A New Novel from the Critically Acclaimed
New York Times Bestselling Author

SAYANTANI DASGUPTA

FORCE OF FIRE
A KINGDOM BEYOND NOVEL

ON SALE
MAY 18

★ “Flawlessly timed comic relief, fast-paced action and adventure.”
—Booklist, starred review

★ “Passionate, thought-provoking, and riotously funny.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

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KIRKUS REVIEWS

VOL. LXXXIX, NO. 9 | 1 MAY 2021

SPECIAL DIVERSITY ISSUE

With Ali Stroker, Jodie Patterson, Anton Treuer, and Paula Yoo

Plus: Black debut authors in conversation

Michelle Zauner
The author of *Crying in H Mart* forges connections to her Korean heritage—and her mother's memory
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK | Tom Beer

What Diversity Means Now

A LOT HAS HAPPENED in the world since we went to press with our second annual Diversity Issue, one year ago.

The ongoing pandemic made the stark inequities of our society—in our work lives and in our access to health care—inescapable. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other Black Americans sparked nationwide protests against police violence and a renewed discussion about racism in this country. The murders of six Asian American women in Atlanta brought anti-Asian bias—a growing problem in a year when former President Donald Trump and right-wing commentators repeatedly blamed the Chinese for the Covid-19 pandemic—into sharper focus. The attacks on transgender people reached a head with passage in the Arkansas legislature of a bill banning gender-affirming medical care for trans youth.

Clearly, America still struggles to celebrate, not punish, diversity.

So, this year’s Diversity Issue arrives when these matters are as pressing as ever in every corner of our society—including the publishing industry. In March, Deesha Philyaw, author of the PEN/Faulkner Award–winning story collection The Secret Lives of Church Ladies, asked three other Black writers to join her on Zoom and discuss the experience of publishing a debut in the past year and navigating an industry that is still overwhelmingly White. Dantiel W. Moniz (Milk Blood Heat), Dawnie Walton (The Final Revival of Opal & Nev), and Robert Jones Jr. (The Prophets) had a frank and free-wheeling conversation about the expectations (and limits) placed on Black writers as well as the importance of mentors and community.

All four authors issued a powerful call on the publishing industry to bring more Black people into its ranks—and make a greater effort to reach Black readers. “When you have a room full of the same people, you come up with the same ideas, and those ideas become stagnant,” said Jones. “Understand that you have what is largely an untapped market out there of Black readers who are hungry for books that you might even have on your catalog. But you’re not reaching them because you’re not doing the work and you don’t have the cultural competency. That is what I’m hoping the industry begins to understand.” You can read more of the discussion on Page 14.

Jones’ challenge could be issued by any group that doesn’t always see itself reflected in the industry or in the books that get published—be they Latinx, Asian American, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, or people with disabilities. In this issue, we’ve tried to shine a spotlight on some of those books and authors. Among the highlights are interviews with Michelle Zauner, the indie rocker and author of the memoir Crying in H Mart, who finds a way to grieve her mother through Korean cooking (Page 62); Tony Award winner Ali Stroker, whose new children’s book, The Chance To Fly, draws on her own youthful experiences as a stage-struck aspiring actor who uses a wheelchair (Page 100); and Anton Treuer, a professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University in Minnesota, whose new YA book, Everything You Wanted To Know About Indians but Were Afraid To Ask, answers questions, both basic and advanced, for Native and non-Native readers (Page 152).

There’s much more to explore in these pages—and in the pages of future issues of Kirkus Reviews.

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

Building on his lysergically drenched book *How To Change Your Mind* (2018), **Michael Pollan** looks at three plant-based drugs and the mental effects they can produce. Read the review on p. 78.

Don’t wait on the mail for reviews! You can read pre-publication reviews as they are released on kirkus.com—even before they are published in the magazine. You can also access the current issue and back issues of Kirkus Reviews on our website by logging in as a subscriber. If you do not have a username or password, please contact customer care to set up your account by calling 1.800.316.9361 or emailing customers@kirkusreviews.com.
The owners of a ballet school have their insular and delicate world torn open. Sisters Marie and Dara Durant own the Durant School of Dance; with matching buns, long necks, and pink tights, they exemplify the traditions of ballet. The classic girl’s dream of becoming a ballerina is the reality they’ve lived since their late mother opened the school in the 1980s. But behind the delicate tulle-clad facade of every ballerina reside the grit, pain, and stamina that drive them to push their bodies to the limit day in and day out. “Ballet was full of dark fairy tales,” Abbott writes, and one of those dark tales belongs to Dara’s husband, Charlie, who was once her mother’s prize student. Charlie now runs the school’s daily operations, no longer able to dance due to his chronic pain. With Nutcracker season upon them, tension runs high at the studio.

While Marie, Dara, and Charlie have survived many Nutcracker seasons, this year is a little different—the dark fairy tale comes to life, first in the form of a fire, “brilliant and bright…eating the floor and spitting out kindling shards in its wake.” As in many of Abbott’s thrillers, a violent catalyst sets off a series of events that brings buried emotions and hidden desires to the surface. The physicality in Abbott’s prose gives the mounting tension a heartbeat, from “the clatter of phones” to “the slap of flip-flops.” The tension arrives next in the form of Derek, the contractor hired to fix the ruined studio—“the expanse of him was overwhelming.” Derek represents every contractor horror story you’ve ever heard. He takes over the sisters’ space, “an invasion and a deconstruction” that threatens to break the delicate balance that keeps the studio—and Marie’s and Dara’s lives—functioning. Derek invades their mental as well as their physical space, twisting words and promises, making beautiful things unseemly: “Some people liked to make everything dirty. Some people liked to ruin everything.” While the life of a ballerina may be “mysterious and private,” many illusions are shattered by the end. Though this story lacks some of the unquenchable energy that is Abbott’s trademark, the mesmerizing prose will keep you turning the pages.

Abbott is a master of thinly veiled secrets often kept by women who rage underneath their delicate exteriors.

**These titles earned the Kirkus Star:**

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**A SHOCK**

Ridgway, Keith

New Directions (256 pp.)

$17.95 paper | Jul. 5, 2021

978-0-8112-3085-8

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**THE TURNOUT**

Abbott, Megan

Putnam (352 pp.)

$14.99 | Jul. 6, 2021

978-0-593-08490-8
SKYE PAPERS
Ajalon, Jamika
Feminist Press (272 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-952177-96-5

In the 1990s, a Black college student escapes the suffocating confines of suburbia to tumble headfirst into life on the outer edges of urban society.

This debut novel will shift the ground beneath your feet. When aspiring poet Skye drops out of her first year of college in Chicago to look for Scottie, a mysterious young man she'd met on a Greyhound bus, what follows is an intense, questioning, drug-addled adventure. Skye heads to Manhattan and shows up at the address Scottie had given her, where she meets an older woman named Pieces. She wakes up alone the next day with a chunk of her memory missing, then finds a note from Pieces reminding her that she'd promised to meet her and Scottie in London. “DON’T FORGET,” it said. Stepping into Pieces’ old hostessing job long enough to buy her ticket, she hops a plane to London and discovers the gritty bohemian life of squatting, busking, and general drug-fueled partying. Still, the days hold an unreal tinge to them, and Skye finds herself in a one-sided obsession with Pieces, who begins to withdraw and skips town to Amsterdam. Beyond the mystery of Skye’s missing memory and hazy dream visions, a darkness seeps out from beneath the floor of their home, dubbed the Trashed Palace, and into Skye’s consciousness. Meanwhile, the reader is already aware that someone has been watching Skye since New York City via hidden cameras; intermittent chapters of observation are laid out as if they’re snippets from a screenplay. Though the novel is deftly plotted and full of well-rounded, interesting characters, the desperate anger of Skye and Pieces’ relationship is meant to be abrasive, giving the book a jagged edge.

A tightly written and compelling psychedelic adventure.

3 Captivating BIPOC Voices in Fiction

"Home of the Floating Lily, by Silmy Abdullah offers an intimate, empathetic and important portrait of the lives of Bangladeshi immigrants in Toronto.”
— Lawrence Hill, author of The Book of Negroes and The Illegal

"A propulsive, unpredictable adventure by a master storyteller. Tightly plotted with complex characters, Boudel Tan offers a cinematic second novel about identity, family, terrible secrets, romantic love, and immeasurable loss.”
— Lindsay Wong, award-winning author of The Woo-Woo

"The Son of the House is a compelling novel about two women caught in a constricting web of tradition, class, gender, and motherhood.”
— Foreword Reviews, starred review

"The Son of the House" by Boudel Tan
9781594146079 | Paperback
$18.99 | Aug 10

"Home of the Floating Lily" by Silmy Abdullah
9781594145870 | Paperback
$18.99 | Jul 20

"The Rebellious Tide" by Eddy Boudel Tan
9781594146079 | Paperback
$17.99 | Aug 10

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A Glimpse of the Asian American Experience

After a year that’s seen rising hatred and violence directed at Asian Americans, it’s a good time to be reminded of the wonderful diversity of literature written by Asians and Asian Americans. This year has seen the publication of new novels by Chang-rae Lee and Viet Thanh Nguyen, two of the best-known Asian American writers, but I’ve also been delighted to discover a cornucopia of debut writers.

Te-Ping Chen is a reporter for the Wall Street Journal, and her debut story collection, **Land of Big Numbers** (Mariner, Feb. 2), shows her journalistic attention to detail. Our starred review said, “Chen’s stories speak to both the granular mundanities of her characters’ lives and to the larger cultural, historical, and economic spheres that they inhabit. She is a tremendous talent.”

Anjali Enjeti is having a moment with the publication of both **The Parted Earth** (Hub City Press, May 4), her first novel, and **Southbound** (Univ. of Georgia, April 15), her first collection of essays. Set in New Delhi in 1947 and Atlanta in 2016, **The Parted Earth** is a multigenerational tale that explores a family’s life in the aftermath of the Partition of India. Our review says there’s a “pulse of truth that makes this book feel so urgent and important.…Illuminating, absorbing, and resonant.”

Linda Rui Feng was born in Shanghai and now teaches Chinese history at the University of Toronto. After several nonfiction books, she’s written her first novel, **Swimming Back to Trout River** (Simon & Schuster, May 11), about Cassia and Momo, a Chinese couple who move to the middle of the U.S. for Momo’s graduate work, leaving their daughter, Ju-nie, behind with her grandparents for several years. Cassia and Momo have never shared with each other their experiences during the Cultural Revolution; our starred review says, “With disarmingly quiet prose, Feng digs beneath Cassia’s and Momo’s reluctance to mine their emotional depths as they struggle to grasp their individual experiences as well as their fractured relationship.”

The title of **Things We Lost to the Water** by Eric Nguyen (Knopf, May 4) refers both to the things Huong’s family lost when they got on a boat to leave Vietnam in 1978 and also to the ever present threat of flooding in New Orleans, their new home. The first loss was Huong’s husband, Công, who for some reason didn’t get on the boat and who finally answers her letters with a postcard saying “Please don’t contact me again.” Our review says, “Nguyen movingly portrays the way adopted homes can become as cherished and familiar as ancestral ones (Huong on New Orleans: ‘She realized this had become her city, the place she lived but also a place that lived in her’) but also the truth that new loves can never quite heal old wounds.”

Ishle Yi Park is a poet—she’s a former poet laureate of Queens, New York—who has now written a novel in verse, **Angel & Hannah** (One World, May 11), an updated **West Side Story** about the love between a bookish Korean American girl named Hannah and her Boricua love, Angel, who’s struggling with drugs. Our review calls it “a tender and honest story of young love striving to survive the streets.”

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
A disillusioned Afghan flirting with terrorism and an elite Navy SEAL team move ever closer to a deadly conflict.

Qasim Nadar bursts with joy at the 2016 wedding of his twin sister, Saida, to his best friend, Eshan. When he finishes his London education, Qasim will likely follow the same path, marrying Diba, a beautiful local girl. But the day turns to tragedy when a drone attack kills Saida. Four years later, a team of Navy SEALs led by Lt. Cmdr. Keith “Chunk” Redman executes a daring mission in the Arabian Sea. Chunk and his men—Trip, Saw, Riker, Morales—are so close they’re like brothers. Qasim, meanwhile, has tried to put the past behind him, attending school in London and working for British Aero Defense Systems. As the tale alternates between these two storylines, Andrews and Wilson develop the personalities and inner dynamics of the SEAL team over a handful of operations. The addition, in Florida, of intelligence officers Michelle Yi and Whitney “Heels” Watts adds texture before the team returns to the Middle East. Eshan, meanwhile, persuades Qasim to return home, ostensibly to be reunited with Diba but actually to help in the fight against the American military. Though he’s declared his hatred for jihad, Qasim is tricked into piloting a plane on a successful mission. His feeling in the aftermath is a surprise even to himself: pride. In addition to presenting action sequences with clarity and an authoritative understanding of weaponry, the authors also depict the ethical complexity and consequential missteps on both sides of the conflict. A glossary of military lingo and acronyms is included.

A solid series kickoff from a prolific pair.

The usual suspects in Tibbehah County have to make room for a new firecracker in town.

Or more precisely, from town, since no sooner does Tanya Jane Byrd realize that she’s the prime suspect in the murder of her no-account mother, Gina, than she takes to the road with her 9-year-old brother, John Wesley, her boyfriend, Ladarius McCade, and her best friend, Holly Harkins, a waitress at the Captain’s Table who’s thoughtful enough to steal her momma’s minivan for the occasion. Sheriff Quinn Colson, back in the saddle after his latest round of job-related injuries in The Revelators (2020), gives chase along with Deputy U.S. Marshals Lillie Virgil and Charlie Hodge and the folks who really did have Gina Byrd killed, dismembered, and stashed in a bleach-filled barrel in a local dump in the first place. But it’s really TJ’s show, and she makes the most of the spotlight even before she hits the road, demanding that Gina’s much older boyfriend, Chester Pratt, return the $18,980 insurance settlement he took from Gina. Chester, deeply in debt to Dixie Mafia stalwart Johnny T. Stagg, is in no position to pay back the money; in fact, he’s getting serious pressure from Stagg’s enforcers. Things get even hotter when TJ and her crew hook up with budding social influencer Chastity Bloodgood, who offers them the hospitality of her car-dealer father’s vacation home in Hot Springs if only they’ll kill her despised stepmother. The combustible mixture of variously violent personalities leaves less room than usual for Quinn’s self-critical memories of Hamp Beckett, his late uncle and predecessor, and they seem more out of place than usual when they come.

A wild chase with walk-on roles for every lowlife from North Mississippi to New Orleans.
“A fast-paced, drama-filled portrait of a family dynasty.”

THE GODMOTHERS

Aubray, Camille
Morrow/HarperCollins (432 pp.)
$27.99  |  Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-298369-5

When Nicole’s husband needs a background check to secure a job in Jimmy Carter’s administration, she asks her godmother if there are any family secrets to worry about. It’s a question she may regret asking.

Setting her tale mostly in the 1930s and ’40s, Aubray uses the dramatic changes in America to highlight the family drama—a saga reminiscent of Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola. Unlike them, though, Aubray focuses on the challenges particular to women, including their parents’ preference for sons, the dangers of extramarital sex, and the difficulties of assuming power in a patriarchal world, particularly the Mafia-ruled world of mid-20th-century New York. At times, Aubray lapses into exposition and cliché, yet the narrative moves fast and furious. Nicole and her cousins actually have four godmothers, four sisters-in-law who each have colorful stories that might give the FBI pause. Filomena has lived under an assumed name since she arrived in New York at age 17 to marry Mario, the youngest brother in the family. Hers is a story of escaping World War II Italy after her cousin dies in her arms. Mario’s older brothers, Frankie and Johnny, marry Lucy (a nurse and single mother who must conceal her son’s biological parentage) and Amie (a shy woman who must violently escape her first husband’s daily assaults), respectively. All three wives carefully honor Gianni and Tessa, the patriarch and matriarch of the family—a family that deftly manipulates crime lords. Petrina, their only daughter, longs to escape the dynasty by marrying into a WASPy family. As violence erupts, power shifts, and war rises once again, the four women learn to negotiate power on their own terms.

A fast-paced, drama-filled portrait of a family dynasty.

There's more than one way to be brave.

“Adolescence is bad enough, but suppose you also have Lyme disease and no one can diagnose it?”

“A gripping, sensitively written account of a terrible affliction that is more common than realized.”

—Kirkus Reviews

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THE 22 MURDERS OF MADISON MAY
Barry, Max
Putnam (320 pp.)
$27.00  |  Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-593-08520-2

Someone is killing young Madison May—over and over and over again.

Though he’s endlessly inventive and entertaining, Barry isn’t exactly prolific, so it’s a welcome surprise to see a new novel arriving so soon after Providence (2020), his diverting space opera. This book isn’t completely out of his wheelhouse, featuring as it does some unsurprising rips in the space-time continuum, but it’s a little more grounded than usual, closer to a clever riff on unwanted resurrection, à la the movie Happy Death Day. The titular Maddie is a real estate agent in Queens when we meet her, trying to follow her profession’s primal rules (“Teeth, Tits, Hair”) when she meets potential buyer Clayton Hors, who not only identifies as some kind of otherworldly outsider, but also declares, “You know, I love you, Madison. In every world. Even when you don’t love me back.” Oh, and then promptly murders her. The only person who thinks this case is wonky is political reporter Felicity Staples of the Daily News, whose situation gets even stranger when a guy named Hugo Garrelly—who looks exactly like Clayton Hors—gives her a strange metal egg right before pushing her into the path of a moving subway train. In subsequent lives, Maddie is an up-and-coming actress or a TV weather girl or a waitress or a student—all ending in her murder by someone who can effortlessly move between the parallel worlds where she exists. Felicity is understandably disoriented when she too starts experiencing these different dimensions, in which her life is just a little bit different every time but she always remembers who and what she was before. It’s all very noodle-bending, time-travel-y science fiction, but Barry is playing with a very specific set of tropes, as Maddie notices just prior to one of her many demises: “Oh, she thought. It’s a horror movie.”

A very clever, unpredictable little murder mystery with some bittersweet tones about the things we do for love.

WHITEHAVENS
Bilal, Parker
Severn House (256 pp.)
$28.99  |  Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-7278-5039-3

Fleeing the mob is easier said than done, especially when you’re holding a cache of their cash.

On the orders of crime boss Donny Apostolis, loyal lieutenant Brodie is sent to deal with “a valuable asset” named Karima Coogan. Donny’s overeager nephew, Zephyr, accompanies Brodie as wingman. This move is part of a larger turf war between the Apostolis and Ziyades crime families, the details of which are only partially known to Brodie. A last-minute call from Donny changes everything. Brodie, who narrates in a brisk, downbeat first person, is ordered to kill both Zef, who’s uncontrollable and didosyn, and Karima, who’s stolen a large chunk of Apostolis money. As Brodie ponders his next move, Zef implements an unexpected plan of his own. He shoots Brodie, who manages to return fire before losing consciousness. When Brodie wakes up, Karima has taken him to see a doctor—and Zef’s dead. After a quick recovery, Brodie makes a decision: “The only plan is to keep moving.” The duo buys a cheap car and goes on the run. Bilal devotes much of the tale to the delicate dance of trust between Brodie and Karima as they seek a way out of their dangerous situation. They grow closer as they share the backstories that landed them in this mess. Both have been disillusioned with their criminal involvement for a long time. Meanwhile, the threats of uncertainty and revenge make it necessary to question even the loyalty of friends.

A sleek thrill ride that loses traction only when it delves into exposition that overshadows its urgency.
A Swedish heiress is ensnared by the aristocracy she tried to renounce.

THE INHERITANCE OF LION HALL
Bomann, Corina
Trans. by Meigs, Michael
AmazonCrossing (527 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-5420-1684-1

A Swedish heiress is ensnared by the aristocracy she tried to renounce in this novel by bestselling German author Bomann.

It’s 1913, and Agneta, daughter of Count Thure Lejongärd of Lion Hall, having legally emancipated herself from her family, is pursuing the bohemian life as a painter and art student in Stockholm. She’s also, along with best friend Marit, an ardent activist for women’s rights, including the vote. (The translation from the original German opts for the outmoded term suffragette.) A telegram from home puts an end to this free-wheeling lifestyle. Her father and his male heir apparent, Agneta’s beloved brother, Hendrik, have died by fire while rescuing Lion Hall’s herd of valuable horses from a burning stable. Her mother, Stella, at first proves vindictive when Agneta assumes, reluctantly, the title of Countess and Mistress of Lion Hall. From here, the action is agonizingly slow, not helped by the competent but stilted translation. Although the narration is in first person, Agneta always seems to be regarding herself at a distance. The leisurely exposition, though frustrating, is not surprising since this is the first book of a trilogy. Agneta investigates a puzzling debt left by her father and wins her mother’s grudging and intermittent trust. Under Agneta’s control, Lion Hall maintains its close ties to the royal family, once the royals are reassured arson will not reoccur on their next visit. Agneta rejects an advantageous proposal from her childhood friend Lennard Ekberg, himself heir to a grand estate. She is holding out for a love match. Her first true love, fellow artist Michael, disdained marrying into the aristocracy, but now Agneta’s affections are ripe for trifling with by her estate manager, Max, landless younger son of German nobles. World War I has ignited, and we are well into spoiler territory by the time...
anything truly momentous happens. But happen it will. Suffice it to say that the Lejongård line continues, buffeted by misfortune and encroaching modernity. Stay tuned for Volume 2.

Promises to be an intriguing saga, both in print and eventually, perhaps, on Masterpiece.

SILVER SKIN
Calvo, Javier
Trans. by Lethem, Mara Faye
ANTIBOOKCLUB (392 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-953862-04-4

A young person’s Catcher in the Rye–like ramble through Barcelona.
An obscure science-fiction author, a Spanish poet, and the heady confusion and poor decision-making of adolescence figure prominently in this unpredictable novel by Spanish writer Calvo, translated by Lethem. As in Salinger’s angst-y masterpiece, the protagonist, Pol, is a teenager who’s been labeled mentally ill, has an adult mindset despite protestations to the contrary, and is prone to the influences of music, drugs, and yearning. We meet him during a court-mandated visit to Dr. Buenanueva, a requirement imposed after he has a fit while being abused by classical mean girl Guiomar Galbán and stabs her in the neck with a fork. Pol’s diagnosis is schizophrenia, which certainly lends him credibility as an unreliable narrator. There’s not much in the way of a plot, though nominally it’s a coming-of-age story. Pol is obsessed with an obscure but influential SF/fantasy writer named Cooper Crowe (who seems like a doppelgänger for Tolkien but is tipped in the acknowledgements as having been based on Michael Moorcock). He inevitably encounters a goth, moody, and antagonistic girl named Bronwyn Ruiz, who will only be in his life for a couple of months but, as happens, will mark him forever. Pol sees the world in the vernacular of myth: He is the iconic “holy fool”; his sister, Oli, the reluctant accessory; his mother the absentee queen of the familial kingdom; and Bronwyn the girl who will never love you but you break yourself on anyway. Pol is telling us this story six years later, but, like many things that happen at that age, it might as well be yesterday.

An uncommon, unconventional reflection on the truths and deceptions we unveil in our youth.

BLACK WATER SISTER
Cho, Zen
Ace/Berkley (384 pp.)
$16.99 paper | May 11, 2021
978-0-425-28343-1

Jessamyn Teoh’s grandmother is back from the dead—but Jess is the only one who can hear her.
After financial setbacks, Harvard graduate Jess and her parents move back to Malaysia looking for a fresh start. Having grown up in the United States, Jess finds returning to Malaysia is an adjustment, as she tries to balance her family’s expectations (she’s living in her aunt’s house, after all) with her own ideas about what her life should look like (maybe her girlfriend shouldn’t be secret). In the middle of making sure her father doesn’t work too hard and entertaining a steady stream of her aunt’s friends, Jess is visited by her grandmother’s ghost, who definitely has unfinished business. Soon, Jess is mixed up
in a world of real estate tycoons, petty gangsters, and gods who really don’t like it when you tamper with their shrines—and the Black Water Sister is the worst of them all. Fast-paced and full of witty one-liners, with a solid grounding in contemporary Malaysia, this is a fun urban fantasy that touches on the ways in which trauma and violence echo through generations. Cho’s evocation of place is impeccable, but while the plot moves quickly between supernatural events and familial squabbles, the relationships between characters remain somewhat under-developed; the most important journey is the one Jess takes toward understanding herself and her own autonomy.

A charming romp through a world where Malaysian spirits are very real.

**THE STRANGER IN THE MIRROR**

*Constantine, Liv*

Harper/HarperCollins (336 pp.)

$26.99 | Jul. 6, 2021

978-0-06-296732-9

An amnesia victim has built a near-perfect new life when she runs into someone from her past.

A disheveled, bleeding woman who doesn’t know even her own name is picked up hitchhiking on a highway in New Jersey by a kindly trucker. He and his wife become her surrogate parents, helping her manufacture a new identity as Addison Hope. Addison soon meets Gabriel, a wonderful young man from the Philadelphia Main Line who is so smitten he ends a yearslong relationship with another woman and proposes. Gabriel’s mother, Blythe, isn’t ready to pop the champagne, though—she wants to know who this girl really is. In truth, Addison feels the same reservations. Meanwhile, up in Boston, a handsome psychiatrist named Julian is caring for his 7-year-old daughter on his own after his wife disappeared two years earlier. Could it be...? In their fifth outing, the sisters who write as Constantine have cooked up another plot involving people with hidden identities—and it works well to embed that issue in the head of the protagonist, who doesn’t know herself or anyone else from her past. The plot is twisty but not excessively so—it’s the kind where an experienced reader can enjoy staying a few steps ahead of the reveals rather than the kind where the answers are obvious too early or are based on too many late-breaking details. Like most of Constantine’s work, including fan favorite *The Last Mrs. Parrish* (2017), this one is set in the lap of luxury, this time a bit stripped down: fewer ritzy locations and rich-people caricatures, a bit less wealth porn. Still, Gabriel’s country-club-snob mother is one of the best characters, and one of several wine recommendations is slipped in as the villain is about to enter his secret den of psychosis: “I have the house to myself overnight for the first time that I remember, and have decided to open the Odette Estate Reserve....”

A fast, fun read for domestic thriller fans.

**THE COVER WIFE**

*Fesperman, Dan*

Knopf (336 pp.)

$26.95 | Jul. 6, 2021

978-0-525-65783-5

In late 1999, Paris-based CIA agent Claire Saylor goes to Hamburg to help penetrate an Al-Qaida group whose members include future 9/11 conspirators. Claire, whose defiance of her superiors has made her something of a black sheep at the agency, is handled by Paul Bridger, with whom she had a brief affair during a botched mission in Berlin a decade
Prose and Cons
a novel by
Chuck Katz

Kia Kuniya is the pint-size gal with big-time dreams.
I'm a writer. Might not have heard of me yet. Trust me, you will.

Dylan Miller is the con artist from Brooklyn.
I don't offer my subway seat to preggoes. I'm not shy about stealing from the dead.

Prose and Cons is the hilarious tale of intrigue as they pursue their passion for prose.

“consistently clever.”

“A kaleidoscopic escapade with a resilient and uniquely addictive pair of characters.”
— Kirkus Reviews

VISIT PROSEANDCONS.COM TO PRE-ORDER
ISBN 978-1-7355634-0-4

For information on publishing and film rights, email charlesevankatz@gmail.com • www.proseandcons.com
IN CONVERSATION

LIFTING AS WE CLimb

Four Black debut authors reflect on their experiences with the publishing industry and the power of community

BY DEESHA PHILYAW

In two of my favorite photos of two of my favorite writers, they are dancing. In one photo, Toni Morrison is at a disco, fine and free, in 1974. In the other, taken a decade earlier in somebody’s New Orleans living room, James Baldwin is bustin’ a move with playwright Lor- raine Hansberry. I cherish these images because they remind me that I’m part of a literary tradition built by people who knew how to get down. They lived and wrote (and danced) in the context of community and of the cultural moments they survived, thrived in, and helped to shape. Like many Black writers, I claim Mor- rison, Baldwin, Hansberry, and their contemporaries as family, as kin. These photos I love invite this sense of familiarity, this embrace.

This time last year, I had no idea that Robert Jones Jr., Dantiel W. Moniz, Dawnie Walton, and I would become not only friends, but family, bonded by the release of our debut fiction books—two novels, Robert’s The Prophets (Putnam, Jan. 5) and Dawnie’s The Final Revival of Opal & Nev (37 Ink/Simon & Schuster, March 30); and two short story collections, Dan- tiel’s Milk Blood Heat (Grove, Feb. 2) and my The Secret Lives of Church Ladies (West Virginia Univ. Press, 2020). We are bonded by our books, by this moment in his- tory, and by a fierce commitment to community and to each other. With a generosity of spirit, we are lifting as we climb. And it all started in the DMs, reaching out, showing each other, and our work, love. What follows is a conversation with my cousins, conducted recently over Zoom; it has been edited for length and clarity.

ON DEBUTING DURING THE PAST YEAR

Deesha Philyaw: I don’t know how you all feel about this question, but I get it a lot: What has it meant to you to have a book coming out in the midst of a pandemic and in the midst of what people politely refer to as this time of “racial reckoning”—that really wasn’t— in the wake of the murders of George Floyd and other Black folks? What has that been like for you?

Dantiel W. Moniz: I have to spin it back to 2016 to properly get into that question. I wasn’t taking my writing seriously. I got into an MFA, I was actually gonna devote time and energy to my writing. And then Trump got elected. The day after that happened, I went into [my mentor’s] office, “So what’s the point? Why should I even be doing this? What do my little stories mean in the grand scheme of all of this?” And she sat me down and was like, “Stories have always been necessary. That’s why they’re underfunded. That’s why they’re undervalued. It’s not because they have no value. It’s because they have so much power to enact subtle changes on a day-to-day level in people’s lives.”
Having the book come out in 2021, I felt so much joy about having the stories published finally, but I was teetering between Why do this? I should be out in the streets right now versus That’s the point, they want me to feel like this is for nothing. I had to coerce myself into Hey, you did this, nobody can take this from you.

**Dawnie Walton:** Dantiel, you and I went into an MFA program at the same time, and in very White towns. You were in Madison, I was in Iowa City. That 2016 election hit like a bomb in a lot of ways, and in other ways it made me write harder and with more fierceness and urgency. In my book, part of the plot issues around the Confederate flag, which was always part of the book, even before 2016. You have things like the insurrectionists taking over the Capitol and the Confederate flag, the flag of literal traitors, being waved through the Capitol, and people are reading the book now and saying, “Oh my gosh, it’s so relevant.” I’m like, well, it’s always been relevant. It’s been relevant for decades.

**Dantiel W. Moniz:** It’s foundational. And nobody wants to acknowledge that.

**Robert Jones Jr.:** You know, I agree with that assessment about it always being here. I was thinking about Trump getting elected and realized that I have a touchstone for every era of my life in which I felt menaced by the society I lived in. So as a 6-year-old, growing up in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, I was chased home by the White kids every single day from school; they had bats, bottles, and chains, chasing us back into the projects. Then I was two blocks away when Yusef Hawkins was killed in my neighborhood. And then, you know, George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan, on and on and on to Donald Trump—which for some people feels like a culmination but to me feels like just another day in America. What I realized is that the fabric of America is the genocide of the Indigenous people and the enslavement of the Black people. And it doesn’t know how to operate outside of those paradigms without fundamentally changing what America is and means. Writing in this period is writing in a perpetual state of fear and suspicion and oppression. America has not changed. Faces have changed, but the underlying pathologies remain the same from 1492.

**Dawnie Walton:** What we’re writing is not new or different. It’s just that the attention is more intense.

**Dantiel W. Moniz:** One of the things that was very important for me was to acknowledge the realities of the world that we live in, especially for marginalized people, especially for Black people, especially for Black women. But I wanted to also portray that that’s just not always at the front of these characters’ minds. The characters are just worried about the same shit everybody else is worried about, you know what I mean? And then a little incident will pop up and remind you—whether it’s a microaggression or something more hei-
nous than that—but it’s not always at the forefront. I wanted to give this space for these characters to be experiencing just normal everyday life-shit.

Robert Jones Jr.: Dantiel, you’re saying something that Toni Morrison said. She said you can’t always home in on the crisis. There have to be the other parts of it, so that you recognize that these are human beings, not just political slogans.

Dawnie Walton: I have been so appreciative of all the [people who read] my novel and said it’s about systemic racism—but it’s also about a Black woman who loves music. It’s also about her trying to find her voice, this one character.

ON NAVIGATING THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

Deesha Philyaw: Dawnie, your main character, Opal, says of herself, “I have never been one of those okey-doke, ‘just happy to be here’ Negros.” And then she goes on to talk about how she scrutinized her very first record contract. I’ve been telling Black writers who asked my advice that they don’t have to be happy just to be here, to be asked to the party. They don’t have to accept what’s offered without negotiation or without asking clarifying questions. Some people are afraid to ask questions for fear that this is their only chance, thinking if I ask the wrong question, maybe they’ll snatch this contract away.

Dawnie Walton: When I was in my first semester at Iowa, NoViolet Bulawayo came through, talking about We Need New Names. She did a Q&A session with students, and somebody asked, “What is your advice in terms of publishing?” As wonderful as my program was, they’re very much like, We don’t talk about that, we just want you to focus on the writing. I don’t know that I agree with that, because a lot of us go in blind, right? The thing that she said, the thing that I tell every Black writer, is: Before you go hurtling into the publishing industry, before you show an agent anything, finish your manuscript. Get it where you want it to be, understand your intention, understand your character arcs before somebody else puts their hands in and starts meddling. I think that is hugely important, especially now, because there is a lot of interest in Black writers. They’re trying to discover somebody, right? And if you do not have your confidence, if you don’t know what your work is, somebody else will tell you. And you may end up with something that you didn’t intend.

Dantiel W. Moniz: I think for me, the greatest advice that I would give anybody is to learn to listen to your own instincts. When I was applying to MFA [programs], I had gotten into Iowa, and I had gotten into the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where I ended up going. I was trying to figure out which one would be the better fit for me, and I remember everyone being like, Go to Iowa, because it’s Iowa. That’s a no-brainer. And I was like, Is it, though? I’m trying to teach my students to learn when they’ve internalized something that’s external. I think that’s so important in a writing project. I do believe that writing is a community, a collective, after a certain point. And that’s great. But you got to know what it is you want from it before it can be beneficial to have other people look at it. Learn to distinguish what your actual voice and vision is versus something that you’ve internalized that’s actually external.

Dawnie Walton: 100%.
ON THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

Deesha Philyaw: Somewhat related to that question: When my agent began to shop my collection around as a partial manuscript, I thought about the facets of the collection that I didn’t want to have to negotiate on. And this was based on the horror stories I’d heard from other Black writers who had engaged with White editors and publishers. And I’m all about the editorial process and the revision process, because it makes for a better book. But I did not want to have to translate Black culture or Black vernacular or Black people for a White audience. I had no interest in revisions that centered the presumed needs and interests of White readers. I knew that White readers could connect with my stories and characters as written if they wanted to. And I knew what Toni Morrison had said about the White gaze and what August Wilson said about Black stories being universal. Can all of you speak to the work that we do of holding onto the vision of our books in a largely White publishing industry?

Dantiel W. Moniz: I’ve done a number of podcasts and TV shows where people would be like, “Who do you think this book is for?” And I was like, “Well, I didn’t write this book for everyone. But I do think anyone can connect to it.” So for me, I wanted to make sure that I’m not explaining things that would not have to be explained by the people that I am writing for. For example, there’s a scene where a character is getting ready for work, she has a little toothbrush, and she’s brushing down her baby hairs. She’s just doing it. You know it, or you can look it up, you know what I mean? I feel like it’s OK for writers to require their readers who are outside of that experience to do a little work. I think that’s totally fine. I’m always conscious of where I’m writing toward and making sure that that stays at the center without trying to put any “Black Experience” label on my book. It is what it is, but I don’t have to define that for you. Because I don’t need to define myself or my worlds.

Robert Jones Jr.: I agree with that. I’m writing in a tradition, which I acknowledge as a Black tradition that I see starting with Phillis Wheatley—going back that far. I know what Black is when I see it. I know that there’s a lot of different types of Black, but I know Black when I see it. Maybe I can’t put it into words, but I know it when I encounter it. I know it in your work, Dantiel, I know it in your work, Dawnie, and your work, Deesha. And I see it in my own work. And when I was first pushing this manuscript, I had already known: There will be no compromises on the Blackness, there will be no compromises on the queerness. These two things go together. It’s Black queerness, if you will, and I will not compromise on any of the Black characters in terms of their agency, their roundness, their dimensionality. And I’m not explaining anything. So when you see the word *toubab*, figure it out.

Dantiel W. Moniz: Look it up.

Dawnie Walton: My book is really dependent on voices, and Opal’s voice in particular. I was uncompromising about the way that she puts things, her phrasing. It was funny at times, because you go through these rounds of proofs, and I would have Opal saying things that we all know, like “You a lie.” It would come back from copy changed to “You are a liar.” They didn’t know. And so I had to write an email, “Please stet that change.”

Dantiel W. Moniz: I had that, too. I had someone, she “fell out” in the church. And they were like, “She fell down?” Finally, I had to do a long explanation—this is just Black. She fell out. They know what I’m talking about, it’s OK.

Deesha Philyaw: I had that, too, with my story, “Jael.” The character Granny says, “I stay prayed up.” And my sweet editor, we went rounds because of the tense. Is it “She stays praying?” No: “She stays prayed up.” The other one, for me, it was more fact checking. She said, “I could not verify that a dozen crabs in Jacksonville, Florida, cost $7 in 1984. Are you sure?” And I’m like, “Yeah.” I don’t even know where you would go to find that!

ON BLACK READERS

Deesha Philyaw: What do you wish these publishers and editors that we’ve been talking about—we had good experiences, but in general—what do you wish they better understood about Black writers and Black readers?

Dawnie Walton: For me, it’s two things. One, understand how important it is for your Black writers to reach their communities. Black “bookstagram” has
been so good to me. Those requests are top priority. I want to do all the [Instagram] lives, that’s super important. The second is that in the PR and marketing process, I have been very involved. And you guys can answer this, but probably you wanted to be very involved as well, in terms of whatever imagery is attached to your work. Whenever sort of fun marketing things are being done. There’s a lot of nuance, and you don’t want to get things wrong.

Robert Jones Jr.: I would like the industry to get over this dogged perception that Black people don’t read. If they went to Harlem, 125th Street, [they’d] see that every other vendor is a bookseller. Every other one. That is how much Black people love to read. And part of the reason Black people love to read so much is because we were denied that ability. Our ancestors, at the threat of death, could not read or write. I would like them to understand that and then find those readers. You have to come up with plans to understand where those readers are and appeal to them.
The way that you do that is you start hiring Black people. There is no reason why, when I was meeting with publishers, that I met one Black woman editorial assistant at seven different publishers—she was the only Black person I saw. When you have a room full of the same people, you come up with the same ideas, and those ideas become stagnant. You need to be able to move and adjust and turn and twist with the times. Understand that you have what is largely an untapped market out there of Black readers who are hungry for books that you might even have on your catalog. But you’re not reaching them because you’re not doing the work and you don’t have the cultural competency. That is what I’m hoping the industry begins to understand.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE MODELS

Deesha Philyaw: What writers have you looked to as role models for navigating this experience?

Dantiel W. Moniz: You, Deesha. I mean, 100%.

Robert Jones Jr.: Deesha Philyaw, who was very transparent about her experience, and Kiese Laymon, who loved me through this process, actually connected me with my agent. Both of you have been absolutely crucial, pre- and post-, as I navigate this publishing industry.

Dantiel W. Moniz: I’d say for me, Danielle Evans and Jamel Brinkley. [Jamel] was a fellow in my first year at my MFA. He sat down with me in a coffee shop [when] he was going through the process of publishing A Lucky Man. And he was very honest with me about the money. Here’s what the process is, here’s how it is to order a book. Let me also tell you about your stories and how you’re not really writing to your potential at this moment. During this whole two years that it took to sell the book and then actually have the book published, I could text him and be like, Yo, what does this mean?

Dawnie Walton: I have to give a shoutout to De’Shawn Charles Winslow, who was a year ahead of me at Iowa and pulled me aside and said, Look, it’s a good time. Here’s what you need to do. He hooked me up with [my agent]. That was crucial. And I also have to give deepest gratitude to Ayana Mathis, who was my thesis adviser at Iowa and has looked out for me every step of the way.

Deesha Philyaw: We talked about Kiese, [how] he’s opened doors, bringing us with him. And so we, in turn, want to bring others with us as we move forward. Robert talked about tradition. We have our writing traditions as Black writers, but also our tradition of being in community. People call it “collaborative” now, but we call it a cookout. We call it talking over the backyard fence. There are versions of that we create wherever we go. I would encourage writers to find that community, to be the person that builds that, be the person that people can come to. What would you advise?

Robert Jones Jr.: I would say, do not look at other Black writers as competition, look at them as community. There will be forces around you that try to pit you against one another. Because, you know, There can only be one.

Dantiel W. Moniz: There can only be one. I was just about to say that.

Robert Jones Jr.: That is absolutely not true. My experience has been, for the most part, that every Black writer that I have come in contact with has lifted me up as I’ve tried to lift them up. This is the sort of love that we need amongst one another because we are writing against the cultural grain. We are writing things that are implicating the people in power, as marginalized people in a White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. My advice to up-and-coming Black writers is to find what is crucial to your development. And then make sure, like Patti LaBelle says, “When you’ve been blessed, pass it on.”

Dantiel W. Moniz: Pass it on.❤️
ago. Her unpromising assignment is to pose as the wife of an American language scholar whose inflammatory new book asserts a key section of the Quran has been misinterpreted—that 72 white raisins, not 72 virgins, await jihadi martyrs. The dumbfounded professor believes his European book tour is being sponsored by a prestigious think tank and that Claire is there for his security, but the trip has been arranged by the CIA in hopes that his physical presence will draw radicals into the open. At the same time, young Moroccan émigré Mahmoud Yassin is busy ingratiating himself with radicals from a local mosque. Their leader, known as Amir, is Mohamed Atta. He says he has big plans for Mahmoud. But first the new recruit must prove his mettle by getting rid of Esma, the alluring, Westernized woman who threatens to interfere with plans to send her husband on a suicide mission. Instantly smitten with her, the skittish Mahmoud is caught between a rock and a tantalizing soft place. In withholding key details from the reader early on, Fesperman is cheating a bit. But his follow-up to the exceptional Safe Houses (2018) is a breezy, thoughtful thriller that avoids high drama in favor of quick and ultimately unsettling shots to the system.

An absorbing tale of terrorism with a tantalizing what if at its core.

LAST SUMMER AT THE GOLDEN HOTEL
Friedland, Elyssa
Berkley (384 pp.)
$15.99 paper | May 18, 2021
978-0-593-19972-5

Secrets and scandals come to light as the last family-owned Catskills resort teeters on the brink of extinction.

“Your grandfather was invited to the Oscars by Tony Bennett! So what if the Sullivan County health department gave our kitchen a C last year? We were once in the Guinness Book of World Records for smoking the largest sturgeon in history!” The Golden Hotel, founded in 1960 by Brooklyn College buddies Benny Goldman and Amos Weingold, with its sprawling campus, kidney-shaped pool, loaded dessert cart and name-brand entertainment, was a go-to vacation spot for Jewish families for decades. But the “three As that sunk the Catskills”—air conditioning, air travel, and assimilation—have taken their toll. All its sibling hotels—Kutsher’s, the Concord, Grossinger’s, the Raleigh, and more—have been demolished or turned into casinos or wellness resorts, and now there’s an offer on the table for the Golden, too. Brian Weingold, the current manager of the Golden, calls an emergency meeting of the families to discuss whether or not to sell. By the time the three generations of each family arrive, other dramas are unfolding as well—a doctor husband running a pill mill, a gay son who hasn’t come out to his parents, an engagement endangered by snobbery. Both the romantic sparks and competitive snarkery that have always flared when the two families meet are kindled anew. Friedland, who won a following with her cruise-ship novel, The Floating Feldmans (2019), pulls off a similar entertainment coup here. From the perfectly put-together diva grandmother Louise to the Instagram influencer and avocado-toast photographer @free2bephoebe, the ensemble cast is full of comfortably familiar characters, almost every one of them with something they’re not tellin’...yet. The vanished history of the Catskills is evoked with love and plenty of schmaltz.

A high-spirited party of a book. BYOB: Bring your own borscht.
YOGA PANT NATION
Gelman, Laurie
Henry Holt (256 pp.)
$26.99  |  Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-250-77757-7

Jen Dixon is now a caregiving grandma, a classroom parent, a PTA fundraiser, and a spin instructor—Stay in the saddle, riders!

We met the irresistibly snarky Jen as a kindergarten parent in Gelman’s debut, Class Mom (2017), and caught up with her in third grade in You’ve Been Volunteered (2019). As our 53-year-old heroine’s son enters fifth grade, Gelman’s comic style has gotten a wee bit cramped—for one thing, she’s already made a lot of the possible jokes about riding herd on the other parents, but also the mores of 2021 have taken some of the teeth out of her comedy. She can still do jokes about spelt-spirulina pretzels and gluten-free cookies; when Jen takes care of her daughter Viv’s out-of-wedlock 2-year-old three days a week, she learns that “everything I did for [Viv] as a child has caused adult-onset you-name-it,” resulting in a “parenting style that can best be described as a cross between Mary Poppins and the surgeon general.” On the other hand, great care must be taken not to offend anyone, removing a lot of comic potential. Gelman confesses in her acknowledgments that her editor had “the unfortunate job of telling me over and over again, ‘You can’t say things like that anymore.’ ” Honestly, you can tell, though the struggle to tamp down the inappropriate didn’t quite succeed in this amusing sentence: “My parents’ possible dementia is nothing to laugh about, but the people in the basement have become a scapegoat for everything from who ate the last cookie to who killed JonBenét Ramsey.” What’s added to fill the void is way, way too much spin class. Do Gelman’s readers really want to hear so much about Jen’s vigorous exercise program, including 6:30 p.m. yoga classes and insights like “I have discovered that yoga is a great counter-workout to spinning, which has a tendency to tighten up my legs and hip flexors”? Let’s hope that middle school gives Jen more room to breathe.

Not the strongest of the series.

“Following up on Die Laughing and The Family Jewels, Vincent Graziano once again mixes an evocative depiction of a time and a place with an entertaining plot and macabre humor.”
—Kevin Egan, Author of Midnight

“Friends hatch a daring rescue scheme for their compulsive-gambler buddy in this comedic thriller.”

“A hilarious take on the caper novel that gains depth from the characters’ affectionate bonds.”
—Kirkus Reviews

For Agent Representation and Information on Film Rights, Email v.graziano53@gmail.com
MAN ON FIRE
Hawksley, Humphrey
Severn House (256 pp.)
$28.99  |  Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-7278-9034-4

A routine exercise in the Bering Strait tips Alaska State Trooper Rake Ozenna off to yet another overscaled global threat, and it’s a honey.

One minute Rake and his buddy Mikki Wekstatt are patrolling the waters in preparation for guiding a Russian speedboat crossing the border between Little Diomede (the American island) and Big Diomede (the Russian one); the next they’re dodging bullets as they fish a mortally wounded woman from the icy waters. Katia Codic dies before they can get any useful information out of her apart from a warning of danger, but that warning is focused much more sharply by the high-casualty prison breakout of Col. Ruslan Yumatov, the wily antagonist from the Zaslon protection unit last seen in Man on Edge (2020). From the clouds of intrigue swirling around Yumatov, Dresden businessman Gavril Nevrosky, British Foreign Secretary Baroness Stephanie Lucas, and nuclear physicist Dr. Rudolf Wagner, a grandly inventive pattern gradually emerges whose goal is to bring the European Union’s common defense project to a shuddering halt.

As whiz-kid Stephen Case of Future Forecasting works every angle to get inside the communications and security network of the dark powers who grabbed Yumatov out from under the Americans’ less-than-watchful eyes before the clock ticks down toward Armageddon, the best hope of Rake and his allies seems to depend on preventing his wife, professor Anna Yumatov, and the two small children Yumatov hasn’t seen since his arrest from joining—or, if all else fails, weaponizing them.

Brass-knuckled international intrigue for readers who still pine for the world of James Bond.

THE PAPER PALACE
Heller, Miranda Cowley
Riverhead (400 pp.)
$23.36  |  Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-593-32982-5

Elle Bishop has spent every summer of her 50 years at her family’s compound on Cape Cod, in the Back Woods. Ramshackle and in a constant losing battle with the elements, the beach retreat is a reassuring constant in Elle’s life, which has otherwise been marked by her parents’ divorce, a series of increasingly inappropriate parental mates, gruesome stepsiblings, and interactions with lecherous and violent men and boys. Jonas, a childhood friend of Elle’s from the Cape, served as another constant during her challenging upbringing. Elle’s day of reckoning is prompted by a sexual encounter with him—just outside a dinner party with both of their spouses in attendance—after years of a slow-burn relationship. Elle’s marriage to a man she truly loves (and the comfortable family life they’ve made together) is balanced against the secret-filled history she and Jonas share.

Over the course of the ensuing hours, Elle narrates her day of introspection and intersperses it with flashbacks spanning the course of her whole life, with and without Jonas. The moody and atmospheric setting of the shadowy paths and ponds of the Back Woods is described in lush detail that makes a sharp contrast to the colder, sharper elements of Elle’s story. But the long-held secrets that Elle reveals and reckons with over the course of her day of decision cast the biggest shadow over her life and will inform the rest of her days.

From the first pages of her debut novel, Heller pulls no punches. Some of them just sneak up on you later on.
Francisco Goldman’s fifth novel, *Monkey Boy* (Grove/Atlantic, May 4), plays an ingenious trick. On the surface, the narrative takes place over five days, and yet the narrator—an alter ego of Goldman’s, Francisco Goldberg—detours frequently into his memories, thoughts, and family history, creating the illusion that the reader is immersed in his mind. The result is an intimate and mosaiclike narrative as intricate as the work of Proust or Sebald.

Francisco (or Frankie, as he was called growing up) is a novelist and journalist who has recently relocated to New York City from Mexico, where his journalism has gotten him into some trouble. An invitation to dinner by a high school crush brings Frankie back to his hometown, a working-class suburb of Boston that is riddled with ghosts of his past: the cruelty of his peers at school; his abusive father; his own youthful insecurities about being half Jewish American and half Guatemalan. Between trips to visit his elderly mother as well as the Guatemalan women who helped raise him, Frankie pieces together memories that span his entire life, attempting to make sense of the conditions that made him who he is. Goldman spoke to us over Zoom from his home in Mexico City; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

You’re the author of four novels and two books of nonfiction. In what ways is *Monkey Boy* in correspondence with your previous work?

It’s somewhat, superficially, in direct conversation with *The Long Night of White Chickens*. That was a novel in which the narrator wrote directly about that nuclear family, but I was very young, and my father was very much still alive. It seemed, 30 years later, that it was time to go back and look at the book from an adult perspective. There are references, kind of ironic at times, in this alter ego [Francisco Goldberg] to the course of my writing career. As a writer, I’m completely different now.

Would you say there’s a before and after in your writing, then?

There’s definitely a before and after. I approached the novel [very differently before] my wife, Aura, died. That was a very traumatic death and grief experience, which I wrote about in *Say Her Name*. The [earlier] books were very much concerned with my relationship to the world outside myself, with an eye on political and social realities. I was trying to create a novel that was self-conscious of two novel traditions: Latin American and North American. After *Say Her Name*, I went inward, and I found myself on a very personal search for how to narrate, a form for the things I needed to address. With *Monkey Boy*, I feel I’m coming to the end of a cycle again, which began with *Say Her Name*. These books all have a secret correspondence, revolving around Aura’s death. Aura’s death is the secret presence of this book.

This is definitely a very introspective work. Frankie weaves together many threads of his life, as if he’s trying to make sense of how he became who he is.
In some ways, the fictional root of the book is an examination of how my life would have turned out if I hadn't met Aura. This came out of preoccupation [and] the guilt you'll find in Say Her Name, the preoccupation being: Why did it take me so long to find love? And I thought, if I had not had some of the problems I'd had in my upbringing, if I'd been more able to love and receive love as a young man, I probably wouldn't have ever met Aura and therefore she'd still be alive. And this created a lot of anger in me, toward all the things [that] had malformed me in that way. A completely crazy way of looking at things. But this was the original premise of Monkey Boy.

The book takes place over the course of five days, but a lot of time is covered. We get a sense of Francisco’s entire life in addition to the different histories that formed him.

It was very important for me that this novel really be about moving through time. Frankie is narrating his life as though it is unspooling in his mind. This automatically pulls the narrative away from the realm of realism, because that's not how minds work. I was creating the illusion of a mind that works this way. But it’s more narrating a sort of bildungsroman that’s running on a parallel narrative track and [is] interwoven with the story of a five-day trip home. I also needed the narrative to read smoothly, as though it wasn't hard to do even though it was really hard! Ultimately, a five-day trip home isn’t an autobiography; it’s not about what you consider most important in your life; it’s not a grand ambitious statement about a life. So on a five-day trip home to see your mom, what will you think about? You’re going to think about your mom, the town you’re going back to, the girl you knew in high school who’s reached out and just invited you to dinner. But the things that are so weighty in your life get dragged along too. So I wanted to create this dance between the frivolous and the solemn, the painful and the more ephemeral.

What made fiction the best form for this book, as opposed to, say, memoir?

Well, a memoir is nonfiction, and, because I have had to do some pretty consequential journalism in my life, I know that in nonfiction you can never fictionalize. There’s this absolute, scrupulous fealty to the factual. A novel is autonomous to reality, independent of it.

What was important to me in writing Monkey Boy was not necessarily the kinds of things you would write about in a memoir. The important thing was figuring out how to write this novel. It was that obsession with the illusion of a subject from which, finally, style and structure emerge. Because it’s the structure, the patterns, forms, the way it’s told that finally express what the book is trying to say.

One of the book’s most striking images is a painting of Frankie’s mother, Yolanda, after she married his father. Did this painting actually exist?

When I started writing the novel, I knew the portrait of my mother would be an important image in this book. We always used to tease my mother about that portrait. It was very campy, and we lived in a very modest lower-middle-class household, in a very modest town. So you can imagine how preposterous it was when kids would come over to my house and see this portrait of my mother. Sometimes we were embarrassed; other times we just liked to tease her. I didn't realize what an important image it was going to be until the book’s patterns of imagery worked themselves out—so by the end of the novel, it becomes a magic portal that allows the narrator to enter her past, which definitely separates this novel from conventional realism.

Roberto Rodriguez is a Poe-Faulkner Fellow in Fiction at the University of Virginia. Monkey Boy received a starred review in the March 1, 2021, issue.
Life—the worst and best of it—goes on after a shocking death in this moving novel.

The story of a family coping with the death of a beloved middle-aged man could easily tip into mawkishness, but this assured first novel avoids that with a crisp pace, complex characters, and an unflinching depiction of how grief can blindside us. Rich is a schoolteacher who lives in rural Devon with his wife, Ruth, and their 10-year-old son, Ollie. Ruth’s irascible mother, Angran (toddler Ollie’s mashup of Angela and Grandma), and sister, Nessa, live nearby, which is a mixed blessing. When Rich is diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, his impulse is to grab every bit of joy he has left and to let people know how much he loves them. Rich might face death bravely, but his family falls apart, all their long-simmering conflicts welling up like the bad drains in Angran’s decrepit cottage. Kline structures the book with short chapters that rotate among the points of view of Ruth, Nessa, Angran, Ollie, and Rich’s parents, Gerald and Marjorie. Ruth and Angran both struggle with depression; Ruth was more dependent on Rich than she realized, and Angran is deeply bitter still that she raised her daughters alone. Nessa is a take-charge schoolteacher whose close friendship with Rich long preceded his marriage to Ruth, and her battles with her mother and sister stretch back decades. Tenderhearted Marjorie is grappling not only with the loss of her son, but with her domineering husband’s descent into dementia. And Ollie, the center of the book and the only character whose chapters are written in the first person, is on the autism spectrum; his father was the main source of the stability he so deeply needs, and after Rich’s death he’s both adrift and unable to express it except through his obsession with a list of gifts his father left to be distributed to his survivors. Kline captures the difficulty of navigating grief in its myriad forms, she finds mordant humor
“Drawing from genres as diverse as horror, humor, and historical fiction, Kupersmith creates a rich and dazzling spectacle.”

BUILD YOUR HOUSE AROUND MY BODY
Kupersmith, Violet
Random House (400 pp.)
$27.00 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-8129-9332-5

A wide-ranging first novel that peels back the layers of a haunted Vietnam.

Winnie is just 22 when she moves in with her great aunt and two surly cousins in Saigon to teach English at the Achievement! International Language Academy. Winnie feels herself to be unexceptional in every way: Half White American, half Vietnamese, she sees herself as having “the muddy ambiguity of the middle.” (In a “taupe” bathroom stall, she gloomily wonders if she is blending into the walls.) She’s also a frankly terrible English teacher, and she lives in fear of being found out by her zealous expat colleagues. But Winnie is finally settling into life in Saigon with her boyfriend, Long, when she suddenly goes missing. Kupersmith, herself of Vietnamese heritage, interweaves Winnie’s life in Vietnam with other people’s stories, all linked together by a supernatural bond: There’s the daughter of a prominent pepper company owner, who disappeared into the forest a generation before Winnie and was rescued under mysterious circumstances. There’s the team at Saigon Spirit Eradication, a kind of Vietnamese Ghostbusters, only the head of the organization, known as the Fortune Teller, is not what he appears to be. The novel also dips into Vietnam’s pre- and post-colonial history with French characters to explore the ways in which war creates another kind of hauntedness. There’s even a possessed dog. Any description of the book could make it sound like too many spinning plates, but Kupersmith manages the whirl with dexterity and confidence. The novel is epic enough in scope to require a character list and several pages of maps, but the pages fly as the reader is compelled to figure out how all the narratives will eventually collide.

Drawing from genres as diverse as horror, humor, and historical fiction, Kupersmith creates a rich and dazzling spectacle.
dreams also play a part here—echoes Lock’s work in *A History of the Imagination* (2004) and *The Boy in His Winter* (2014). Initially, Page’s misadventures in 1692 suggest a 19th-century version of numerous time-travel narratives in which someone out of their proper time wrestles with a new status quo. Lock also adds a few winks at the reader, as when Page waxes ecstatic about Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown.” Rather than confronting Hathorne, however, Page grows distracted by the society around him and the prospect of romance. Gradually, he moves from being a progressive, liberating figure to one beset by ominous visions and prone to retrograde, offensive statements—and who ultimately ponders reconciling with, rather than rebuking, Hathorne. In showing Page’s gradual shift, Lock illustrates the ease with which some idealists can become reactionaries—and chronicles an uneasy metaphysical struggle in author and character alike.

*Palace of the Drowned*

Mangan, Christine

Flatiron Books (320 pp.)

$27.99 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-250-78842-9

A bestselling British author takes refuge from self-inflicted scandal in Venice. Fortunately, this novel is set in the 1960s, since its most crucial plot developments could not have occurred in the 2020s. Glaring among these is the fact that going to Venice to escape a scandal in London would no longer be an option, scandals being inescapable. Stung by a dismissive anonymous review of her latest novel, Frances “Frankie” Croy seethes for a few weeks, then, at a literary gala, confides drunkenly in a waiter before slugging a stranger. The waiter turns out to be a tabloid reporter. After Frankie spends a stint in a posh asylum, her best friend, Jack, offers her family’s palazzo in Venice as a place for Frankie to recuperate and perhaps start the fifth novel her faithful editor, Harold, has been nagging her for. To Frankie’s consternation, Jack and her husband, Leonard, delay joining her in Venice, which, conveniently for the plot, allows Frankie to get in the kind of trouble a lonely midlife author is prone to, especially one with a severe but unacknowledged drinking problem and who fears her talent is waning. Enter 26-year-old fan/stalker Gilly, who buttonholes Frankie in the fish market, claiming to be the daughter of a colleague. At first, Frankie is charmed by Gilly’s youthful hero worship and willingness to befriend an older woman of 42. But something is “off” about “the girl.” Are Gilly’s changing stories calculated or absent-minded? Much of the suspense here is driven by misdirection, abetted by Frankie’s puzzling inability to ask pointed questions. Not surprisingly, it develops that Gilly herself has writerly ambitions, and the narrative takes an *All About Eve* turn. A reference to Patricia Highsmith, like Chekhov’s gun, will also play out, because Gilly has much in common with Ripley, in that her real aim is to supplant her hero. These tropes wind down in a not entirely unexpected but fitting way.

Against the grim backdrop of off-season Venice, literary rivalry can be menacing.

*Mrs. Rochester’s Ghost*

Marcott, Lindsay

Thomas & Mercer (398 pp.)

$24.95 | Jul. 13, 2021

978-1-5420-2638-3

A modern American Jane Eyre won’t rest until she learns the fate of her employer’s wife.

When Jane arrives at Thorn Bluffs, a former artists colony on the very edge of Big Sur, she’s leaving behind a failed career as a scriptwriter, a romantic betrayal, and her mother’s recent death. Almost at once she thinks she’s made a mistake in
“There's a lot to like here, especially Centeno's focus on character development—particularly secondary characters.... this focus begins to pay real dividends in the latter chapters as readers are rewarded with a breakneck-paced, fully immersive, and plot-twist-laden read.”
—BlueInk Review

“A space captain must contend with inner turmoil and enemy forces in Paul L. Centeno's high-octane science fiction novel Maz'hura.”
—Foreword Clarion Reviews

“Sci-fi and fantasy merge to form an entertaining romp in space.”
—Kirkus Reviews

ISBN: 978-1530954650

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letting her friend Otis Fairfax, Thorn Bluffs’ chef, talk her into coming there to tutor a motherless teenage girl. The estate is isolated; Jane’s cottage, though it’s rent-free, is bleak; and the absent owner, Evan Rochester, is rumored to have murdered his wife, the lovely but mentally unstable Beatrice. Jane has always had a taste for the macabre, but even she’s unsettled on her first night, when she thinks she sees a ghost. She’s almost ready to quit when Evan and a motorcycle emerge from the mist. Despite his rudeness, arrogance, and unwillingness to talk about his wife, who supposedly drowned herself in the surf on their wedding anniversary, Jane can’t help falling for him. Stolen garments, a mysterious medallion, a red stain on the rug, a deteriorating tower with a slashed portrait, Evan’s beautiful business associate, and Beatrice’s vengeful brother keep Jane guessing about Beatrice and doubting whether she can trust Evan—even after they become lovers.

Despite its emojis, mojitos, Range Rovers, and Beechcrafts, Marcott’s reworking of this Gothic classic holds its own.

A lonely young woman who works as a maid at a yacht club reaches for connection but grasps only straws. McClory’s debut is a poignant comedy starring an endearing female character whose quirkiness seems to be rooted in some unspecified admixture of disorders that is never fully pinned down in the book. Maybe that’s just the point, so readers who identify with the eccentric protagonist don’t have to climb over a diagnosis to get there. Though Amy Hanley attended a “rather elite university,” as she reminds herself frequently, she is cleaning hotel rooms as she waits to take the test to become an EMT at the end of the summer, hoping to follow in the footsteps of her hero, Florence Nightingale. To short-circuit her terrible anxiety about the exam, she decides to apply a theory she learned in her favorite college class. “It might not be common practice to placebo oneself, but why not try? Weren’t we all doing it to some extent every day anyway?” Telling ourselves mind over matter, think positively, visualize, manifest, fake it till you make it.” In Amy’s case, this involves pretending she has already passed the test, making herself a fake results letter and certification card, and celebrating over cake with her landlord, who is also her only friend. What a tangled web we weave....McClory has the courage to make Amy less than completely likable, which gives the book an interesting edge, but her courage seems to fail in the final pages. The story stops rather than ends, pretending to be more conclusive and less depressing than it is.

Like a tasty half sandwich. What’s here is good, but it’s not quite enough.

McKinney opens his futuristic Water City Trilogy with a slice of post-apocalyptic noir even darker and more stylized than Blade Runner.

Called to Akira Kimura’s penthouse in the undersea mansion of Volcano Vista to provide personal security for his old friend, the nameless narrator finds his prospective client flooded with nitro and dismembered inside her hibernation chamber. It’s a grim fate for the most famous person in the world, the scientist who back in 2102 spotted the asteroid Sessho-seki on a collision course with Earth and overcame the relentless objections of people like NASA scientist Dr. Karlin Brum to launch the Ascalon
Project, whose cosmic ray split The Killing Rock into halves that darted off in different, non-Earthbound directions. But it’s far from the most bizarre thing that will happen to the narrator, an 80-year-old detective who served as Akira’s bodyguard while she worked on the project. Over the next week he’ll quit his job during an interrogation by his boss, pull a thermal blade on Akira’s wealthy grad school friend Jerry Caldwell, get arrested for murder when Jerry’s killed soon afterward, submit to another interrogation by Sabrina, the fourth wife he mentored when she was a rookie cop, and enlist his friend Akeem Buhari to accompany him on a midnight visit to Akira’s mausoleum to fulfill her last request: that he find the daughter she abandoned years ago and apologize to her. The landscape is so densely imagined in both technological and political terms (think class warfare and cellphones on steroids) that it’s no easy task to concentrate on the self-tormenting hero, who reflects that “violence is when I’m most in tune with my flow,” or his investigation.

Even the most ardent readers are more likely to turn the last page exhausted rather than eager for the sequels.
ointment. In order to launch his own pet project, a portable EEG that registers its wearer’s levels of engagement with goods and experiences whose merchants would love to know more about, Doug needs more money, so he teams up with tech consultant Erik Powell to sell medical information they’ve stolen from Dr. Maryn’s database. Dr. Maryn continues to have strong opinions of her own, some of them highly ethical, others not so much. Most disruptive of all is Doug’s receptionist, Chloe, whom he sends to Emily hoping that RFG can represent her on the strength of her work with Common Parlance, a pop-up performing troupe. Chloe and Emily don’t bond, but Chloe and Doug do, early and often. When her romance with Doug has run its all-too-predictable course, Chloe is unexpectedly taken up by Emily, who has ideas of her own about how best to turn the situation to her advantage. But so, it turns out, does Chloe.

Myles’ sharp sense of the objects and perks that spell entitlement isn’t enough to save this inflated, overdetailed affair.

THE ROAD TRIP
O’Leary, Beth
Berkley (400 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-5933-3502-4

Years after a tumultuous breakup, a young woman finds herself crammed into the same tiny car as her ex for a dayslong drive to a mutual friend’s wedding. Addie and her sister, Deb, are excited to be road tripping from their home in England to rural Scotland for their friend Cherry’s wedding. They’ve planned the trip so perfectly that they don’t even mind transporting a work friend of Cherry’s, an overly apologetic fellow named Rodney. Unfortunately, only a few hours after they set out, they get rear-ended. It turns out the driver is none other than Dylan Abbott, the man Addie has spent two years trying to forget. Worse yet, the car Dylan was driving now needs a tow, leaving him and his best friend, Marcus, without transportation to the very same wedding. Before she can stop herself, Addie invites the men to ride along with her, Deb, and Rodney. Everyone piles into the Mini Cooper, and with each mile they drive, Addie and Dylan find themselves assaulted by memories and unresolved feelings. Meanwhile, the group dynamic, as a whole, is also less than perfect. As the journey progresses, the bickering between the passengers only escalates, creating a slew of awkward moments and surprising revelations. Told alternately from Addie’s and Dylan’s perspectives, the novel shifts between “Then,” when they were falling in love, and “Now,” when they are grappling with their unresolved feelings. As a picture of the past begins to crystalize, the author deftly portrays the passion the couple once felt for each other. Unfortunately, other than the sexual chemistry, they seem to be missing a true emotional connection, rendering their potential reunion somewhat less exciting. After the initial flashback scenes, which are quite engaging, Dylan gradually reveals himself to be so self-involved and undirected that his shortcomings weaken the intrigue of his pining over Addie. More fun is watching the other passengers in the car battle against each other as they navigate the uncomfortable ride, squishing into tight spaces and arguing over every possible topic. Despite its unevenness, the story is full of fun: quirky behavior, witty Briticisms, and gleeful slapstick humor.

A second-chance romance shows the many potential pitfalls of road tripping.
"I remember every sight, every sound, every smell, from the moment of my birth to the moment we are in now. I’ve been taken far from my home, across vast waters to towering nests filled with two-leggers, where countless of them hurtle about in their false beasts."

My world is out under the open sky, where the stars are so close you can see them moving across the night. It is under that sky that I hope to end my journey, among the two-legged friends who raised me, and the friends from my long ago adopted herd."

"A vivid and timely depiction of the sentience of elephants and the cruelty of ivory poaching."
—Kirkus Reviews

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“A surprising, provocative debut that holds the weight of myth.”

A SHOCK
Keith Ridgway
New Directions (296 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Jul. 5, 2021
978-0-8112-3085-8

A group of Londoners wrestle with intimacy, trust, and memory. Irish author Ridgway’s first novel in eight years doesn’t necessarily lend itself to an easy description. It follows the lives of a number of people based in London, though the connections between these characters—or even when these scenes take place in relation to one another—aren’t always apparent. When certain moments click into place, such as the significance of one character’s shouting at a rat or the way a conversation about a man named Gary adds depth to an earlier scene, the effect is transportive. Where this novel excels in particular is in Ridgway’s ability to evoke the mental states of his characters, especially when they pass outside of lucidity. That the novel opens with a section centered around an aging widow whose memory isn’t as reliable as it once was and who’s struggling with paranoia and depression in the wake of her husband’s death does a fine job of preparing the reader for what’s coming. This reaches its apex in a long chapter detailing a drug-fueled assignation between Frank and Tommy. That both men are using a prodigious amount of crystal meth gives the chapter a delirious feel, but Ridgway details that in intriguingly specific ways, such as a moment when Tommy realizes that his favorite part of a Charles Mingus record is the sound of a washing machine coming from another room. At the same time, numerous conversations about politics—including the plight of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and whether someone can be both your friend and your boss—add another dimension to the narrative.

Once this novel clicks into place, its blend of the heady and the visceral is immersive and compelling.

AQUARIUM
Yaara Shehori
Trans. by Hasak-Lowy, Todd
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (272 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-3741-0592-1

Two young girls raised in a Deaf family must find their way after their sheltered, codependent world is shattered. Lili and Dori Ackerman are Deaf. All their lives, they have lived in an isolation largely imposed on the family by their father; they have no interaction with hearing people, as their parents are also Deaf and choose to teach the girls at home. All the elements of their existence are controlled, planned for, regulated—not unlike the controlled climate of an aquarium, complete with visitors pressing their faces against the glass to gaze upon the exotic dwellers within. When the borders of their fortress are breached and new elements introduced into their world, the consequences have a ripple effect the Ackermans could not have foreseen. The narrative switches back and forth between perspectives as we observe Lili and Dori walking their separate paths, representing two different possibilities—counterlives, as Philip Roth would have it. Israeli poet and editor Shehori’s debut novel has the resonance of a folktale, rendered in evocative prose (for which we must also credit translator Hasak-Lowy) that lends an otherworldly quality to the story, mirroring the rarified existence of the Ackerman sisters. But ultimately, this comes at the expense of an engaging narrative, as we are kept at arm’s length from the protagonists, despite the extended glimpses into their interiority, they are more like characters in a fable than they are fully drawn, idiosyncratic people. Nevertheless, Shehori has brought into being a memorable fictional world that asks us to rethink our assumptions about family versus community, nature versus nurture, and how we relate to—and communicate with—one another.

A surprising, provocative debut that holds the weight of myth.
SHOULD WE STAY OR SHOULD WE GO
Shriver, Lionel
Harper (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-06-309424-6

Is it a good idea to kill yourself before you become elderly and burdensome? Shriver considers the possibilities.

After more than a decade of often sour, scolding fiction, Shriver has written her best novel since The Post-Birthday World (2007), in no small part because it revisits that book's alternate-timeline conceit. In 1991, Kay, an interior designer, and Cyril, a physician with Britain’s National Health Service, are dispirited by the death of Kay's father from dementia. So they agree that on Kay's 80th birthday, in 2020, they'll take fatal doses of Seconal. In successive chapters, Shriver imagines a dozen ways this plan plays out, or doesn't. Kay has second thoughts and is struck dead by a delivery van anyhow; or Cyril does and meets a similarly dim fate. Elsewhere, they decide to play out their dotted in a spendy retirement home, or their children discover the plan and have the couple banished to a dismal institution. More wildly, Shriver imagines scenarios in which a drug for immortality is discovered or the couple enter a cryogenic deep-freeze and reemerge to a transformed human race or suffer in a dystopian England overrun by migrants. Shriver is still Shriver, using her characters to grumble about Brexit, Covid, monetary policy, and political correctness. (“Please tell me you're not listening to that Shriver woman,” Kay groans to Cyril. “She's a hysteric. And so annoyingly smug, as if she wants civilization to collapse.”) But a novel with multiple tendrils means she doesn't get locked into one point of view, and, as in The Post-Birthday World, the multiple perspectives produce a tender and complex portrait of the central couple. Mortality, Shriver finds, needn’t be morbid; one of her imagined futures is downright pleasant and testifies to humanity's adaptability. It reads a bit awkwardly, but that'll happen when a writer tries something new.

A return to form, merging Shriver's better instincts as both novelist and social critic.

“I loved book one and I love this one just as much, if not more.”
—The Romance Reviews

“...a fun mix of paranormal meets mystery that will leave readers glued until the end!”
—InD’Tale Magazine

“Thoroughly entertaining and witty, with a nicely judged mix of genres.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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LOVE AND FURY
A Novel of Mary Wollstonecraft
Silva, Samantha
Flatiron Books (288 pp.)
$26.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-250-15911-3

A fictionalized biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, the pioneering 18th-century feminist and radical thinker who was the mother of Frankenstein author Mary Shelley.

Wollstonecraft died at 38, days after having given birth to Mary, her second daughter, and Silva frames the novel as the dying woman’s recounting of her life story to her infant. Her reprobate father made her childhood a misery, she remembers, but, already rebellious and brilliant, she had a knack for drawing others to her. John Arden, father of her friend Jane, recognized Wollstonecraft’s intelligence and tutored her until Jane began to find Wollstonecraft too unconventional (and needy) to continue their friendship—also a pattern in Wollstonecraft’s life despite her intellectual emphasis on independence and feminine self-reliance in her writings. At 18, Wollstonecraft began a romantic friendship with tubercular artist Fanny Blood, but Fanny married for financial security and died in childbirth. After a brief career as a governess in Ireland, Wollstonecraft began a writing career in London supported by flamboyant publisher Joseph Johnson, who introduced her to the likes of William Blake, Thomas Paine, and her future husband, radical philosopher William Godwin, whom she initially disliked. Instead, she fell madly if semi-platonically in love with married painter Henry Fuseli, until he dumped her at his wife’s insistence. In Paris to observe the French Revolution, she began a passionate affair with American adventurer Gilbert Imlay, a cad not unlike her father. He fathered her first daughter, Fanny, then broke her heart. Finally Wollstonecraft and Godwin reconnected as soul mates. While Silva works hard to fit in all the details of Wollstonecraft’s life with accuracy, the most moving moments belong to her fictitious midwife, kindly Mrs. Blenkinsop. Her intermittent narration of Wollstonecraft’s last weeks is meant to provide a workingwoman’s adoring view of Wollstonecraft and her domestic life with Godwin but also reveals the midwife’s private grief and spiritual growth.

Silva’s strong visual language enhances an otherwise matter-of-fact retelling of Wollstonecraft’s brief, eventful life.

What happens when a weapon empowered by God falls into the wrong hands?

"A riveting sea adventure that will leave readers craving sequels." - Kirkus Reviews

"A few like Ray Griggs are given special talents and known as storytellers." - Gerald R. Molen, Academy Award Winner Schindler’s List, Jurassic Park and The Mog

"It contains all of the exciting components of a Dan Brown, James Rollins, and Clive Cussler book rolled up into one..." - Readers’ Favorite

NOVEL 11, BOOK 18
Solstad, Dag
Trans. by Lyngstad, Sverre
New Directions (224 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-8112-2826-8

Norwegian novelist Solstad delivers a grim exercise in modern literary existentialism.

Bjørn Hansen is 50 as this novel opens. He had left Oslo years before for the quiet country town of Kongsberg, the hometown of his lover, Turid Lammers, for whom he abandoned his wife and child. Now, having talked his way into the job of town treasurer by virtue of a college degree, he has left Turid, too. “This was how Bjørn Hansen’s existence had shaped up. This was his life. At Kongsberg. With Turid Lammers, this woman he had to live with because he feared he would otherwise regret everything,” writes Solstad. Turid’s sin? As director of the local theater company, she allowed Bjørn to deliver a disastrous performance in a production of Henrik Ibsen’s The Wild Duck, a mirthless story perfectly at home in Bjørn’s sprawling library of similarly dour books: Kafka, Kierkegaard, Cela. Of The Family of Pasquale Duarte, the brooding masterwork by the last writer, Bjørn intones, “Was it sombre enough? I mean, I liked the book, but did it go deeply enough, I mean deeply enough into my own existence?” Bjørn empties out his library when his forgotten son, Peter, bobs up to attend optometry school; Bjørn lets Peter
TOWER OF MUD AND STRAW

YAROSLAV BARSUKOV

Kindle Best Seller in Gaslamp Fantasy, Steampunk and Metaphysical Fantasy

"Tower of Mud and Straw feels like a step forward for the genre..."
—FanFiAddict

"It’s clever, it’s feverish, and he leaves much up for interpretation."
—The Quill to Live

“This marvelous SF tale about dangerous technology offers sublime stretches that will warrant revisiting.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) ★

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stay in his home but steadily regrets the decision when he realizes Peter has no direction in life and is roundly disliked by his classmates. “Youths like Peter Korpi Hansen were ten a penny,” Bjørn grumbles. “All of them radiated the same intoxicating nonchalance, self-indulgence and idleness.” Like the similarly bookish Peter Kien of Elias Canetti’s *Auto-da-Fé*, Bjørn, too, is an ostensibly influential man without purpose or power. Steered into an insurance scam by his drug-addicted doctor when he announces his intention to “actualise his No, his great Negation,” Bjørn surrenders his will as if glad to be rid of it. The philosophical implications are many, though it’s a bit of a slog through an essentially actionless plot to get at them.

If Ingmar Bergman’s films are too cheerful for you, this is just the antidote.

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**LIGHT PERPETUAL**

*Spufford, Francis*

Scribner (336 pp.)

$23.99 | May 18, 2021

978-1-982174-14-9

This richly imagined mosaic tracks the lives five Londoners might have experienced if they hadn’t been killed as children by a V-2 rocket during World War II.

It starts with a bang in an almost poetic description of the German weapon’s inner workings and the utter havoc it wreaks. Spufford notes in a postscript the historical source of his opening scene: the 1944 bombing of a London Woolworths that killed 168, including 15 children. As god-novelist, he undoes death and gives five young victims an escape clause, “some other version of the reel of time, where might-be and could-be and would-be still may be.” It’s a device that might recall Kate Atkinson’s *Life After Life* but with only one-time reincarnations. After we get a school-days view of the quintet in 1949, they are shown in their separate adult lives—with occasional intersections—every 15 years through 2009. Jo has a moment of pop stardom, Alec endures the union struggles on Fleet Street, Val finds love and darkness with a skinhead, Vern plays con man and real estate mogul, and Ben teeters on the edge of mental collapse. The precis doesn’t do it justice. While the view is fragmentary and full of gaps, the characters are complex, engaging, memorable. Spufford does indeed bring them to life. He also brings depth and detail to every vignette, from a boy’s view of soccer to hot-lead typesetting, a neo-Nazi concert, or a trip on a double-decker bus. There’s a subtle theme on the war’s legacy woven from references to building and rebuilding. The bigger threads are people and family, change and time, how we hurt, love, and use each other and find or lose ourselves while our brief lives evolve in “a messy spiral of hours and years.”

Entertaining and unconventional.

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**CHEAT DAY**

*Stratman, Liv*

Scribner (320 pp.)

$26.00 | May 25, 2021

978-1-982140-54-0

A diet-obsessed woman has an affair and reevaluates her life.

In Stratman’s debut novel, perpetual dieter and job quitter Kit embarks on an extreme diet—and an affair. At 34, Kit is living in her childhood duplex in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, with her kind but inattentive husband, David. She works as the general manager of Sweet Cheeks, her sister’s bakery, and is constantly searching for the wellness regimen that will bring her fulfillment. As she embarks on the Radiant Regimen, an ultrastrict 75-day diet, Kit meets Matt—the handsome carpenter hired to build shelves for the bakery—and they
quickly begin a passionate affair. The more Kit lies and cheats, the less she eats. Along with stellar characterization, Stratman beautifully (and often with humor) captures the complexities of long-term relationships and the ways deprivation and indulgence are intricately intertwined. The novel explores the trappings of diet culture in nuanced and honest ways. Kit, who has always believed a smaller body would bring her true happiness, realizes the very thing she’s chasing is contributing to her angst—but she can’t bring herself to stop or break the cycle. In the thick of her affair and while on a rare night out with David (at a Radiant-compliant restaurant), Kit thinks about how her past self would marvel at what she has, yet she’s still miserable: “Forcing myself and my husband to skip the wine, to order an inferior version of the good food. Nothing’s ever enough, and you never get away from yourself.” The ending is less explosive than introspective, but it feels true to the novel. Whether readers love Kit or hate her, there’s something wonderful in the way she finally begins to embrace her life and put effort into her work and relationships instead of just her fad diets.

A funny, wise, and winning debut.

ENCIRCLING 3

Aftermath
Tiller, Carl Frode
Trans. by Haveland, Barbara
Graywolf (448 pp.)
$20.00 paper | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-64445-058-1

The concluding volume in Tiller’s three-part novel about class and identity, thick with provocative twists and ill will. Tiller’s Norwegian domestic saga closes by following the pattern of the first two books, published in English in 2017 and 2018. David has taken out an ad asking friends and acquaintances to share memories about him following a bout of amnesia; the replies say something about David, a witty, sour writer, but also about the respondents and broader Norwegian culture. Hanging over the narrative is David’s search for his father’s identity, which this volume resolves, but happy feelings of closure are hard to come by. In the first section, Marius reveals the truth about David’s father and unspools a remembrance of his own insecurities growing up in a wealthy family and competing with his brother. Susanne, a college friend, had an affair with David after her marriage began to crumble, but her relationship with David became poisonous as well. Finally, David himself weighs in, chafing against his stalled literary career and neuroses about his wife’s family; scenes of him sabotaging a family dinner are paired with transcripts of him parrying with his therapist over his fears. If those talk-it-out scenes are a little pat, Tiller’s sense of his characters’ pressure points is acute; he grasps how competitive Marius and David are and how desperate Susanne is to buck against domestic roles. And though scenes sometimes stretch on, Tiller’s pointillistic approach gains power as it goes along. (In David’s section, a bouillabaisse and some Q-tips spark an epic interior explosion over feelings of failure as a husband and father.) David is hard to like, but Tiller’s prismatic approach captures him from a multitude of angles; he and his cohort become fuller, if not necessarily more likable, as the story progresses.

A surprising, emotionally intense character study that elevates everyday anxieties into epic form.

REVIVAL SEASON
West, Monica
Simon & Schuster (304 pp.)
Jun. 15, 2021 | $26.00
978-1-982133-30-6

A debut novel about patriarchal religion and faith healing. Every summer, Miriam Horton’s family travels to midsized cities throughout the South so that her father can preach and heal. The summer of her 15th year is
different, though. During the previous revival season, the Rev. Samuel Horton had assaulted a pregnant teen, and it seems that the Black evangelical community has not forgotten. Frustrated that he is no longer drawing large crowds, Samuel lashes out at those who seek his help and at his family. Miriam is navigating the spiraling violence within her home when she discovers that she has the power to heal—an ability she must keep secret from her father, who believes that a healing ministry is for men only. West delineates several sources of tension here, but she doesn’t explore any of them in depth. For example, Samuel’s fall from being one of the most sought-after preachers on the Southern Baptist circuit makes him angry and abusive, but Miriam doesn’t tell us much about what life was like when her father was ascendent. Did she, her mother, and her siblings enjoy a status that they have now lost? Do they feel shame or resentment? Another issue is that, while momentous things happen, they seldom have serious or lasting consequences. Miriam heals her best friend of Type 1 diabetes, but then the illness returns. Miriam keeps on healing people who find out about her gift, but it’s not clear what the results of her efforts are. Does she have the power to heal or doesn’t she? The author can certainly choose not to answer this question, but it’s weird that Miriam herself isn’t much troubled by it. But, then again, Miriam doesn’t have much depth, and the characters who surround her are barely developed at all. The people in this novel exist to serve the plot. West gives us a glimpse of an insular world, but it’s not much more than a glimpse.

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Nearing 30 and newly dumped in Columbus, Ohio, a woman reconnects with her friends and tries to figure out what she wants out of life. Teddy Phillips has been with Richard (Rick the Dick to her friends, she later finds out) ever since college, devoting herself to taking care of him and helping him become a doctor. But despite all the cooking, cleaning, and of-course-I-can-agreeableness she showers upon him, instead of proposing to her as she expects one evening, he dumps her and kicks her out of their house. She turns up on the doorstep of her two best friends, Eleanor and Kirsten, who welcome her with open arms, an empty spare room, and encouragement to try one new scary thing each day. Thus begins Teddy’s attempt to figure out who she is after so many years of tagging along, helping others, and abdicating responsibility for any and all decisions. One of her first scary things is an impromptu decision to write to Everett St. James, host of Everett’s Place, a local children’s television show, to ask for advice on figuring out her life. She loves his show, which is devoted to helping young kids process and understand their feelings, and she’s happy when they become pen pals—and then when their relationship evolves into more as they open up to each other. As in previous books, Winfrey has created a straightforward story with pop-culture nods, strong and supportive friends, and complicated-but-loving families. The core of the book grapples with the question of just what constitutes happiness and how to strike the right balance between work and life.

Fans will be happy to settle into this cozy rom-com and its comfortably unfolding story.
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Podcast Available on iTunes
ANGEL & HANNAH
A Novel in Verse
Yi Park, Ishle
One World/Random House (192 pp.)
$18.00 paper | May 11, 2021
978-0-593-13432-0

A passionate novel in verse about the love between two New York City teenagers whose cultural and economic expectations eventually turn their relationship to dust.

The book’s poems, most just a page or two, are tied together in four sections named for the seasons, beginning with spring, when the flowers of all beginnings bud. We first meet Hannah and Angel separately; the first two poems introduce them in second grade, then the book leaps to high school, setting the stage for abrupt chronological disconnections throughout the narrative. Bookish and school-smart Hannah from Queens, the daughter of Korean immigrants, meets Boricua Angel, a young dealer from the streets of Bushwick, at a party and they immediately fall into a dark, heedless romance. Hannah, who chafes at her father’s violent, controlling ways, eventually moves in with Angel and begins a different dance—one of poverty, Angel’s drug addiction and infidelity, and her own burgeoning outbursts of rage. The richest parts of the book are the tantalizing glimpses of Hannah’s culture—often seen through Hannah’s thoughts of her mother and the Korean comfort food she would cook—and her yearning to not become her parents. Though Angel’s character is well developed at first, we lose the thread of who he is beyond Nuyorican clichés as he starts to unravel from drug addiction. Ultimately, his humanity becomes rooted in his younger brother, Rafi, who was born with HIV and whom both Angel and Hannah fiercely love.

A tender and honest story of young love striving to survive the streets.

M Y S T E R Y

A HEX FOR DANGER
Addison, Esme
Crooked Lane (336 pp.)
$26.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-64385-586-8

The Magicals and the Mundanes tangle again in this follow-up to A Spell for Trouble (2020).

When Aleksandra Daniels turned to her mother’s family in Bellamy Bay, North Carolina, after the death of her father, she learned that the Sobieskis have magical powers inherited from mermaids. Her relatives, who run an herbal remedy store, soon teach her to harness her own powers—something she keeps secret from her Mundane boyfriend, detective Jack Frazier, who once arrested her aunt for murder. Trouble arrives in the form of a brief incident of nothingness, which is passed off as a power outage, though the Magicals know that more is involved. Disaster strikes the mermaid festival when muralist Neve Ryland is murdered in the office of museum director Jasper Collins, and Alex’s friend Celeste is the major suspect. During a conversation with Alex at the unveiling of her mystical mermaid mural, Neve revealed that someone was researching the DNA of people with mermaid genes, a project that might have led to her murder and now spells danger for Alex’s friends and family. Jack is stubbornly bent on arresting Celeste, but Alex knows that the involvement of the Magicals makes the case much more complicated than a jealous girlfriend. Alex must trust in her Magical childhood friend Dylan Wesley, who vies with Jack for her love, if she’s to survive long enough to solve the puzzling crime.

Magical mysteries, romance, and a Harry Potter–like storyline add up to an enchanting read.
DEATH AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE

Ashley, Jennifer
Berkley (336 pp.)
$16.00 paper  |  Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-593-09939-1

Who's poisoning the mistress of the house in Victorian London?

Kat Holloway is a cook with unusual connections that are very useful when she encounters mysteries to be solved. While visiting the Crystal Palace, she meets wealthy Lady Covington, a friend of the family she works for, who confides that she's being poisoned and can trust no one. Although she rules the house where her two stepchildren and her own two children live, she suspects them all except for her beloved youngest son. Kat's romance with Daniel McAdam, who helps Scotland Yard as a way of working off an unspecified debt, has been slowly developing over the course of several puzzling cases she's helped him solve, but he's still an enigma to her in many ways. Bringing a recipe for the cook as an excuse, she visits Lady Covington's home to see if she can discover how and why milady is being poisoned. Luckily, Kat works for eccentric Lady Cynthia, who's far from the perfect Victorian miss her parents desire—she dresses in men's clothing and is always willing to help Kat solve mysteries. Meantime, Daniel reluctantly seeks Kat's help in his quest to expose Fenians plotting to kill British leaders. His request that she pose as the fiancee of the empty-headed fop he's playing puts her in peril even as she makes headway on the case of the poisoned lady.

Fans will enjoy the continuing exploits of the clever cook, who gets to solve two complex mysteries.
NANTUCKET PENNY
Axelrod, Steven
Poisoned Pen (304 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-4642-1416-5

A poetry-writing Nantucket police chief is nearly overwhelmed by multiple crimes.

Henry Kennis eagerly awaits his nuptials to cozy-mystery writer Jane Stiles on lovely Nantucket. Despite the island's reputation as home to the rich and famous, the native population's interest in past and present insults, along with a healthy dose of xenophobia, has been troubling Henry. In addition, there are drug gangs and an email from Australia that suggests someone is murdering women who look a lot like Jane. One of Henry's own officers is a racist rogue cop whose generations-long ties to Nantucket have so far kept him from being fired. Several locals have gone missing, with only a telltale penny left behind when each of them disappears, but they could be off-island for purposes of their own. So they're low on Henry's to-do list compared to the problem of the California jailbreak of Roy Elkins, whom Henry had helped capture when he worked for the LAPD. Elkins is evidently bent on killing the loved ones of everyone connected to his arrest. Closer to home, a local kid who brings an AR-15 for school to school to kill Latinos is stopped by Mitchell Stone, a former Marine with a highly classified past, whose skills Henry much appreciates when he suddenly has a murder to contend with. Nantucket native Jane well remembers the mean girls and bullies from high school who may be driving a former classmate to kill. Are all Henry's problem cases connected to ancient slights?

A cerebral yet action-packed procedural rooted in sharply observed social problems.

LITTLE BLACK BOOK
Carlisle, Kate
Berkley (384 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-0-593201-43-5

A hazardous hunt for a missing person moves from California to Scotland.

San Francisco book restorer Brooklyn Wainwright has recently married Derek Stone, a sexy, dangerous, and well-connected former MI6 agent. Shortly after he receives a puzzling package mailed from Scotland containing a signed first edition of Rebecca, they're visited by a nervous woman named Claire Quinn asking Derek if he'd received a package from Scotland. Claire's aunt is missing, and her only clue is the postal receipt for the package, which she had found a few days earlier, hidden in her aunt's ransacked apartment, when she arrived for a visit. Claire, an expert on antique weapons, had worked with Brooklyn on the television show This Old Attic. Now they strike up a friendship that will be severely tested. Claire's aunt Gwyneth Quinn had raised her after her dodgy father vanished, and Derek knows that Gwyneth was an MI6 operative. When Brooklyn and Derek's cupcake-baking, kick-ass neighbor notices a strange man in the garage, they check and find the man with a dagger in his throat; Claire recognizes him as a phony pizza delivery man she'd refused entry. After Claire's apartment is trashed, they travel to the home of Derek's parents in Sonoma, where a second man is killed with a dagger and Brooklyn discovers an encrypted message in Rebecca. A trip to Scotland lands them at a castle near Gwyneth's home, where they encounter more questions than answers in their hunt for a dangerous killer.

A character-driven mystery with plenty of thrilling escapades to keep the plot moving.
The 10th and last in Clare’s riveting Aelf Fen series completes a long and dangerous journey for the determined heroine.

In the summer of 1100, supernaturally talented healer Lassair is returning to England after years spent in Spain learning to harness her formidable powers. She feels a dark cloud hanging over England and, in a vision of the future, sees a man killed in a forest, setting the stage for many hazardous adventures. At first she doesn’t visit her mentor, Gurdyman, or her teacher back in Spain. Instead, she meets with Eleanor de Lacey, who’s part of the king’s spy ring, which was run by Lassair’s late former lover, Rollo Guiscard. Eleanor has a chest full of Rollo’s gold and papers for Lassair, who takes it away and hides the contents in a deserted hut where she takes up secret study in her healing arts. The next day she finds Eleanor tortured and killed, and the contents of the chest. Lassair dares not visit her family with Errita so close on her trail, but she investigates on her own until her inquiries collide with Jack’s in a startling turn of events.

An exciting, mysterious adventure, though newcomers may prefer to start with the first book in this fascinating series.

**THE GRANDMOTHER PLOT**

Cooney, Caroline B.
Poisoned Pen (320 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-72820-515-1

Murder at a memory-care facility leads the drifting but doting grandson of a resident to poke around.

After his mother passed away, Freddy Bell moved to Connecticut to take care of his grandmother, Cordelia Chase. Technically, Middletown Memory Care is doing the heavy lifting, since Cordelia is best off being cared for by those who have the specialized training to do so. Freddy is perfectly happy with his regular visits, charming the otherwise unappreciated female caregivers. It’s hard to believe that this is the same Freddy who’s motivated the powerful drug dealer Doc to come all the way to Connecticut, or as Doc calls it, the land of trees, to get Freddy to do his bidding. Even though his main occupation is making glass pipes, Freddy doesn’t want to be a dealer. Besides, a little pot isn’t coke. But Freddy’s wrong when he thinks the biggest problem in his life is Doc’s demands, because the death of a longtime resident at the care center is way bigger. Sure, Freddy barely knew Maude Yardley, but when it turns out her death isn’t the progress of her disease but murder, Freddy’s afraid for his grandmother’s safety. What he should be afraid of, though, are the concerns of his sisters, whose overachieving lives mean they’re usually out of the picture but who are now threatening to descend on Freddy and get involved. To ensure his grandmother’s safety and his own, Freddy scrambles to figure out what happened to Maude while trying to stay under Doc’s all-seeing radar.

Difficult to dig into, but the characters are so richly detailed that they feel real.

**THE LAMMAS WILD**

Clare, Alys
Severn House (326 pp.)
$28.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-7278-9009-2

An exciting, mysterious adventure, though newcomers may prefer to start with the first book in this fascinating series.

**MURDER AT THE LAKESIDE LIBRARY**

Danvers, Holly
Crooked Lane (336 pp.)
$26.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-64385-632-2

A woman returning to her family’s summer home learns that her mother may be harboring secrets she’ll have to investigate to clear her mom of murder.

Giving up her career and her high-rise condo overlooking the Milwaukee River, Rain Wilmot heads back to her childhood retreat in Lofty Pines, Wisconsin, to clear her head after the death of her husband, Max. Processing her complicated feelings while staying in the serene family cabin on Pine Lake seems perfect until Rain finds out that in the absence of her mother, Willow, she’s unofficially in charge of the informal town library that Willow usually runs. Rain and Willow aren’t on the best of terms right now; and the more Rain hears about Willow from folks in the small town, the more her mother seems like a stranger. This feeling becomes all the more prescient in light of two shocking developments: Rain finds the body of Thornton Hughes, and she learns from town gossip that Thornton and Willow may have had an intimate relationship. As she settles into the cabin, she gradually realizes that her parents may have been leading separate lives for longer than she’d imagined, though she’s certain this sort of secret isn’t related to Thornton’s death. The problem is that Willow’s absence, combined with her connection to Thornton, makes her a primary suspect in his death. As distant as she feels from her mother, Rain, certain that Willow isn’t a murderer, resolves to do what it takes to clear her mother’s name, even if it means plunging into the investigation herself.

The lake setting is one of the few distinguishing features in a cozy that’s too mild for much else.
PALM SPRINGS NOIR
Ed. by DeMarco-Barrett, Barbara
Akashic (304 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-61775-928-4

Fourteen tales of dark doings in sunny Palm Springs.
As editor DeMarco-Barrett points out, it’s hard to think “noir” in a landscape that offers 300 days of sunshine a year. But unrelenting heat and light can do funny things to your brain. What else could explain why a longtime karaoke DJ heads south with a trunk full of his partner’s body parts in Tod Goldberg’s “A Career Spent Disappointing People”? Or how a runaway from the Betty Ford Clinic becomes a cat burglar in Eduardo Santiago’s “The Ankle of Anza”? Or how two vacationing college grads get hopelessly lost on a road three miles from the Joshua Tree parking lot in Ken Layne’s “The Loop Trail”? Of course the desert has always been a magnet for the extremes in human behavior. Where else would a group of religious renegades set up camp, as they do in Alex Espinoza’s “The Salt Calls Us Back”? Where else would the CIA conduct the bizarre mind-control experiments Rob Roberge chronicles in “The Expendables”? But even in the extreme Palm Springs climate, the tried-and-true noir motives still stand. There’s money, as in Janet Fitch’s “Sunrise.” There’s the love that goes wrong in Chris J. Bahnsen’s “Octagon Girl” and Kelly Shire’s “A Cold Girl.” There’s the fear that sprouts in J.D. Horn’s “The Stand-In.” And sometimes all three can produce a toxic mix, as they do in DeMarco-Barrett’s “The Water Holds You Still.”

An engaging mix of the good, the bad, and the off-kilter.

DARKNESS BEYOND
Eccles, Marjorie
Severn House (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-7278-5060-7

In 1933, an English soldier comes back from the dead only to be killed again.

The Black Country town of Folbury owes a lot to the Milar family. For three generations the Millars have provided affordable housing to everyone from factory workers to the upper crust. That is, all but Paul Millar, the restless one of the Millar children, who isn’t interested in anything without an engine. Easily provoked, he went off to Germany to sulk after some real or imagined insult only to return with a bubbly German wife, Liesl. But after Liesl dies, he again leaves his family, this time including his young son, Matt, to fight the Germans in the Great War. Years after his reported death in combat, he reappears still again, shocking his sister, Thea, and his younger brother, Teddy, who’s now in charge of the Millar empire. Before Paul can tell anyone where he’s been or why he’s returned, his body washes up in the River Fol. And once the police doctor confirms that Paul was killed by a shot in the back of his head, it’s up to DI Bert Reardon and his sergeant, Joe Gilmour, to find out why. Methodical and perceptive, Reardon digs further and further back into the Millars’ history to find the story of the man who had to die twice.

Eccles combines a steady police procedural with a tense family drama that hits all the right notes.

A GLIMMER OF A CLUE
Gerber, Daryl Wood
Kensington (304 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-4967-2636-0

A tale of perseverance, murder, and a sprinkling of magic in California.

Courtney Kelly is the owner of Open Your Imagination, where she uses her background in landscaping to help customers create inventive fairy gardens. Carmel-by-the-Sea is a delightfully artsy town, but Courtney saw its dark side when she solved a murder with help from Fiona, a fairy-in-training who lives in her shop. Among the roses of her friends and clients is one thorn: Lana Lamar, art critic and fanatic pickleball player. Lana uses her wealth to bulldoze anyone who gets in her way, so it’s no surprise when she ends up dead at a high-end fundraiser. Unfortunately, the woman found clutching the murder weapon is Wanda Brownie, mother of Meaghan, Courtney’s bestie. Wanda’s apparently sleepwalking, but that doesn’t keep her from being arrested by Detective Summers, who’s not a fan of Courtney’s sleuthing. Ignoring him, she slowly works her way through the alibis and motives of a diverse group of people who cordially hated Lana, including her husband, a trainer at the gym where she was pickleball champ, and a woman whose husband was killed in an accident she caused. Courtney’s secret weapon is Fiona, who can eavesdrop and enlist other fairies to help track down a killer.

Even readers who aren’t tempted to create a fairy garden may be enticed by the recipes appended to this appealing cozy.

THE ABDUCTION OF PRETTY PENNY
Goldberg, Leonard
Minotaur (352 pp.)
$26.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-2502-2422-4

The disappearance of an enchanting actress brings Joanna Watson face to face with a storied killer.

After her first husband died, Joanna, who’s Sherlock Holmes’ daughter, married John Watson Jr., the son of Holmes’ sidekick, and settled in
at 221B Baker St. to follow in her father’s footsteps, deploying the same amazing skills. Now, the Whitechapel Playhouse has hired her to find Pretty Penny, their missing star, a beauty of immense talent from a poor background. Though at first there seems little reason for Penny’s disappearance, Joanna soon notices subtle hints about why she might be gone. The suspects include three theatrically talented physicians who acted with Penny. At the same time, Scotland Yard requests help in the search for a vicious killer whose work bears the hallmarks of Jack the Ripper. Joanna reasons that The Ripper has taken Penny but not yet killed her, unlike the unfortunate prostitutes he’s recently mutilated and murdered in the most shocking ways. The Baker Street Irregulars are called in to watch the three doctors, all of whom frequent The Ripper’s prowling grounds in Whitechapel, while The Ripper taunts them with misses, one of them threatening the life of Joanna’s clever son, Johnny. When Johnny is abducted, the Watsons are desperate to find him. Johnny escapes, but Penny’s still missing, and The Ripper’s continuing to kill, forcing Joanna to adopt a dangerous plan.

Sherlockian ratiocination and authentically stomach-churning detail prop up a mediocre mystery.

**BUTCHER’S WOOD**
*Guttridge, Peter*  
Severn House (192 pp.)  
$28.99 | Jul. 6, 2021  
978-0-7278-5037-9

British author Guttridge returns to Brighton in his continued exploration of love, hate, and crime.

Guttridge first introduced actress Nimue Grace in *The Lady of the Lake* (2020), when DI Sarah Gilchrist and rude DS Bellamy Heap investigated a dead body found in her lake along with money from a bank robbery that had been sealed in plastic containers. Nimue, who’s hidden some of the loot, is trying to figure out a safe way to use it to enhance her depleted fortune when she gets a note from the original thief demanding its return. That thief has friends in high places, including bored police commissioner Bob Watts, who’s still trying to take down crooked businessman William Simpson, the father of Heap’s girlfriend. Gilchrist is attending a play with pathologist Johnny . When Johnny is abducted, the Watsons are desperate to find him. Johnny escapes, but Penny’s still missing, and The Ripper’s continuing to kill, forcing Joanna to adopt a dangerous plan.

Though the series repays reading from the beginning for its complex relationships, this new entry succeeds as a stand-alone.

**GHOST BLOWS A KISS**
*Hart, Carolyn*  
Severn House (192 pp.)  
$28.99 | Jul. 6, 2021  
978-0-7278-9048-1

A love story mixes with murder to be solved by a heavenly fixer.

Bailey Ruth Raeburn is one of the most accomplished members of Heaven’s Department of Good Intentions despite her rebellious ways. This time out, the redheaded firecracker is deposited in Adelaide, Oklahoma, just in time to rescue Fran Loring and her sister-in-law Jennifer’s dog from drowning. Not far away, Fran’s brother, Travis, a self-absorbed artist, enters the library of the gracious Chandler family home to find his wealthy patron, Sylvia Chandler, lying dead in front of the fireplace, covered in blood. The rest of the Chandler family is at home because the patriarch, Arthur, is on his deathbed. At first Bailey Ruth isn’t worried, since her old friend Chief of Police Sam Cobb can be trusted to sort things out. But Sam’s on leave, and acting chief Howie Harris is a self-satisfied incompetent who immediately seizes on Fran, who left distinctive boot prints nearby, as the obvious culprit. Fran’s side is taken by handsome police detective Don Smith, who believes she’s being set up. In her alter ego as Detective M. Loy, Bailey Ruth questions Arthur’s children, who stand to inherit a lot of money if their stepmother, Sylvia, died before their father, in her quest for the killer and a happy ending for Fran and Don.

Bailey Ruth’s infectiously happy crime-solving makes up for her series’ repetitive storylines.

**BACK FROM THE BRINK**
*Hayes, Emery*  
Crooked Lane (288 pp.)  
$27.99 | Jul. 13, 2021  
978-1-64385-598-1

A second case finds the sheriff of Toole County, Montana, up to her neck in potentially crooked law enforcement colleagues.

Called out from Blue Mesa, from which their little department must cover an impossibly broad area, to assist the equally short-handed Border Patrol North, Nicole Cobain and her deputy, Ty Watts, find a BPN boat afloat on Lake Maria, apparently abandoned by Kyle Monte and Melody Baker, the two agents who’d asked for help. Plus, there’s the dead body they were calling about, so completely encased in ice that the aid of a chainsaw is required before it can be thawed. Monte and Baker are nowhere to be found; the closest a search of the lake comes to them is a BPN bag containing a king’s ransom in fentanyl. Certain that her search for the missing agents is only part of a deadlier hunt for money and drugs on the parts of both different police
departments and numerous criminals, Nicole, fresh from a near-fatal encounter with Benjamin Kris, the once-loved father of her 11-year-old son, wonders with increasing apprehension whom she can trust. Larry Green, the BPN division commander still smarting over the loss of a pile of crucial drug evidence last year? Retired attorney Lois Embry, who's given shelter to Adelai Amari, a young Syrian who's just given birth while on the run from shadowy enemies? Special agent Devon Gates, who appears from nowhere to demand a role in the investigation? The answers seem to lie with the three Franks brothers, Matthew, Luke, and James, but it's anyone's guess how trustworthy any of them are.

So many bent cops the poor drug lords barely register.

DEATH OF AN ITALIAN CHEF
Hollis, Lee
Kensington (320 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-4967-2497-7

A food-loving Maine reporter solves a murder and changes her life.

Hayley Powell, a food columnist for the Bar Harbor newspaper with a string of solved murders to her credit, is dining with her husband, Bruce, and her brother, Randy, at Romeo's, a new Italian restaurant, when she admits to Romeo that she prefers her own spaghetti carbonara recipe. This results in a cook-off and a budding friendship with the hot-tempered Romeo, who has a major argument in the middle of the cook-off with a contractor who claims Romeo owes him money. A few days later, Romeo, who has heart problems, is admitted to the hospital, where he winds up sharing a room with Randy, who has gallbladder problems. When Romeo dies, a heavily sedated Randy remembers someone killing the chef, and then the night nurse vanishes. Because both Bruce and Randy's husband, who happens to be the police chief, are out of town, Hayley has to rely for help on new hire Sgt. Vanessa Herrold, a woman who obviously disbelieves Randy. The staff at Romeo's begs her to keep the place going until an heir is found. So with help from her besties, Liddy and Mona, she takes on that job while investigating Romeo's background for clues to his murder. Romeo (not his real name) owed money to the Brooklyn mob, a connection that makes Hayley's task very dangerous.

An enjoyably twisty mystery laced with the heroine's equally entertaining foodcentric newspaper columns.

DRAW AND ORDER
Hollon, Cheryl
Kensington (304 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-4967-2526-4

Death disturbs the serene beauty of the Daniel Boone National Forest.

When Miranda Trent inherited her uncle's farm in Kentucky, she gave up her career as an artist in New York and set out to establish a business that combined teaching art with hiking, preparing traditional, locally sourced food, and brewing moonshine. Armed with her uncle's famous moonshine recipe, she's working to build a still in her barn. Trouble arrives with the Risky Business Adventurers, a group of skilled hikers whom Miranda's boyfriend, Ranger Austin Morgan, joins on an excursion to lecture on geology and local legends. It's fortunate that he's along on this difficult climb, for one of the hikers discovers human remains. Miranda has a bad feeling that the body could be that of her cousin Howard Cable, an experienced outdoorsman who disappeared without a trace five years ago. Howard was always searching for the lost silver mines legendary in the area. A forensic anthropologist confirms that the bones are those of a man with a broken leg and other damage. Certain the bones are her cousin's, Miranda, who's already solved one murder, promises her aunt that she'll investigate and joins forces with Austin to do so. Miranda is surprised to learn that the members of Risky Business are all old friends of Howard's and that one of them had been about to become engaged to him, so she has plenty of suspects once the coroner determines that Howard was murdered. She knows she's getting close when the killer sabotages her business, but she and Austin continue their hunt undeterred.

A solid mystery with the welcome addition of recipes for moonshine cocktails and down-home Southern dishes.

FATALITY WITH FORSTER
Hyde, Katherine Bolger
Severn House (208 pp.)
$28.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-7278-9035-1

"I'm counting on this being a corpse-free honeymoon," Lt. Sheriff Luke Richards tells his bride, the former Emily Cavanaugh. As if.

The happy couple have distanced themselves from Oregon, the scene of their earlier mildly criminal adventures. They've booked a month's stay in England at Fitzhugh Manor, near Binsey, a village within shouting distance of Oxford. In fact, they're the very first paying guests to enjoy the hospitality of Sir James Fitzhugh and his American wife, Allison. Of course there are ripples in the pond. James' grandmother, Lady Margaret Fitzhugh, is in such denial about her grandson's decision
to turn the manor into a guesthouse that Allison asks Emily and Luke to introduce themselves to the dragon as her friends. When Allison, who's excited about the fact that she and James have hired her ex-fiancé, architect Adam Marshall, to design a housing development they plan to build on the estate, shares the news of her pregnancy with Emily, her happiness reminds her confidante painfully of the long-ago miscarriage that ended her own dreams of bearing children. And Penelope “Bunty” Fitzhugh, the distant cousin James never married, is clearly having it on with Conan O’Donnell, her partner in the Fitzhugh Stables, even though Lady Margaret regards him as a member of a distinctly lesser species. When a horseback riding accident begins to look like murder, Emily and Luke figure that they’d better solve it posthaste in order to reestablish peace in the family.

“Blink and you’ll miss the reference to E.M. Forster, which is just as well, since it gives far too much away.”

**SHADOW HILL**

**Kies, Thomas**

Poisoned Pen (320 pp.)

$15.99 paper | Jul. 13, 2021

978-1-4642-1440-0

Who killed the oil company executive? And why is everyone so anxious to cover it up?

When wealthy retired oil executive Morris Cutter and his wife, Julia, are found shot dead in their home, their distraught son, Eric, hires investigator Geneva Chase to determine whether his father really killed his mother before turning the gun on himself, as the police have determined. Both Eric and his wife, Olivia, are adamant that Morris is innocent. After years as a reporter, Geneva now freelances as a researcher for her own dreams of bearing children. And Penelope “Bunty” Fitzhugh, the distant cousin James never married, is clearly having it on with Conan O’Donnell, her partner in the Fitzhugh Stables, even though Lady Margaret regards him as a member of a distinctly lesser species. When a horseback riding accident begins to look like murder, Emily and Luke figure that they’d better solve it posthaste in order to reestablish peace in the family.

“Blink and you’ll miss the reference to E.M. Forster, which is just as well, since it gives far too much away.”

**THE BOMBAY PRINCE**

**Massey, Sujata**

Soho Crime (360 pp.)

$27.95 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-641-29105-7

In 1921, the arrival of the Prince of Wales triggers riots in the streets of Bombay, providing cover for a discreet killing.

Freny Cuttingmaster consults fledgling solicitor Perveen Mistry, the only female lawyer in Bombay, on behalf of the Woodburn College Student Union about the legality of skipping classes on the day Edward, the Prince of Wales, will be visiting Bombay. Indians are in the midst of a fight for independence, and Woodburn students are expected to attend a parade and support the prince, which many of them don’t want to do. Perveen advises the girl to feign illness, a weak solution she regrets almost immediately. Indeed, violence ensues at the prince’s procession. Once the
situation is calmed, Freny's corpse is discovered in the school's garden. Perveen's friendship with Woodburn math teacher Alice Hobson-Jones keeps her apprised of new developments, which first emphasize the political situation and Perveen's relationship with her lawyer father, Jamshedji, brother Rustom, and Indian society generally, and only later coalesce into a whodunit. Freny's father, Firdosh, hires the Mistry law firm to ensure that Freny's autopsy and burial are handled in a respectful manner. Freny's father, Firdosh, hires the Mistry law firm to ensure that Freny's autopsy and burial are handled in a respectful manner. When Perveen mentions that Freny believed strongly in Indian independence and may have known prominent activist Dinesh Apte, Firdosh responds with outrage. With many questions surrounding Freny's death unanswered, inveterate sleuth Perveen undertakes an informal investigation, beginning with the coroner and continuing through Freny's friends, teachers, and fellow insurgents. Massey's graceful prose and mastery of period detail successfully suggest the fiction of the period.

Perveen's third mystery propels a rich story of female empowerment during a pivotal era.

MURDER AT KEYHAVEN CASTLE
McKenna, Clara
Kensington (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-4967-1779-5

An American marrying into an aristocratic family faces prejudice and peril in 1905 England.

In some ways Stella Kendrick has been fortunate. She’s survived a girlhood with a wealthy father eager to marry her to any British aristocrat so he’d be able to brag to his friends in Kentucky horse-racing circles. Her engagement to Viscount “Lyndy” Lyndhurst has become a love match because of the trust they’ve built up over several murder investigations. A trip to Southampton to pick up her father's friends the Swensons for her upcoming wedding becomes an introduction to murder when someone is trampled to death by runaway horses right in front of them. When the couple’s police contact, Inspector Archibald Brown, identifies the man as a crooked jockey, they find themselves immersed in another murder case, but that’s the least of Stella’s problems in the run-up to the wedding. Her paternal uncle, Jedidiah Kendrick, turns up uninvited along with two young children, putting her irascible father in an even worse mood than usual. Hoping to defuse the tension and get away from her disapproving future mother-in-law, Stella plans an outing to the ruins of Keyhaven Castle. When her father is pushed to his death by one of his friends or relatives, she faces conflicting emotions since she knows he never loved her. But she and Lyndy continue to investigate the world of racing, hoping to find a motive.

The sleuthing couple unearth surprising revelations in an appealing continuation of their adventures.

THE PARTING GLASS
Redmond, Lisa Marie
Severn House (240 pp.)
$28.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-7278-9131-0

Two Buffalo detectives have yet another brush with death.

Lauren Riley and her partner and housemate, Shane Reese, have an intense and complex relationship on the cusp of being sexual. They are such stars at solving cold case murders that they’ve earned the enmity of Buffalo Police Department higher-ups annoyed with their fame. Forced to have her annual physical, Riley is bummmed when she’s put on medical leave after refusing to admit she hasn't fully recovered from having been stabbed in another high-profile case. Bored, she renews her private investigator’s license and waits for an interesting case, which promptly appears when Sharon Whitney hires her to go to Ireland to find a Picasso that was stolen 40 years ago, while she was still married to Howard Whitney. Although the couple divorced and split the insurance payment of $3 million, the painting is now worth $20 million, and they both want it badly. Nothing was proven against the lead suspect, handyman Jimmy Breen, and he returned to Ireland. Riley convinces Reese to join her for a working holiday, and they arrive at a B&B in Keelnamara to learn that the Garda have ruled Breen's recent death a murder and his tiny house has been trashed. When someone scours their room at the B&B, they realize that the painting has yet to be found. Since everyone in the small community knows about the missing painting, even the local Garda is suspect. The stakes are raised when a pub owner is tortured and killed. Riley and Reese keep a step ahead of the Garda and solve the complicated case, but their relationship and Riley’s prospects are still far from certain.

The partners dance around their powerful feelings in a stunning Irish landscape, making this far more than an ordinary procedural.

SILENCE IN THE LIBRARY
Schellman, Katharine
Crooked Lane (352 pp.)
$27.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-64385-704-6

A patriarch’s murder disrupts the families of both the victim and the sleuth.

London, 1815. The unexpected arrival of her bullying father, George Pierce, shakes the fragile equilibrium of young widow Lady Lily Adler. Pierce even manages to insult courtly Capt. Jack Hartley, who’s been Lily’s most faithful supporter and friend ever since the death of her husband, Freddy. A social call on Pierce’s longtime friend Sir Charles Wyatt and his new young wife turns awkward when Thomas the footman is accused of stealing a large sum of money; greatly
upsetting his sister, Ellen the maid. The observant Lily dazzles the group by accusing Sir Charles’ nephew Percy, who turns out to be guilty. This puzzling crime gives the fledgling sleuth an excuse to stay away from her new home on Half Moon Street, where Pierce has settled in for an indefinite visit. Impassive investigator Simon Page of the Bow Street Runners undertakes the investigation; Lily turns on the charm in order to piggyback onto his probe and strikes out on her own with Jack as wingman. Suspicion naturally falls upon heirs like Sir Charles’ devoted son, Frank, Pierce’s godson. Schellman’s gracefully written whodunit is equally a tale of 19th-century female empowerment and societal conventions. Depth of character and persuasive historical detail keep the pace leisurely.

More than a clever murder puzzle, this is an immersion in a bygone era.

DOGGED BY DEATH
Scott, Laura
Crooked Lane (320 pp.)
$26.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-64385-657-5

The prolific Scott launches a new series starring a veterinarian, her grandfather, and a boxer dog. Ally Winter has returned to her hometown of Willow Bluff, Wisconsin, after her former fiancé and business partner embezzled money from their clinic and dumped her with just enough money to buy the practice of a retiring veterinarian. Her crime-obsessed grandfather is recovering from a broken hip in a small rehab home where the three resident ladies compete for his regard. Things are so slow for Ally that she’s added grooming and dog walking to her repertoire. But when she arrives to walk lawyer Marty Shawlin’s boxer, Roxy, she finds Shawlin with a crushed skull. The lead detective is her high school crush, Noah Jorgenson, who starts their reunion off on the wrong foot by calling her by her hated nickname, Hot Pants, recalling an embarrassing incident with fire ants. Lots of people have been angry with Shawlin because he charged them for legal work he never completed. And that includes Gramps, who had thrown him out of the rehab house. Although business is picking up, Ally still has enough time to aid Gramps, who’s determined to solve the crime, much to the despair of Noah—especially after Ally starts getting violent warnings to butt out. Ally is well aware that Roxy could name the killer if only she could talk. Even without a voice, though, she helps Ally winnow down the suspects.

An entertaining cast of characters makes for a kickoff sure to please dog lovers.

THE LAST COMMANDMENT
Shepherd, Scott
Mysterious Press (336 pp.)
$25.95 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-61316-228-6

A serial killer seems to be taking his cues from Agatha Christie and Ellery Queen.

The first victim is a visiting Oxford don, the second an East End sculptor, the third a has-been rocker. They seem to have nothing in common except for the successive Roman numerals carved into their foreheads. Commander Austin Grant of Scotland Yard can’t imagine what could possibly link them all until his brother, Oxford philosophy professor Everett Grant, points out to him over a game of chess that each victim had notably broken one of the Ten Commandments. Since the most likely candidates for the role of fourth victim are priests who are working on the Lord’s Day, Grant sends out a veiled nationwide warning that improbably shuts down myriad houses of worship, but it does no good; the killer simply hops the pond and executes a priest inside St. Patrick’s Cathedral. High-tailing it stateside after his quarry, Grant makes contact with NYPD Detective John Frankel and Rachel Grant, the journalist daughter who’s been estranged from him ever since her mother’s death from cancer. Shepherd isn’t afraid of clichés, and the obsessively choreographed murders are complemented by an interfering reporter, the detective’s buried family secret, his looming retirement on New Year’s Day, true love blossoming in the unlikeliest places, and the death of whichever suspect seems the most obvious candidate for the role of “the Commandment killer” on a given day. Readers may be surprised early on, but many of them will figure out whodunit well before Grant.

A fast-paced tale that weds its golden-age homage to some serious violence. Sinners beware.
Twin princesses—one fated to become a queen, the other a martyr—find themselves caught up in an unexpected battle of dark magic and ancient gods.

Four hundred years ago, a Valleydan princess facing a loveless betrothal sought refuge in the Wilderwood with her lover, the Wolf. The legendary Five Kings—including her father and her husband-to-be—pursued them only to be trapped in the Wilderwood. Now, according to legend, the only hope of restoring the Five Kings to power lies in the ritual sacrifice of every Second Daughter born to Valleyda's queen. There hasn't been a second daughter for 100 years—until now. On her 20th birthday, Redarys accepts her fate and walks into the Wilderwood to become the Wolf's next victim only to find that the stories she grew up on were lies. The handsome man who lives in a crumbling castle deep in the forest is not the original Wolf but his son, and he wants nothing to do with Red or her sacrifice. Afraid of her wild magic abilities and the danger they pose to her sister, Neverah, Red refuses to leave the Wilderwood. Instead, she clings to the new Wolf, Eammon, who will do whatever it takes to protect her from the grisly fate of the other Second Daughters. Meanwhile, in the Valleydan capital, Neve's desperation to bring her sister home sets her on a path that may spell disaster for Red, Eammon, and the Wilderwood itself. Whitten weaves a captivating tale in this debut, in which even secondary characters come to feel like old friends. The novel seamlessly blends "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Beauty and the Beast" into an un-put-down-able fairy tale that traces the boundaries of duty, love, and loss.

A masterful debut from a must-read new voice in fantasy.

A Hollywood socialite is forced to spend the summer in a fishing village in Washington state.

Everyone thinks 28-year-old Piper Bellinger is a vapid, airheaded socialite—including herself. To distract her social media followers from seeing that her boyfriend of three weeks has humiliatingly dumped her at a party, Piper breaks into the Mondrian Hotel's rooftop pool and holds a wild party. Her shenanigans put one of her stepfather's business deals in jeopardy, and to teach her a lesson, he ships her off to the small, coastal town in Washington where she was born. Piper's father died in a fishing accident when she was 4, and her heartbroken mother left Washington and never returned. Piper is joined in exile by her sister, and the two quickly immerse themselves in the life of the small, close-knit town. Brendan Taggart is a widower and captain of a fishing boat, and he thinks Piper—with her beauty, bravado, and big-city ways—doesn't belong. Their attraction is sudden and intense, and they quickly fall into a relationship, but he fears she'll never be satisfied with life out of the limelight. However, Piper surprises herself by forming close relationships with the new friends and family she finds in town. Piper realizes she's capable of more than anyone gave her credit for. Bailey delivers on her usual trifecta of sharp banter, instant chemistry, and high-heat sex scenes, but they are coupled with intense soul-searching for both Piper and Brendan. How can they be together when they seem so different? What does it mean to truly accept a partner for who they are? The third-act crisis feels completely organic to their personalities and beliefs even if the plotting seems a little rushed.

Another winning romance from an author at the top of her game.

The tale of Anastasia Romanov receives a fresh retelling in this queer love story between a potential princess and the investigator who must unearth the truth of her identity.

Makeda Hicks' life arguably couldn't get any worse. Not only has she lost her job, but her longtimer
Makeda’s unconvinced, until she realizes accepting her possible birthright could have a financial benefit that would save her grandmother from going into debt. A long, closed-quarters journey on the high seas ensues, with everything from the improvisation of a fake marriage to the promise of only one bed for Makeda and Bez to share, and over the course of their trip, the two women come to the realization that they want their future to be together even if responsibility demands they stay apart. Cole’s characters are delightful, and her prose brims with humor and sexy, romantic tension. Though the ending feels a bit abrupt, readers looking for another delightful romance from Cole will be well served by this charming tale.

An effervescent queer romance that challenges the institutions of monarchy and marriage.

Rosaline Palmer loves two things most in this world: her 8-year-old daughter, Amelie, and baking. When the stars align and she’s selected to compete in a reality TV baking competition called Bake Expectations, Rosaline is wary of leaving Amelie for filming but knows this could be the path to a more secure future for herself and her daughter. Hall creates a memorable cast of characters, from Rosaline’s supportive ex-girlfriend to the utterly adorable and scene-stealing Amelie. Setting the book at a reality TV show is a brilliant choice as it not only introduces elements of forced proximity, but also the tensions that come from competition; there’s sparkling humor and plenty of baking mishaps.

A perfect bake.

**ROSALINE PALMER TAKES THE CAKE**

*Rosaline Palmer Takes the Cake*

*Hall, Alexis*

*Forever (448 pp.)*

*$15.99 paper | May 18, 2021*

978-1-5387-0332-8

In this delicious romantic comedy, a British home baker must win a televised cooking competition and navigate her competitors’ distastefully good looks to provide a better life for herself and her daughter. Rosaline Palmer takes the cake.

**PACK UP THE MOON**

*Pack Up the Moon*

*Higgins, Kristan*

*Berkley (480 pp.)*

*$15.99 paper | Jun. 8, 2021*

978-0-451-48948-7

A young widower begrudgingly attempts to move on when he receives assignments from his beloved late wife. Joshua Park has never had an easy time getting close to people. He’s brilliant, with a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering and a job as a medical device engineer, but as someone on the autism spectrum, he often doesn’t pick up on social cues. But none of that is an issue with his wife, Lauren, a public space designer. The two of them are madly in love with one another—and then Lauren is diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a disease in which fibers grow in her lungs and make breathing difficult (and, eventually, impossible). Her terminal diagnosis means that their marriage will be briefer than they ever imagined...but, unbeknownst to Josh, Lauren has a plan to take care of him when she’s gone. After Lauren’s death, Josh doesn’t know how he’ll get through the day, let alone the rest of his life. But then the first letter comes. Before her death, Lauren wrote him a letter for each month of his first year without her, each one containing a task that will help him keep going. They start out relatively easy (going to the grocery store) but gradually require him to open himself up more. Lauren’s instructions initially annoy Josh, but eventually he begins to connect with new people—and the people who were already there for him. Higgins deftly navigates a premise that could’ve been sappy and instead turns it into something poignant, realistic, and occasionally even funny. Josh and Lauren never seem like caricatures of a grieving widower or a selfless, angelic dead wife. Instead, they are fully rounded characters with flaws and eccentricities. The story alternates between Josh’s present-day attempts to live his new life and Lauren’s point of view in the past, making her feel like a real person instead of just a saintly presence. The amount of detail around Lauren’s disease is both impressive and heartbreaking to read. The characters surrounding Josh and Lauren are all complex and quirky, and seeing Josh accept love from the people in his life, both from new friends and old family members, is just as sob-inducing as reading about how he loses Lauren.

A moving and life-affirming portrait of grief that’s sure to bring the tears.
Meanwhile, the secondary narrative offers the promise of a Darius Mekenna, the rightful heir of Lachlan, who has been directed by her sister and stepfather and with her mother in a forbidden drug known as phorria, is revealed to be abusing the domin, where the enigmatic and terrifying Thief King controls and sees all, they are known as the Mousai, a trinity of magic-wielding women with the power to seduce or terrify. When the loathsome Duke of Lachlan, a man addicted to a potent and forbidden drug known as phoria, is revealed to be abusing the tenants on his land, Larkyra is given a mission to both stop him and uncover his supplier. Posing as the duke’s intended is all part of the plan, but she doesn’t account for his stepson, Lord Darius Mekenna, the rightful heir of Lachlan, who has been victimized by the duke for years. The closer Larkyra comes to uncovering the terrible duke’s secrets, the more she begins to understand that her true feelings lie with Darius, a man who literally wears the scars of his past. The first installment in this new fantasy series is a spellbinding read, with an instant sense of familial connection between the Bassette trio, although the thorny underbelly of the book is not as forward-thinking. Phillips is at her best when she allows emotional generosity. Morrissey is at her best when she allows Sloane to consider quitting acting, but as he makes an effort to right previous wrongs, Sloane begins to rediscover her love for the camera. So when the female lead is fired, Sloane readily steps into her shoes to save her family’s production. Sloane and Joseph are a fantastic couple onscreen, but they need to work through a range of personal issues if they are to be together in reality. Sloane is sharp, bright, no-nonsense, and immensely likable as she negotiates the politics of Hollywood with a rare emotional generosity. Morrissey is at her best when she allows Sloane’s musings to shed light on the caprices of the entertainment industry. Even as Sloane’s bond with Joseph develops with charming ease, her evolving relationships with a diverse array of relatives illuminate the many peculiarities inherent to understanding, accepting, and loving family.

A compelling and unique riff on the potential of second chances in love.

A powerful young woman in possession of a destructive voice learns to channel her magic for good (and love) as she takes on a dark mission.

In the world of Aadilor, Larkyra Bassette and her sisters have been developing their unique powers all their lives—but within the hidden realm of the Thief Kingdom, where the enigmatic and terrifying Thief King controls and sees all, they are known as the Mousai, a trinity of magic-wielding women with the power to seduce or terrify. When the loathsome Duke of Lachlan, a man addicted to a potent and forbidden drug known as phoria, is revealed to be abusing the tenants on his land, Larkyra is given a mission to both stop him and uncover his supplier. Posing as the duke’s intended is all part of the plan, but she doesn’t account for his stepson, Lord Darius Mekenna, the rightful heir of Lachlan, who has been victimized by the duke for years. The closer Larkyra comes to uncovering the terrible duke’s secrets, the more she begins to understand that her true feelings lie with Darius, a man who literally wears the scars of his past. The first installment in this new fantasy series is a spellbinding read, with an instant sense of familial connection between the Bassette trio, although the thorny underbelly of the book is not as forward-thinking. Phillips is at her best when she allows emotional generosity. Morrissey is at her best when she allows Sloane to consider quitting acting, but as he makes an effort to right previous wrongs, Sloane begins to rediscover her love for the camera. So when the female lead is fired, Sloane readily steps into her shoes to save her family’s production. Sloane and Joseph are a fantastic couple onscreen, but they need to work through a range of personal issues if they are to be together in reality. Sloane is sharp, bright, no-nonsense, and immensely likable as she negotiates the politics of Hollywood with a rare emotional generosity. Morrissey is at her best when she allows Sloane’s musings to shed light on the caprices of the entertainment industry. Even as Sloane’s bond with Joseph develops with charming ease, her evolving relationships with a diverse array of relatives illuminate the many peculiarities inherent to understanding, accepting, and loving family.

A compelling and unique riff on the potential of second chances in love.
like a model—and the description of the ex-fiance’s behavior traffics in stale stereotypes about suicide.

Dated elements detract from what might have been a charming romance.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED
Stetz-Waters, Karelia
Forever (336 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5387-3552-7

A straight-laced New York businesswoman inherits half of a sex-toy shop in Portland, Oregon, from her free-spirited aunt.

Cade Elgin seems downright conservative to her artistic family. Her parents own one of New York’s most famous art galleries, and although Cade has an eye for discovering new artists, she spends most of her time managing the business side of things. After her Aunt Ruth’s funeral, Cade learns she has inherited half of her quirky aunt’s sex-toy shop, Satisfaction Guaranteed. The other half was left to Selena Mathis, Ruth’s friend and tenant. The shop is in dire financial straits, and even though she knows it’s a lost cause, Cade agrees to work with Selena to try to turn it around. Cade has never had much luck with girlfriends or sex, so she finds Selena’s sensuality and playfulness hard to resist. Meanwhile, Selena admires Cade’s easy confidence and calm demeanor. Selena has her own personal struggles with ex-lover Alex, who wants to get back with Selena after finally leaving her husband. Alex was one of her professors, and after their affair ended, Selena dropped out of art school and burned all her paintings. Determined to stay celibate until she straightens out her life, Selena tries to avoid her strong attraction to Cade while dodging Alex’s high-pressure push to reconcile. Cade and Selena are likable characters in a sticky situation, and they respect each other’s faults and foibles. Cade learns to let loose while Selena redisCOVERS her love of painting. Much of the novel’s humor derives from the differences between Cade and Selena, but Stetz-Waters never makes either of them the butt of the joke. It’s a truly funny rom-com that’s full of heat and heart.

An engaging, lighthearted novel likely to appeal to all romance readers.
The role of mapmaking in the discovery and development of America.

In Europe, the Renaissance stoked the desire to find “worlds beyond the medieval horizon,” write Asbury and Isbouts, who show the critical role of cartography in the rise of America. Beginning with the expeditions of Columbus and continuing through the American Revolution, the authors provide a scholarly review of the history of the U.S. Although much of the information presented is not new, the renderings of various iterations of relevant maps and an analysis of their implications provide a more robust examination of this time period than many surveys. For example, as the authors note, when Columbus set out to find a western route to the Indies, “the problem was, of course, that the medieval understanding of geography was still very rudimentary. Since Antiquity, very few people had actually endeavored to try to depict the earth in all of its far-flung beauty and detail.” Columbus was forced to turn to the only geographical resources available, which failed to indicate that another continent blocked his path. Despite the atrocities associated with his exploration, the authors assert that his achievements inspired subsequent voyages and led to developments in image reproduction, including copper engraving and three-dimensional globes, which would radically change the way Europe saw itself and its role in the world. Following colonization, the authors demonstrate the ways in which maps and diagrams proved instrumental in the division of land parcels, treaties with Indigenous peoples, and the complex interactions involved in the French and Indian War and other conflicts. The authors also note that, as exploration continued, maps and globes became conversational pieces and status symbols, frequently displayed as artwork in homes and included as objects in paintings of the day. Adding depth to the analysis are a host of full-color images of historical maps, related diagrams, paintings, and photographs.

A fresh, well-informed addition to the literature devoted to early American history.
THE TRUTH ABOUT THE O.J. SIMPSON TRIAL
By the Architect of the Defense
Bailey, F. Lee
Skyhorse (312 pp.)
$24.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5107-6584-9

Former criminal defense attorney Bailey gives an immodest account of his role in helping to acquit his “totally innocent” client O.J. Simpson in the “Trial of the Century.”

A 2015 poll, taken 20 years after Simpson was acquitted of murdering his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ronald Goldman, found that most Americans believed he was “definitely” or “probably” guilty. Few are likely to change their minds after reading this vigorous but unconvincing argument that a timeline for the murders shows that Simpson had “no realistic opportunity” to commit them. Nor are readers likely to be swayed by the author’s claims that the case was marred by “sloppy police work” (a phrase used four times in the narrative) and other flaws amply documented by others. Bailey offers no compelling evidence that anyone except Simpson might have committed the crimes. He pays only lip service to chief defense counsel Johnnie Cochran’s idea that the killers were two “irate drug dealers” who, angered by an unpaid debt of a guest of Nicole’s, targeted the wrong people—and who may be conveniently beyond the reach of subpoenas since the author has heard they were “executed by the mob for their calamitous mistake in murdering two innocent victims in error.” Given such gaps, this book will appeal mainly to O.J. completists, especially those interested in turf wars on a legal dream team–turned-nightmare as seen by a general who isn’t too modest to flaunt his stripes. (Bailey notes that when Simpson raised the possibility of hiring the flamboyant lawyer Gerry Spence, the defense team’s Robert Shapiro said, “We’ve got the best, Lee Bailey. Why would you want to downgrade?”) As for Simpson’s culpability, William C. Dear offers a more credible argument in O.J. Is Innocent and I Can Prove It, which suggests that a more plausible perpetrator was Simpson’s oldest son, Jason, a potential suspect Bailey doesn’t discuss.

An insider’s view of a controversial trial with effects that still reverberate.

COMING TO OUR SENSES
A Boy Who Learned To See, a Girl Who Learned To Hear, and How We All Discover the World
Barry, Susan R.
Basic (272 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5416-7515-5

Through stories of two amazing individuals, a neurobiologist explains how we see and hear.

That newborns must learn to talk is old news, but Barry, professor emeritus of biology and neuroscience at Mount Holyoke College, points out that newborns come into an incomprehensible world. Their eyes detect shapes and colors, and their ears hear sounds, but nothing makes sense. Over their first few years, babies literally discover how to see and hear, after which their ability to do so plummets. Doctors have long known that children who have sight restored after being blind throughout childhood never regain full sight. The same is true for hearing in congenitally deaf children. Until recently, writes the author, “few attempts were made to restore vision or hearing in congenitally blind or deaf people older than eight years. By age eight, the brain, it was thought, was no longer plastic enough to allow for the development of a new sense.” Yet exceptions exist, and Barry delivers gripping accounts of two. The first, Liam McCoy, lived in a “cocoon of visual blur.” At age 15, surgeons inserted a second lens into his eye (keeping the original), which vastly improved his vision. The result was not a familiar scene but rather a “tangled, fragmented world” of colors, lines, and edges. Barry devotes the first half of the book to the five years during which Liam gradually made sense of his new world. The second, Zohra Damji, was profoundly deaf. She was fortunate in that the condition was diagnosed very early and that her extended family provided intense support and the large sum of money required for the cochlear implant she received at age 12. Her first experience with sound was “loud, scary, and uncomfortable” as well as incomprehensible, but she ultimately sailed through graduate school. Both stories are inspiring and well rendered by the author.

Even science-savvy readers will find surprises in this insightful exploration of how two humans learned a new sense.
WHITE PRIVILEGE IS undeniable. Thankfully, in recent years, we have seen the publication of potent books that attack the problem and offer effective paths forward—among countless others, check out Mychal Denzel Smith’s *Stakes Is High* (winner of last year’s Kirkus Prize for nonfiction), Isabel Wilkerson’s *Caste*, Ibram X. Kendi’s *How To Be Antiracist*, Shaun King’s *Make Change*, and Heather McGhee’s *The Sum of Us*. Late last year, I was further encouraged by the launch of an entire imprint dedicated to investigating and dismantling the racist systems that plague the United States.

In November, Atria, a division of Simon & Schuster, created Black Privilege Publishing, headed by radio host and author Charlamagne Tha God. Black Privilege, noted the release, will “focus on opening new doors in the publishing marketplace by amplifying Black and brown narratives, rethinking traditional approaches to the industry, and engaging with the audiences Charlamagne knows best: cutting-edge, connected, and culturally aware.” Joining Charlamagne at Black Privilege Publishing are editor Nicholas Ciani and senior vice president and publisher Libby McGuire.

Bursting out of the gate is the imprint’s first book, Tamika Mallory’s *State of Emergency: How We Win in the Country We Built* (May 11), which has received a Kirkus star. In the review, our critic notes that Mallory “sounds an alarm against complacency now that a new administration is in the White House.”

Mallory was an excellent choice to launch the imprint. Not only did she co-found the historic 2017 Women’s March; she is also a *Time* 100 honoree and co-founder of Until Freedom, “an intersectional social justice organization that serves as a clearing house for organizers, activists, movement attorneys, artists, celebrities, and formerly incarcerated individuals.” I hope the imprint grows rapidly and reaches a vast readership, and I can’t wait to see what fresh voices arrive on the scene to shake complacency, explode systemic racism, and change this country for the better.

*Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction editor.*
reveal the impact of its production. Armed with extensive data and research, the author covers a lot of territory. She begins in Texas, where she spoke with cotton farmers and a wash-house owner who explained their processes and how the U.S. has shifted from a manufacturing economy to a retail economy. In fact, 98% of the clothing that Americans wear is made overseas. In China, Bédat witnessed sludge from a factory draining into a river used by local farmers. In Bangladesh, which has overtaken China as the top exporter of denim to the U.S., she describes inky black waters and mounds of industrial waste. The author toured a factory in Bangladesh, where the tension was palpable, and privately interviewed a factory worker who explained that employees are required to work at a dangerously rapid pace. In Sri Lanka, the author talked to a day laborer who revealed that sex trafficking has become a common phenomenon in garment factories. Bédat also examines the lesser-known role of the apparel broker, the middleman in the production, adding another layer of opacity to the supply chain. Back in the U.S., she toured an Amazon distribution center, and she provides an astute, depressing analysis of the impact that online platforms and automated systems have had on jobs—and landfills. On a positive note, the author offers practical advice and further resources aimed at solving these problems. Though Bédat’s personal commentary sometimes detracts from the seriousness of her message, her book is a compelling examination of an important problem that continues unabated.

A persuasive invitation for readers to examine the impact of their consumerism.

BEAUTIFUL THINGS
A Memoir
Biden, Hunter
Gallery Books/Simon & Schuster
(272 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-982151-11-9

A memoir of addiction, family, and loss from the president’s son. For much of his life, fate seemed to be trying to take Biden down, and he did his share to help it along. On the not-his-fault side were the tragic car accident when he was 2, which critically injured him and his older brother, Beau, and took the lives of their mother and sister; Beau’s heartbreaking death at 46; and the nightmare of Donald Trump’s relentless campaign to weaponize Hunter against his father. The author’s own major contribution to his troubles arose from his addiction to crack. His engrossing account of his downward spiral brings to mind Bill Clegg’s Portrait of the Addict as a Young Man (2010), as Biden chronicles his battles with the “terrorizing band of skeletal night riders—the Four Horsemen of the Crackocalypse.” Sparing no detail, he ranges from the sardonic—while recounting his efforts to find crumbs of crack in the carpet, he writes, “I’ve smoked more cheddar popcorn than anyone on earth”—to the ruefully insightful: “Once you decide you’re the bad guy everyone thinks you are, it’s hard to find the good guy you once were.” Looming over the narrative is the ultimate good guy, Beau, who didn’t drink or take drugs and appears entirely pure in heart and mind. Though Hunter’s addiction began long before Beau’s death, the loss of his brother broke him. One of the hardest things to read about is the attempt by Hunter and Beau’s widow, Hallie, to deal with their loss by becoming a couple. Difficult to read for different reasons is the chapter on Hunter’s Ukrainian business connections, which form the basis of Trump’s attacks and the “Where’s Hunter” movement. The granular details shared here seem to bear out the author’s assessment that the whole episode is “most remarkable for its epic banality.” When he was just about to cash in his chips for good, fate had one more surprise for Hunter, this one a stroke of Cupid’s magic. Sometimes moving, sometimes funny, often horrifying, thoroughly heartfelt, and believable.

A True Business Adventure Tale
Billion or Bust!
“An executive recounts the prodigious growth of his Texas-based tech company in this debut memoir.”

“The author tells his tale in an eclectic prose that mixes industry jargon with bro-like enthusiasm.”
—Kirkus Reviews

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL INFO@BRAUNINK.COM
ON THE ONE HAND / ON THE OTHER HAND
The Art & Graphic Stories of R.O. Blechman / The Writing of R.O. Blechman Published & Unpublished
Blechman, R.O.
Fantagraphics Books (488 pp.)
$45.00 paper  |  Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-68396-434-6

A two-part compilation of Blechman’s erudite essays and intellectual illustrations.

The author’s artistic mastery is on display twice over in this two-volume set: One collects a range of comics and artworks, including Blechman’s brilliantly unassuming covers for Story magazine. The other offers a generous selection of texts about animation, art history, and life as a commercial illustrator in New York City. In a pleasantly meandering style, Blechman writes and draws like a well-read, jaunty academic. His illustrations—often a single page, drawn in an “inquiring,” jittery pen—manage to crack open literary and religious mythologies with the perspective of a scholar who knows his subject so intimately that he’s earned room to play. In “The Power of Positive Thinking,” a struggling writer learns he can keep getting published as a critic if he churns out fluffy praise. “Our Daily Bread” tells of the economic success of an abbey of monks, renowned for its bakery and centuries-old recipes. In “Apologia,” Blechman discusses an ancient writer who penned a memoir “about the most celebrated heretic in Judea” and was later crucified. “But during the Spartacus uprising,” he writes, “6,000 slaves were crucified….So please,” he writes under a shrugging, smiling figure, “let’s put a single crucifixion in perspective.” In his essays, Blechman seeks his place among his peers. There is a story about Saul Steinberg’s widow and another about Steinberg’s assistant. Blechman lauds the great David Levine, whose cross-hatched caricatures adorn the New York Review of Books, and writes with back-patting reverence about professional peers like Jules Feiffer and Tomi Ungerer. These texts are warmly accessible and boast a delicate balance of admiration and kinship, and they leave no doubt about Blechman’s place among this pantheon of iconic illustrators. Some readers may not yet know the “90-goddamn-years-old” Blechman, and a biographical introduction is sorely missed in this collection, but it’s a thrill to piece together his story by contextualizing him among his subjects.

A charming, mixed-media portrait of the artist.

REPUBLIC OF DETOURS
How the New Deal Paid Broke Writers To Rediscover America
Borchert, Scott
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (400 pp.)
$28.00  |  Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-374-29845-6


The FWP, a division of the Works Progress Administration, was a work relief program that also served as a literary endeavor. Borchert chronicles the production of the FWP’s series of American Guides to all 48 states by fleshing out key figures: Henry Alsberg, the director and “crucial visionary”; Vardis Fisher, Idaho novelist and director of that state’s guidebook; Nelson Algren, field worker for the Illinois project; Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote for the Florida guide; Richard Wright, who worked on Harlem guide material; and Martin Dies Jr., Democratic Congressman from Texas who battled Alsberg over federal funding of the FWP and Federal Theater Project. Alsberg intended his series of regional guides to be a “vast national self-portrait assembled by thousands of destitute citizens,” treating writing as a craft—i.e., a form of labor requiring a stimulus package. Fisher, “a gleeful iconoclast from out of the American West” and “elegist for the pioneer experience,” wrote all of his
state’s guide himself. Algren’s goals for a “proletarian literature” found a “purposeful citizenship” in his reporting from the field, “churning out the raw material that formed the basis of the American Guides and all other FWP projects.” Borchert, a diligent researcher, makes a convincing case for the significance of Hurston, Algren, and Fisher as writers “whose talents would have been wasted by the Depression” and Wright as one “whose talent may have never been known at all.” Though other celebrated writers worked for the FWP—Studs Terkel, Saul Bellow, John Cheever, and Ralph Ellison—Alsberg was clear in his intent that the FWP was open to all writers, including “near writers” and “occasional writers.” Borchert provides interesting, detailed portraits of FWP life and how office politics and pressure from the left (strikes) and right (redbaiting, threats of defunding) jeopardized the endeavor.

A well-documented, engaging history of a program that treated writers as valuable citizens.

HOLA PAPI
How To Come Out in a Walmart Parking Lot and Other Life Lessons
Brammer, John Paul
Simon & Schuster (224 pp.)
$26.00  |  Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-982141-49-3

Life counsel from an LGBTQ+ advice columnist.

In his sassy, entertaining debut collection, Brooklyn-based author and illustrator Brammer doles out sage guidance for primarily gay male audiences through personal anecdotes and memories. He shares bold, unique perspectives on a variety of subjects, including his attempts to forgive a childhood bully, navigating the “hook-up” app culture, and acing the “serious mental gymnastics” involved in moving from a closeted kid to an out gay man. Brammer derived the name of his advice column from the first greeting he received on the
Grindr app. From there, he gained in popularity as he began addressing a host of situational, sexual, relationship-oriented, and racially diversified issues within the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities. The author humorously and candidly discusses his personal coming-out process and thrust for knowledge about the gay community, and his authentic voice will appeal to and resonate with readers navigating their own sexual identities. Brammer also writes about his mixed-race history as a Mexican American son of a “brown woman from Texas” and a “white man from Oklahoma” alongside a beloved abuela doling out tough love. For the author, school days were tough and lonely, the exact opposite of his parents’ experiences at the same schools, where they were popular basketball superstars. Brammer also revisits decisions he made about working in Mexican restaurants in high school after recognizing that he “wasn’t Mexican enough”—decisions his abuela disdained: “I was deliberately undermining all the hard work Abuela had put into making me white.” As free-flowing commentary on identity, Latinx culture, and tradition commingle with Brammer’s contemporary urban gay experience, the narrative is packed with illuminatingly frank perspectives. Some sections, which answer fan questions on how to dress “gayer,” aren’t nearly as impactful, but the sum of Brammer’s life experiences will prove charming, instructional, and frequently relatable for his established readership and those seeking time-tested advice on contemporary conundrums within the gay community.

Contemporary lighthearted wisdom (and some campy fun) for LGBTQ+ audiences.

THE GREAT DISSENTER
The Story of John Marshall Harlan, America’s Judicial Hero
Canellos, Peter S.
Simon & Schuster (608 pp.)
$30.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5011-8820-6

A thorough biography of the Supreme Court justice who famously said, “our Constitution is color blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.”

Canellos, the former executive editor of POLITICO, delivers the riveting story of a courageous Kentucky lawyer who initiated significant challenges to anti-civil rights measures during an era of ubiquitous bigotry. John Marshall Harlan (1833-1911) is remembered especially by his ringing Supreme Court dissents in three disgraceful cases passed by near unanimity: the Civil Rights Cases of 1883, focused on arbitrary discrimination by establishments; Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, which established the “separate but equal” doctrine of Jim Crow segregation in public spaces for the next 60 years; and Lochner v. New York, a setback for labor legislation that would become especially troublesome during the New Deal. In 1876, Harlan was appointed to the Supreme Court by the recently elected president, Rutherford Hayes, who desired a Southerner for the post—though the Great Dissenter would prove to be a decidedly “eccentric” Southerner. Harlan grew up in a family that owned slaves, including his half brother, Robert, who built a successful career for himself as a freed man. Canellos shows how Robert, “horse-racing impresario, gold rush entrepreneur, financier of Black-owned businesses, world traveler, state representative, and leading Black citizen in Ohio,” had a profound impact on his brother. Despite the fact that the final postwar civil rights amendment had been ratified in 1870, by the time Harlan was appointed, the meaning of all of them was still unclear. Harlan was the lone voice insisting that a “legal revolution had been won on the battlefields of Shiloh, Antietam, Gettysburg, and Manassas.” His dissent “provided the only shred of faith in the system, the only real evidence that America wasn’t completely separating along color lines.” Given the recent heated debates about Supreme Court justices and civil rights legislation, this expert biography is especially timely and significant.

An impressive work of deep research that moves smoothly along biographical as well as legal lines.
THE COLOUR OF GOD
Chaudhry, Ayesha S.
Oneworld Publications (304 pp.)
$25.00 | May 11, 2021
978-1-78607-925-1

A memoir about growing up Muslim in Canada.

The same year that Chaudhry was born in Toronto, her Pakistani parents gave up on assimilation and turned to a version of Islam that the author describes variously as conservative, fundamentalist, extreme, and puritanical. "My parents didn't think Islam should be a mosaic," she writes. "They didn't like the way Islam was being practised there—it was too diluted, too weak, too Western." A professor of gender and Islamic studies, Chaudhry recounts a childhood and adolescence filled with pain, anger, and frustration as she attempted to live up to her parents' high expectations of piety and modesty while living in a culture that did not understand or accept her. The author explains that her parents chose a conservative Muslim lifestyle as a shield from the racism they faced. As Pakistanis, they were judged by their skin color; as Muslims, they were judged for their belief system, a persecution that actually empowered them. Chaudhry's retelling of her youth is ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so. She fondly recalls an upbringing that, at the time, caused her intense emotional pain and led her to suicidal behaviors. Readers may be shocked by several incidents—e.g., after she was caught stealing a figurine, her parents threatened to chop off her hand, her father going so far as to stand over her with a hatchet. The author has clearly channeled her painful memories into anger, and she blames White supremacy and institutionalized patriarchy for the social isolation of her youth. Chaudhry's story, which includes such asides as her reasons for not wanting to have children (she includes a list of 12) and a chapter on hair, is occasionally difficult to track. Throughout, the author struggles with issues of self-identity and anger, rendering her emotions in a raw and candid style that sometimes meanders.

A mixture of troubling religious and cultural memories and the author's pride in her heritage.

BALD
Critchley, Simon
35 Philosophical Short Cuts
Yale Univ (264 pp.)
$25.00 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-300-25596-6

A genial exercise in public philosophy by an admittedly tonsorially challenged practitioner.

To engage in philosophy in public, writes Critchley, is akin to sticking your head out the window and engaging passersby. But, he adds, "If you stick your head out the window, something foul-smelling is likely to land on it." People are argumentative and contrarian, especially in the digital realm, and they forget a key Socratic tenet of the discipline: The unexamined life isn't worth living. Happiness is a central issue here, and one of its hallmarks is quiet time for contemplation, easily ruined by the impinging demands of daily life: "The cell phone rings, the email beeps and one is sucked back into the world's relentless hum and the accompanying anxiety. Not that tucking yourself away from the world is a guarantee for happiness or even decency. As Critchley notes, Rousseau, that most eminent of philosophers, was a deeply unpleasant man, "self-obsessed and totally paranoid," who stuck all five of his children in an orphanage. Happiness can be a subset of the Greek concept of glory, which boils down to how you'll be remembered after you're dead. It can be accomplished by a certain amount of old-fashioned cynicism of the Diogenes variety, which we need more of "in a world like ours, which is slowly trying to rouse itself from the dogmatic slumber of boundless self-interest, corruption, lazy cronymism and greed." Ever current, Critchley closes with a meditation on Covid-19 and the
In her new memoir, the indie rocker forges connections to her Korean heritage—and her mother’s memory—through food

BY HANNAH BAE

Don’t read *Crying in H Mart* (Knopf, April 20) on an empty stomach. In this memoir, mouthwatering descriptions of savory Korean noodles, bubbling stews, and the crisp crunch of peppers are Michelle Zauner’s surest route to remembering her late mother and forging her own ties to her Korean heritage. As our starred review says, the biracial Korean American indie rocker known as Japanese Breakfast “frames her story amid the aisles of H Mart, a place many Asian Americans will recognize, a setting that allows the author to situate her personal story as part of a broader conversation about diasporic culture, a powerful force that eludes ownership.” I spoke with Zauner over Zoom from her home in Brooklyn, New York; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Did you always know that Korean food was going to be your lens for this story?
When it first started, I was just writing an essay [that later went on to win *Glamour’s* 2016 essay contest]. I just very naturally gravitated toward cooking. The first step was when I cooked doenjang jjigae for my aunt and cousin [after my mother’s funeral]. They had been crying all day the day before, and I felt they were moved by [my] cooking this grounding meal, the first thing I’d ever cooked for them. Then I found Maangchi [and her Korean cooking videos on YouTube], and I just wanted to learn more. I felt like I was running to preserve this thing that was slipping away from me after my mother’s death.

Did you have an ideal reader in mind as you were writing?
My ideal reader is me. I had an authentic sense of urgency to investigate what I was feeling. In my mind, I thought it was a niche story that no one would be able to relate to. Then, after [the publication of my first two essays about Korean cooking and loss], I was blown away by the other biracial Korean Americans who had also lost their moms and found Maangchi as a kind of guardian. One of my greatest fears was having Korean Americans feel like I was pandering to a White audience. I didn't want to let down Asian American readers, who are very smart and very critical. I also wanted to warn people about what dying actually looks like. I had felt so unprepared for the experience of caretaking [for my mother] and cancer and death. I felt like I’d never read what it looks like in horrifying detail to watch someone go through this.

You didn’t shy away from the off-putting details, from the gruesomeness of death to your own ugliest feelings.
The moments that I love in books are when an author reveals something very shameful and ugly. The richer a character is, if you see these flawed and ugly parts of them, that’s more honest. I think everybody feels [shame about our innermost thoughts], but we’re too afraid to admit it sometimes. I was particularly nervous about tarnishing my mother’s memory. I was nervous about writing about bodily fluids and that kind of thing at my moth-
er’s expense. I was mortified writing some of those passages, but I thought that could be a good thing.

Your work—your prose and your music—reflects the skill of a thoughtful storyteller. Who have been your influences over the years?

Daniel Torday, my professor at Bryn Mawr College, really changed the way that I read and write. I never thought I would write nonfiction. It felt like my experiences were too complicated to just dive into a story. I thought I’d have to have all this pretext of my mother is Asian, my father is Caucasian, and I could never just be a neutral character. Writers like Philip Roth, Marilynne Robinson, Annie Proulx—gritty, whip-smart writers writing about these rugged, blue-collar people—that was what felt literary to me. That’s what I wanted to do with my writing. I’ve since read a lot more Asian American writers. I love Jenny Zhang’s *Sour Heart*. I love Alexander Chee, Jia Tolentino, Cathy Park Hong, Chang-rae Lee. We’re getting a real wealth of stories from Asian Americans. It’s really exciting.

In *Crying in H Mart*, you end up claiming your Korean heritage, your “birthright,” as you call it, with your own agency. You don’t wait for anyone’s approval.

Going to Korea every other summer was a huge part of my life, and I did spend a good amount of time there. It was very formative for me. I have a lot of people in my life who have said beautiful things—that I’m not half Korean and half American, I’m full Korean and full American. I actually think that being half and not quite belonging anywhere is a huge part of my identity. I will never fully belong anywhere, but I feel the greatest sense of belonging in this space that I have created for myself. I think before identifying as an American or a Korean, I identify as an artist.

How did that identity lead you to the ending of your book?

I was initially hesitant to talk about my relationship to music because the book is so centered around food, and I felt like that’s what people wanted from me. I also felt, *I’m not Patti Smith, I’m not Mick Jagger*. This is not a book about how I came to be this musician. I’m not someone who’s there in my career. This is a mother-daughter story. Then I came to the realization that a big part of my life was the contention and misunderstanding between my mother and me. A big reason why we drifted apart was because I felt so much like a creative person, and my mother was trying to protect me from a certain type of lifestyle. Then I cautiously stepped toward this beautiful, serendipitous, full-circle moment where [throughout] my whole life my mom couldn’t wrap her head around [music] ever working out for me. And then after she passed away, it did. It’s very bittersweet that she never got to see me become successful on my own terms. It feels in some way that she was looking out for me and that it couldn’t have happened any other way. It is a strange, very true story.

You have an album about joy, *Jubilee*, coming out two months after *Crying in H Mart*, this book about grief. What does it feel like to have these two parts of you entering the world at the same time?

It feels wild. It was not supposed to be like this. *Jubilee* was supposed to come out last summer, but we pushed it because of the pandemic. There was supposed to be way more space between them. In some ways, I’m glad. They really worked off of each other. I wrote *Jubilee* in the winter of 2020 between drafts of *Crying in H Mart*. I wanted to make a record about something new, and enough time had passed that this experience wasn’t as raw for me. It also helped that I’d spent three to four years writing everything about that process. Purging that whole experience made way for me to write about something else.

In the same way, *Crying in H Mart* can be a very ugly, intense book, but there’s a lot of joy in it, too. I think that’s the human experience—you need to feel both.

Hannah Bae is a Korean American writer, journalist, and illustrator and winner of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer’s Award. *Crying in H Mart* received a starred review in the March 1, 2021, issue.
anxieties it induces, which he encourages his readers to grapple with rather than self-medicate away. Along his path, he pauses to wonder whether philosophy has progressed at all over the centuries; to appreciate David Bowie’s final album, *Blackstar*, which “he reportedly planned as a message to his fans from beyond the grave”; and to allow, with Pascal, that we’re weak and wretched beings but eminently improvable.

There’s much good food for thought—and for better thinking—in Critchley’s rambles.

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A history of the quintessential video band, from its New Romantic roots to the nostalgia circuit.

Duran Duran came together in the late 1970s when the band mates were still teenagers, enchanted by Roxy Music’s musical and sartorial style, Chic’s disco-funk, and the nascent British synth-pop movement. Soon they became the house band at the Rum Runner, a dance club that was Birmingham’s answer to London’s New Romantic ground zero, the Blitz. Once singer Simon Le Bon arrived with a notebook stuffed with abstract, earnest lyrics, they developed a formula that got them halfway toward being the dominant dance-pop act of the early 1980s. The other main factor, of course, was MTV. Informed that the new cable channel was tired of rote performance videos, the band delivered ambitious clips filmed in far-flung locales (“Hungry Like the Wolf” in Sri Lanka, “Rio” in Antigua) and became superstars. Multiplatinum success brought them mansions and a glamorous social circle; keyboardist Nick Rhodes became close friends with Andy Warhol. But it also delivered a harsh backlash and cocaine habits that left the band in disarray for years to come. Veteran rock biographer Davis, best known for his 1985 Led Zeppelin biography, *Hammer of the Gods*, cobbled this book from interviews for a band autobiography that never came together. While he delivers some interesting details about band gossip and chart action, he rarely comes off as enthusiastic about his subject. Aside from some insights into the band’s early songs and perfunctory attempts to braid the band’s rise with Thatcherism, he’s content to chronicle record releases, tours, breakups, and rehab stints, only more speedily after the band’s mid-’80s peak. If the band’s music deserves a critical reassessment, Davis isn’t interested in exploring the matter.

A disappointingly bloodless bio of a band all but defined by flash, color, and the “fervor” of their devoted fans.

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Historical sketches of 48 countries that no longer exist.

“Countries die,” writes Defoe on the first page. “Sometimes it’s murder. Sometimes it’s an accident. Sometimes it’s because they were too ludicrous to exist in the first place.” The author, who admittedly uses the term country broadly, provides
brief, often humorous summaries not intended to provide a comprehensive, scholarly examination of extinct countries. The book contains a mixture of familiar nations and “countries” that many readers may have never known existed (Poyais, Khwarezmia, the Free State of Bottleneck, the Great Republic of Rough & Ready, etc.). Although Defoe offers a clever perspective, the satirical tone occasionally misses the mark. Regarding the Kingdom of Bavaria (1805-1918): “Every morning, Ludwig II, the fourth king of Bavaria, would have his barber tease out his hair into a weird bouffant that made his head look massive.” The Principality of Elba (1814-1815): “It had been a rough few years and, like desperate parents sticking an iPad in front of their difficult toddler, the great powers of Europe decided to give the recently vanquished Emperor Napoleon a little country of his own to play with.” The author’s irreverent, often biting style captures numerous unsettling elements of world history. “The Confederate States of America hasn’t been a thing for a century and a half,” he writes, “but that doesn’t stop cowardly Nazis (in those parts of Europe where the swastika is banned) from using the Confederate flag as a coded bumper sticker.” And: “The new Kingdom of Yugoslavia, barely out of its bubble wrap, first fell apart in World War II. Croatia enthusiastically hooked up with the Axis powers. So enthusiastically in fact, that the Nazis found the Croat massacres of the Serbs a bit hard to stomach (compared to their own, much neater genocides).” It’s not Niall Ferguson, but it fits the historical facts.

A droll, tongue-in-cheek view of history best taken in small doses and with a grain of salt.

**PROJECTIONS**

*A Story of Human Emotions*

*Deisseroth, Karl*

Random House (256 pp.)

$28.00 | Jun. 15, 2021

978-1-984853-69-1

A Stanford professor of bioengineering and psychiatry uses both of his specialties to reveal his ideas on the mind, mental illness, and human feelings. Deisseroth begins with one of the primary conundrums of his profession: In someone who suffers from psychiatric illness, the target organ isn’t damaged in a visible way. One can visualize a broken leg, a weakly pumping heart, and a fibrotic liver, but there’s nothing to see in a psychologically sick brain and little to investigate except with words. High-tech brain scanners don’t reveal nerve function, only blood flow or tissue density, but a 21st-century breakthrough created a new technique: optogenetics, in which the author was a pioneer. Scientists have long known that certain bacterial genes produce proteins that turn light into electrical current. Recently, researchers learned how to transfer these genes from microorganisms into the cells of larger animals. If they shine a light onto an altered brain cell, it fires. Complex and branched, a single nerve cell may extend across the brain, deep into regions that govern behavior and powerful emotions. This new ability to track neural pathways has produced an avalanche of discoveries on brain function. What it hasn’t produced is a definitive explanation for any mental illness, but this doesn’t prevent Deisseroth from combining this information with his longtime experience in practice to muse on how brain dysfunction might produce the suffering he sees. Most of the book consists of vivid case studies in which his patients’ depression, mania, dementia, or schizophrenia trigger a discussion of the background, possible mechanism, and even evolutionary role of mental illness. A schizophrenic cannot differentiate between the inner and exterior world. Most of us pay little attention to idle thoughts and musings; a schizophrenic often “hears voices.” People with autism dread uncertainty, and nothing is less predictable than social interaction.

Theoretical but good food for thought for anyone interested in the endless complexity of the brain.
FACTORY SUMMERS
Delisle, Guy
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Dasczak, Holger & Aspinall, Rob
Drawn & Quarterly (156 pp.)
$24.95 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-77046-459-9

A rites-of-passage portrait of the graphic artist as a young man.

For more than 20 years, French Canadian cartoonist Delisle has chronicled his experiences as a vagabond traveler, with graphic narratives taking readers to Burma, Jerusalem, North Korea, and elsewhere. Here, he provides a kind of origin story of his formative years in Quebec City, when he was drawing for fun and unsure how to translate his talent into a career. Beginning at the age of 16, he spent his first of three summers working at the local paper mill, which produced newsprint for the likes of the New York Times. His father had spent his professional life as an engineer at the factory, but the author rarely saw him. Most of what’s important in the narrative goes unsaid, or barely said, with Delisle and his father failing to connect. In the drawings, which any Delisle fan will appreciate, the mill and its machinery exert a greater physical presence than any of the characters. The author remembers himself as a “loner,” more interested in going to the library than interacting with his fellow workers, some of whom are overly friendly, others brutish and ill-tempered. Those with whom he formed any sort of bond could be gone the next summer, and he chronicles how he visited his father, who no longer lived with the family, only once each summer. During the rest of the year, Delisle pursued an education as an animator, and though he was prepared to return for a fourth summer at the mill, an employment offer provided the pathway to his career in cartooning. He and his father never discussed his art, at least as portrayed in these pages, but when he died, the author discovered his father kept much of his work.

Bittersweet and elliptical, a narrative in which not much happens but everything changes.

HUNT, GATHER, PARENT
What Ancient Cultures Can Teach Us About the Lost Art of Raising Happy, Helpful Little Humans
Doucleff, Michæleen
Illus. by Trujillo, Ella
Avid Reader Press (332 pp.)
$27.00 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-982149-67-3

Time-tested parenting methods from three Indigenous cultures help a mother tame her wild toddler.

Doucleff knew there had to be a better way to parent her child, one that didn’t result in Rosy’s hitting, screaming, and throwing temper tantrums, where every day wasn’t a battle from morning to night. Using the investigative skills she has honed as a correspondent for NPR’s Science Desk, she traveled to the Yucatán to live with a Mayan family, the Arctic to spend time with an Inuit family, and Tanzania and the Hadzabe tribe to understand how other cultures raised helpful, independent, disciplined children without unnecessary drama and frustration. Doucleff shares the tips and tricks she learned along the way and includes with each chapter a distilled list of insights that can be quickly referenced when the need arises. For example, she explains how to deescalate a situation by remaining calm and instilling awe and how having a child help with chores at a young age may create more work at first but gives the child the chance to learn and assume responsibilities that help the family. Also, when a child understands the consequences of her actions, she is less likely to misbehave than if she only hears the words no or don’t. Of course, the author recommends outdoor time, emphasizes the power of stories to teach lessons, and shows why it’s important to let children speak for themselves. Doucleff, who has a doctorate in chemistry, interweaves scientific research and her own trials with Rosy into the information
she learned from the Mayans, Inuits, and Hadzabe. The result is an intriguing study that should be useful to parents from any culture, especially those who are at their wits’ end with their rambunctious, untamed children.

Eye-opening looks at how ancient techniques can benefit modern parents.

BIG VAPE
The Incendiary Rise of Juul
Ducharme, Jamie
Henry Holt (336 pp.)
$28.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-250-77753-9

A deep investigative dive into the electronic cigarette behemoth.

In this riveting expose, Time health and science journalist Ducharme chronicles the history and problematic future of Juul, which quickly rose to prominence after a series of missteps. She profiles friends and former smokers James Monsees and Adam Bowen, who, during a 2005 Stanford product-design program, sought to develop an alternative to traditional tobacco-burning cigarettes. Focusing on harm reduction, they positioned their prototype as a way to “improve the lives of adult smokers” by helping them transition to the supposed safety of vaporizing pens, which heat a liquid but avoid combustion. Piggybacking on lessons from earlier, less-successful vaping devices, Monsees and Bowen, aided by Japanese investors, laid the groundwork for a successful venture—but not without a host of problems that did not go unnoticed by the Food and Drug Administration and would reemerge later to cloud their success. With briskly paced writing, Ducharme details the “buzz-testing” conducted by Juul employees to gauge the addictive potency of the nicotine formulations in the vape pods and how the “cool kids”–friendly product marketing campaign became “the company’s religion.” As the author writes, “more news stories suggested that Juul had torn a page from the Big Tobacco playbook and purposely hooked teenage customers for profit.” By 2015, Juul vaporizers were widespread, and the company started to record significant profits. However, when reports of underage users emerged, Juul dispatched representatives to schools to warn about the dangers of nicotine, “sprinkling in references to how safe Juul was and how it was going to get FDA approval any day now.” Juul then partnered with big tobacco corporation Altria, and the emergence of a mysterious pulmonary illness ignited anti-vaping activists and public health watchdogs. In the wake of hundreds of lawsuits set to hit courthouses in 2022, both Monsees and Bowen have “abandoned ship.” Based on dozens of interviews with former employees, investors, doctors, and researchers, this well-rounded journalistic narrative is consistently informative and alarming.

Intensive, exemplary reportage on a controversial industry cloaked in scandal.
requires no background in economics to understand—was about 65% in 1980 and is below 58% today. “A decline of seven percentage points—or 10 percent—may seem tiny,” he adds, “but that includes the earnings of…top earners, and not just the low-paid workers.” Given the inequalities in today’s winner-take-all economy, workers understandably feel that they have no stake in the game and no vested interest in seeing that the system is maintained, giving rise to political unrest. In a novel, intriguing argument, Eckhout holds that Amazon and other monopolies could well afford to lower their costs, which would mean more volume, yet they keep their prices high in order to curb demand and keep labor costs down while maintaining market power. The author notes that whereas the two largest retailers before the Depression, Sears and A&P, had a market share of just 3%, Walmart and Amazon today “account for 15 percent of retail sales.” Yet antitrust regulators, as well as politicians of all stripes, are silent. Eckhout proposes that existing antitrust laws be brought to bear to force higher wages as well as to pry data from the hands of corporations and back into the purview of the consumers who generate it.

A provocative case, and one that those who feel undervalued in the present economy will surely appreciate.

DEAR SENTHURAN
A Black Spirit Memoir
Emezi, Akwaeke
Riverhead (540 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-593-32919-1

A unique, visceral memoir from the author of The Death of Vivek Oji (2020).

How does a spirit child drawn from Nigerian tribal cosmology negotiate modern life? That’s the metaphysical conundrum at the heart of this highly personal and unusual memoir. Emezi grew up in Aba, Nigeria, and identifies as ogbanje, an “Igbo spirit that’s born to a human mother, a kind of trickster that dies unexpectedly only to return in the next child and do it all over again.” In order to ameliorate their feelings of “flesh dysphoria” or “metaphysical dysphoria,” the author underwent multiple surgeries, including breast reduction and a “hysterectomy with a bilateral salpingectomy.” As Emezi writes, they chose “to mutate my body into something that would fit my spiritself.” Structured as a series of far-ranging letters written to friends, lovers, exes, family members, and others, the narrative raises questions about the author’s “embodied nonhuman” existence and Igbo conceptions of reality. While Emezi’s personal and professional travels have taken them around the world—Trinidad, Berlin, Johannesburg, Vietnam, Tanzania, and homes in Brooklyn and New Orleans—this book is not a travelogue. Although conventional elements of memoir reoccur—a painful breakup, estrangement from family members, career ups and downs—the author presents them as manifestations of a deity’s “deeply traumatic” embodiment as a human being. Emezi attributes much of their meteoric rise—multiple literary award wins and nominations, National Book Foundation’s “5 Under 35” honoree, etc.—to the casting of the right spell. The author is crystal-clear in their focus on “writing for people like me, not for a white gaze,” and seen through the prism of Igbo ontology, this adventurous life story is undoubtedly compelling. For some readers, getting past Emezi’s “outrageously arrogant” demand “for attention, for glory, for worship” as a self-described “bratty deity” may require a leap of faith and a modicum of empathy, a merely human trait.

Tribal spiritual beliefs meet contemporary literary acclaim in a powerful memoir.

THE CHILD IN THE ELECTRIC CHAIR
The Execution of George Junius Stinney Jr. and the Making of a Tragedy in the American South
Faber, Eli
Univ. of South Carolina (176 pp.)
$29.99 | Jun. 25, 2021
978-1-64336-194-9

A compact, jolting account of the shameful execution of a 14-year-old Black boy in the Jim Crow South.

Beyond the riveting narrative, this book has a poignant backstory: Faber pursued it as both academic study and passion project, ultimately racing a cancer diagnosis to complete it. Before his death in 2020, he tasked colleague and friend Carol Berkin with shepherding it to publication. “I knew Eli had been right,” writes Berkin in the foreword. “I had in my keeping an important thing that needed to be shared.” The story of George Junius Stinney Jr., convicted of murdering two young girls in a South Carolina mill town, is puzzling and tragic. “Bitter memories of this double murder and the execution that followed...endured for decades,” not least because a desultory investigation and arguably coerced confession leave open the question of culpability. Faber develops the story meticulously, with rewarding detours into the odd “company town” of Alcolu, where a sternly benevolent founding family dominated life, encouraging relatively benign treatment of Black citizens prior to the murder; and the horrific role of lynching as social control in the South. Recalling a memory from Stinney’s brother, the author writes that “until things unraveled after the murder of two White girls, overt tension between the races did not exist.” When the girls were found murdered, a state constable received a tip from an unnamed “colored man” that George Stinney was “the meanest boy in the town. Although he’d been in sight of family members the whole day, Stinney’s guilt was quickly presumed. As people heard about his purported confession, “rumors of rape quickly destroyed the relative civility between the races that had long defined Alcolu.” A lynching was narrowly averted. Faber ably documents Stinney’s perfunctory trial and quick march toward execution, giving a rich sense of the daily, pervasive brutality of the Jim Crow South.
An unsettling yet important historical excavation and true-crime narrative.

PERMANENT DAMAGE
Memoirs of an Outrageous Girl
Fontenot, Mercy with Parker, Lyndsey
Rare Bird Books (208 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 9, 2021
978-1-64428-182-6

A repetitive catalog of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll by a pioneering groupie.

“It was never a goal for me to be famous. I wanted to be infamous.” So writes Fontenot (1949-2020), a member of the Frank Zappa creation called the GTOs, or Girls Together Outrageously, who recorded an album that, Dee Dee Ramone exclaims later in the book, he paid $500 for on the used-disc market. Fontenot did a little bit of everything to earn a living in 1960s Los Angeles, and she cut an odd figure: admittedly often overweight but with an exuberant, heavily made-up style that musicians like Alice Cooper and the members of KISS would appropriate. Her musical tastes were broad. She dug Gram Parsons particularly: “We basically bonded over soul music and heroin. Sometimes we’d just watch TV, and I learned quickly that if I walked into Gram’s place and Hee Haw was on, I had to be real quiet.” Though the author writes that “sex has never been a big deal for me,” various contortions and partners figure into these pages, which eventually become tiresome. Mostly, though, Miss Mercy, as she was known, enumerates the many kinds of drugs she consumed and the trouble that got her into, even though there was always someone worse. As she writes about a fellow groupie, “she was actually younger than me, but she looked about seventy-five years old. After she died, I found out she’d been shooting Ritalin for years. It made her look like a fossilized tree. Or like Keith Richards.” A crack addiction left Fontenot homeless for a couple of years—though “the homeless crackhead lifestyle could actually be a ton of fun.” Alas, the fun times ended, and Fontenot died in July 2020 at the improbably old age of 71, long having felt “like a ghost already.” Pamela Des Barres, the author’s friend and fellow groupie, provides the afterword.

Best left to die-hard GTO fans or parents trying to scare their kids straight.

THE INVENTION OF OSCAR WILDE
Frankel, Nicholas
Reaktion Books (272 pp.)
$25.00 | Jun. 10, 2021
978-1-78914-414-7

An exploration of Oscar Wilde’s intentional construction of a new persona.

In his latest book about Wilde, Frankel focuses on the author’s deliberate self-reinvention, predicated on a desire for fame. Frankel contends that Wilde’s time at Oxford marked the beginnings of the Wilde we know today. “Especially determined to make a name for himself as a poet,” he shortened his name and effected a new accent. Years later, he noted, “My Irish accent was one of the many things I forgot at Oxford.” Wilde moved to London and began identifying himself as English, becoming the object of satirical attack. Soon, he embarked on his famous North American lecture tour. “He was the first modern celebrity,”
In his new book, Claudio Lomnitz explores the unique history of his emigrant Jewish family in Latin America
BY TOM BEER

The title of Claudio Lomnitz’s new book, Nuestra América (Other Press, Feb. 9), is a nod to the Cuban poet and revolutionary José Martí. Martí’s influential 1891 essay, “Nuestra América,” was a clarion call for a pan–Latin American unity at a critical juncture in the region’s history.

Lomnitz, a professor of anthropology at Columbia University and a columnist for the Mexico City newspaper La Jornada, tells a more personal tale: the journey of his Jewish grandparents from Europe, fleeing rampant anti-Semitism after World War I, to South America, where they settled over time in Peru, Colombia, and Chile. But the book is also a far-ranging examination of the 20th-century Jewish exodus, the hierarchies of Latin American society, and the socialist ideals that could unite diverse groups of people across national and ethnic lines.

“At first I thought of [the book] in a very intimate way,” Lomnitz explains over Zoom. “But by the time I’d finished it—because writing is always a transformative process—I became convinced that the traditional formulation about Latin American culture is missing something key, which is the connection between the 20th-century destruction of Europe and what we understand today as Latin America. And Jews are an important part of that story.”

Chock-full of old family photographs, Nuestra América does offer an intimate glimpse of Lomnitz’s clan, especially his maternal grandparents, Misha Adler and Noemi Milstein. They came separately from Eastern Europe—a polyglot region known as Bessarabia, that was variously part of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, and other countries—and met in Lima in 1927.

Once married, Misha and Noemi became part of the bohemian circle surrounding José Carlos Mariátegui, a charismatic Peruvian journalist and socialist intellectual who for many readers outside Latin America will be a fascinating discovery. “Mariátegui is a key political figure in Peru,” Lomnitz says, “because he creates a socialist party that later becomes the Communist Party of Peru. But he’s
also a key cultural figure; he creates a journal called *Amauta*, which means *teacher* in Quechua, which is one of the two or three most important journals of the Latin American literary and cultural vanguard.

As members of Mariátegui’s cadre, Lomnitz’s grandparents were participants in a sophisticated philosophical conversation about national identity. “[The] idea was basically that Peruvian national culture had been generated by turning its back to the Native population, which was four-fifths of the population at that time, and that a new national collectivity needed to be shaped,” Lomnitz says. “But at the same time, [Mariátegui] was not a nationalist in the traditional sense. He was an internationalist; he thought that rethinking Peru involved opening discussion up and out to the world. His slogan was ‘Everything that is human is ours.’ In that sense, there was a lot of space for discussion with people like my grandparents, who were multilingual and did translations from Russian and from German for *Amauta*.”

The subtitle of the book, *My Family in the Vertigo of Translation*, captures some of the complex negotiations, linguistic and otherwise, that these European Jews made in the Spanish-speaking lands that received them. Lomnitz, born in Chile and raised in Berkeley, California, and Mexico City, writes that he, too, has “remained sandwiched between Spanish and English, feeling comfortable to a certain point in each of these languages, but also insecure in both....I have always lacked the perfect language: the one that names things without distorting them.”

In fact, Lomnitz has written two different versions of *Nuestra América*—the first in Spanish, published in Mexico City in 2018, and this English edition, which is less a translation of the original text than a reworking. “The book is not the same in English as it was in Spanish,” Lomnitz says. “I had to reflect more, in English, about South American cultural history and intellectual life and things that needed more explanation. I think the book, in some ways, is more precise, more specific, in English than it is in Spanish.”

Moreover, Lomnitz was able to call on other scholars and historians to “reach further into portions of the history” that had initially been difficult for him to research. Elisheva Shaul and others assisted in translating letters from Yiddish. Gustavo Álvaro Gardeazábal, a contact in Colombia, provided valuable background on a province of the country where Lomnitz’s relatives had lived. Likewise, an archivist in Germany wrote to Lomnitz when she heard about the book; Karen Strobel was able to furnish documentation about another of the book’s captivating tangents—the murder of Lomnitz’s paternal great-grandfather by Nazis in Mannheim in 1922, very early in the party’s history.

“It’s a hard book to have stopped writing,” Lomnitz admits. “I miss it. It has that range; it moves across so many places and times. If you like writing, and you love research, which I do, it’s hard to stop, at a certain point.”

Perhaps there’s another iteration of *Nuestra América* still to come.

*Nuestra América* received a starred review in the Jan. 1, 2021, issue.

“An autobiography to which all Latin Americans are entitled” — Martín Vejar Linares

Nuestra América received a starred review in the Jan. 1, 2021, issue.
writes Frankel, “a transatlantic superstar whose self-created public image went before him, and his lecture tour went hand in hand with a media frenzy accompanying his every move.” Wilde’s eccentric appearance broke gender norms and presented a stark contrast to the “bearded or moustachioed” appearance that dominated the day. Regarding the experience overseas, Wilde noted “a greater openness than Britain in matters of gender and sexuality.” In 1884, Wilde married Constance Lloyd, a union that drew speculation and gossip. As Frankel contends, Wilde was becoming “increasingly willing to act on his desires for other men,” and his fiction “was becoming increasingly provocative.” Through a close examination of his literary works, Frankel notes similarities to Wilde’s personal life. The author also explores the circumstances that led to Wilde’s conviction on counts of gross indecency. While in prison, Wilde wrote a letter that would become “one of the most important and influential works of his life.” After his release, he assumed a pseudonym and exiled himself to France, where he again found greater acceptance. After Wilde’s death, his literary executor published excerpts from the letter, the first step in a long battle for public redemption.

This lively biography paints a colorful portrait of the writer as public relations master and trendsetter.

An urgent, brilliant work of historical excavation.

WAKE
The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts
Hall, Rebecca
Illus. by Martínez, Hugo
Simon & Schuster (208 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-982115-18-0

A vividly illustrated account of Black women rebels that combines elements of memoir, archival research, and informed imaginings of its subjects’ lives.

A former tenants rights lawyer, Hall pursued a doctorate in history to uncover America’s warped justice system. “In order to understand our experiences as Black women today,” she writes, “I had to study slavery.” This collaboration with illustrator Martínez focuses on two women-led revolts in New York City and uprisings during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Of a 1712 revolt, Hall finds in court records the first names of four women involved and sentenced to execution; none are quoted in transcripts. “This is one way history erases us….You think you are reading an accurate chronicle written at the time, but if who we are and what we care about are deemed irrelevant, it won’t be in there,” writes Hall. The author also examines a 1708 revolt led by a woman referred to in documents as the “Negro Fiend”; she was burned at the stake. The granddaughter of slaves, the author seeks to honor her ancestors by filling in the silent record. Facing difficulty accessing records and digesting their information, Hall called upon her deceased grandmother for strength. In London, Hall delved into archives of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, reading hundreds of slave-ship logs. Revolts at sea were largely a suicide mission fueled by slaves’ desire to “take their captors with them to the bottom of the ocean.” Research shows that the more women onboard a slave ship, the more likely a revolt. Hall believes that this was because women were mostly kept unchained and on deck, where it was easier for crew members to rape them; this also gave them access to weapons. The black-and-white illustrations nicely complement the text and elevate the artfulness and the power of the book, which begins and ends with scenes depicting women-led revolts aboard a ship Hall calls the Unity.

An urgent, brilliant work of historical excavation.
The boys’ food choices usually leaned toward pizza, stir-fry, and quesadillas, but once they asked for fried chicken, which Hauck affecting story, “would be a way to finish one item on my father’s also be mine.” The boys—eight at any one time—picked the ates indelible portraits of the wounded, lonely, and disillusioned about the ways race inflected our food, our bodies, our every-thing. “Until the fried chicken, we hadn’t really addressed race,” ing the map of the world he lived in, to figure out how it might also be mine.” The boys—eight at any one time—picked the menu, she arrived once a week with groceries that she paid for herself, and they cooked and ate together for nearly three years. The boys’ food choices usually leaned toward pizza, stir-fry, and quesadillas, but once they asked for fried chicken, which Hauck had never made. Armed with a recipe from a friend’s mother, she soon realized that it was far different from what the boys had eaten. “Until the fried chicken, we hadn’t really addressed race,” she writes. “It was obviously always present, but we never talked about the ways race inflected our food, our bodies, our every-thing. Until the fried chicken, we cooked around it.” Hauck creates indelible portraits of the wounded, lonely, and disillusioned boys, some of whom lashed out in anger at a world that had failed them. When the residence closed in 2009 due to lack of funding, the director implored Hauck to write about her experience: “You have to tell the story. That something happened here. Or there will be no trace of any of it.” Hauck’s sensitive memoir honors the boys she nourished.

A moving memoir about how “systems fail but food is revolutionary.”

In 2006, Hauck began an unusual volunteer project at a group home for adolescent boys in state care. She had conceived the project with her father, a social worker and co-founder of the nonprofit residence; after he died, the author decided to make the plan a reality. “Cooking at the House,” she writes in this highly affecting story, “would be a way to finish one item on my father’s largely unfinished to-do list.” A high school Spanish teacher, Hauck had no clear plans for her future, and she was burdened by an abiding sense of grief over her father’s death. “The project,” she reflects, “was less about retracing his steps than understanding the map of the world he lived in, to figure out how it might also be mine.” The boys—eight at any one time—picked the menu, she arrived once a week with groceries that she paid for herself, and they cooked and ate together for nearly three years. The boys’ food choices usually leaned toward pizza, stir-fry, and quesadillas, but once they asked for fried chicken, which Hauck had never made. Armed with a recipe from a friend’s mother, she soon realized that it was far different from what the boys had eaten. “Until the fried chicken, we hadn’t really addressed race,” she writes. “It was obviously always present, but we never talked about the ways race inflected our food, our bodies, our every-thing. Until the fried chicken, we cooked around it.” Hauck creates indelible portraits of the wounded, lonely, and disillusioned boys, some of whom lashed out in anger at a world that had failed them. When the residence closed in 2009 due to lack of funding, the director implored Hauck to write about her experience: “You have to tell the story. That something happened here. Or there will be no trace of any of it.” Hauck’s sensitive memoir honors the boys she nourished.

A captivating debut.

While Covid-19 continues to circle the globe and wealthy countries clamor for vaccines, dozens of “neglected tropical diseases” are ravaging more than 1 billion people living in developing regions of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The treatments for some of these are available, but accessing them can be difficult or impossible. When these diseases appear in developed, Northern Hemisphere countries, they are rarely diagnosed accurately by doctors, who did not learn about them in medical schools, and sociocultural barriers, political choices, and racism further limit options for care. In her latest, Hernández, a pro-fessor of English and former New York Times reporter, explores her family’s struggles with Chagas disease, better known as “kissing bug disease.” The author highlights how poverty, policies that limit health care for immigrants and marginalized peoples, and the worldwide neglect of public health infrastructure all contribute to the 10,000 deaths among the 6 million cases of Chagas disease in the Americas, 300,000 of which are in the U.S. The heroes of this story are not only the doctors, nurses, public health professionals, and volunteers who work tirelessly testing for and treating the disease—as well as identifying and controlling infestations of kissing bugs (Triatoma species) and the Trypanosoma parasite that causes the illness—but also the patients and support groups who have increased awareness of it, especially in Texas and California, where it is most prevalent in the U.S. And, of course, the tireless family members—cum-care-givers like Hernández. The author’s Tía Dora, who lived with and died from Chagas disease, changed Hernández’s life. Her story ably rendered by the author, should open readers’ eyes to a persistent plague.

A compelling indictment of our failing health care system and the people falling through its ever widening cracks.
Among the skills they examine are security awareness, communication strategies, and financial responsibility. As the authors explain, children are more capable of doing things on their own than many parents believe. Unfortunately, in this era of helicopter parenting, children have often “failed to launch.” In addition to teaching children basic survival skills, exposing them to various cultures and perspectives, and offering opportunities for them to develop their own personal hobbies and interests, the Hillsbergs discuss the importance of building trust with your children, the benefits of allowing them to fail, and knowing when striving for perfection can be detrimental. As Voltaire said, and the authors echo, “perfection is the enemy of good.” By sharing their story, they hope readers will be able to use these techniques to shape their own children into security-conscious, confident, and well-rounded adults—while also giving parents a little peace of mind and reduction in anxiety.

**A fresh and fascinating perspective on child-rearing.**

Famed for such chillers as “The Lottery” and *The Haunting of Hill House*, Jackson reveals a warm, witty side in her voluminous correspondence.

There’s still an edge to the hilarious domestic vignettes she sends her parents, clearly the raw material for the now less famous magazine pieces collected in *Life Among the Savages and Raising Demons*: Tending to four rambunctious children while cranking out the magazine pieces and novels on which the family income depended was a perennial challenge. Husband Stanley Edgar Hyman, a professor at Bennington for most of his career, was a perennial challenge. Husband Stanley Edgar Hyman, a professor at Bennington for most of his career, never made much money, and his urgings to Jackson to get back to work form a disquieting undercurrent to the generally cheerful letters. The earliest letters are her lovestruck missives to Hyman when both were students at Syracuse University; but an angry letter from 1938 reveals a darker side to their relationship, delineated in more explicit detail 22 years later. Her anguish over his unrepentant womanizing and habit of demeaning her in public while ignoring her in private makes a heartbreaking counterpart to delightful portraits of family activities that also ring true but tell only part of the story. The dark side so evident in Jackson’s fiction is kept for her work, but we see its origins in a 1938 letter to Hyman declaring, “you know my rather passive misanthropic tendencies, and how [sic] hate this whole human race as a collection of monsters.” Jackson’s avoidance of capital letters adds to her correspondence’s charmingly idiosyncratic flavor, though she adheres to more conventional punctuation in letters to her agents Bernice Baumgarten and Carol Brandt, which offer candid snapshots of a working writer’s life. Later letters chronicle without self-pity the years of declining physical and emotional health that preceded her untimely death at age 48 in 1965.

**A vivid, engaging, and engrossing collection from one of American literature’s great letter writers.**
The questions scientists ask about the nature of the universe tend to conform to the normal rules of logic rather than to outside-the-box speculations. Marletto argues that many advances in such varied topics as “natural selection, force fields, curved spacetime, quantum superposition, and the universality of computation” owe to counterfactual thinking. She offers the example of a future space mission whose astronauts leave a metal box on some distant planet containing a book of poems by William Blake. The fact is the box; another is the book. “That the words in it could be read is a counterfactual property,” though, that hinges on whether the box is discovered and whether the finders can figure Blake out on the page. Marletto extends the example to examine how the laws of thermodynamics work and might work, how the laws of physics prevent a perpetual motion or time machine that might just come about if we figure out how to design new conditions in the “territory beyond the boundary that has been currently set by the traditional conception of physics.” The impossible, writes the author, is impossible because our “initial conditions” make it so. Counterfactuals can be put to work dealing with more practical matters such as climate change if only our thought experiments are sufficiently flexible. The author turns to knowledge and information themselves as materials that might have physical properties. Marletto dances around her subject too often: The lead-up to a working definition of counterfactuality takes dozens of pages, and at the end of the book, many readers won’t be entirely sure that they fully understand. Still, there’s plenty of food for thought for those interested in the processes of conceptual breakthrough. A little advanced for casual readers without a background in physics, but adepts will enjoy Marletto’s disquisitions.

The first volume of a new Hitler biography.

McDonough provides an expert, disheartening account of the first seven years of Hitler’s chancellorship, during which he seemed to have the golden touch. The author reminds readers that in 1932, Germany’s establishment had long viewed Hitler as a lowbrow demagogue, but the Nazis were the largest political party. Certain that they could control him, leading conservatives persuaded the president, Paul von Hindenburg, to appoint Hitler as chancellor. He took office on Jan. 30, 1933, and swiftly proposed the Enabling Act “to end parliamentary democracy now and forever.” This required an election. Many historians pronounce the Nazi’s 44% minority in the March 5 voting a disappointment, but it was a spectacular achievement for a multiparty system, the “highest vote of any party” in any German election since 1919. Passing the act required 66% of the Reichstag, which Hitler accomplished.
by banning communist deputies and threatening the Centre Party. McDonough offers an insightful chronological account of what followed: brutal persecution and packed concentration camps inside Germany and a pugnacious foreign policy that produced easy, bloodless takeovers of Austria, the Sudetenland, and Czechoslovakia before the invasion of Poland persuaded a reluctant Britain and France to declare war. Few historians fail to denounce the refusal to take Hitler seriously until it was almost too late, but McDonough emphasizes that his frenzied public persona disguised a sophisticated diplomat. By the 1930s, almost everyone deplored the Treaty of Versailles and sympathized with his denunciation of Germany's persecution. After interviews, Western journalists wrote fawning articles; face to face, most politicians found him reasonable. Western leaders refused to believe that Hitler always intended to go to war, not only because they hated the thought of conflict, but also because wars are often pointless. Of course, Hitler was deeply determined and pugnacious, and the catastrophic results of his ambition will likely become apparent in the second volume.

Hitler biographies are not in short supply, but this one is worthy of study.

**ANTIMAN**

A Hybrid Memoir

Mohabir, Rajiv

Restless Books (352 pp.)

$27.00 | Jun. 22, 2021

978-1-63206-280-2

An Indo-Guyanese queer poet recounts how he came to embrace his Hindu heritage and artistic leanings through his Guyanese grandmother. The London-born child of Guyanese immigrants to Florida, Mohabir was the only one in his Christianized family to take an interest in their “Coolie Hindu” past and Aji, the paternal grandmother who represented it. The author’s father insisted that the family “leave behind the backward ways” of colonial Guyana to travel to the U.S. But Mohabir was so intrigued by the languages Aji spoke (Guyanese Hindi as a teenager and translating and transcribing his grandmother’s words). Later, he went to Varanasi to find the origins of Aji’s songs and stories as well as Mohabir’s own interesting idea of making chili Cheetos and experimented on extra unused product from the plant. He called the prototype Flamin’ Hot Cheetos and then broke ranks to “think like an owner” and call then–CEO Roger Enrico to pitch his creation. A revolution was suddenly underway in Montañez’s life as well as in the snack industry. The author suggests that his revelation came about by asking “what if” questions, which helped him take game-changing risks. But his rise through the corporate ranks came slowly because many executives took issue with both his lack of education and his ethnicity. Montañez found support among a few executives like Enrico. Others blocked his progress—e.g., a regional director who “neglected” to tell him about a management position offer Frito-Lay finally made to him years after the successful launch of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos. Rather than embitter him, these lessons taught the author to “fight harder” and, later, to actively pursue deserved compensation and promotions. This classic rags-to-riches story about underdog ingenuity, hard work, and the motto of “faith it til you make it” will appeal to entrepreneurs, specifically among marginalized communities, and anyone seeking motivation to spark the “flamin’ hot” ideas that can change a life.

**FLAMIN’ HOT**

The Incredible True Story of One Man’s Rise From Janitor to Top Executive

Montañez, Richard P.

Portfolio (240 pp.)

$26.00 | Jun. 15, 2021

978-0-593-08746-6

A genuine up-by-the-boatstraps American success story. Once a janitor and now a PepsiCo executive, Montañez gives advice about self-empowerment through an account of his own unconventional climb up the corporate ladder. The son of field laborers, the Southern Californian native grew up in “the poorest part of the Spanish-speaking barrio.” After dropping out of school in sixth grade, he left home at 14 to work odd jobs. At 19, he became a janitor at the Rancho Cucamonga Frito-Lay plant to provide for his young family. For the next decade, he made ends meet with side hustles, one of which involved selling homemade tortillas and salsa. When Frito-Lay cut his hours, Montañez hit on the idea of making chili Cheetos and experimented on extra unused product from the plant. He called the prototype Flamin’ Hot Cheetos and then broke ranks to “think like an owner” and call then–CEO Roger Enrico to pitch his creation. A revolution was suddenly underway in Montañez’s life as well as in the snack industry. The author suggests that his revelation came about by asking “what if” questions, which helped him take game-changing risks. But his rise through the corporate ranks came slowly because many executives took issue with both his lack of education and his ethnicity. Montañez found support among a few executives like Enrico. Others blocked his progress—e.g., a regional director who “neglected” to tell him about a management position offer Frito-Lay finally made to him years after the successful launch of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos. Rather than embitter him, these lessons taught the author to “fight harder” and, later, to actively pursue deserved compensation and promotions. This classic rags-to-riches story about underdog ingenuity, hard work, and the motto of “faith it til you make it” will appeal to entrepreneurs, specifically among marginalized communities, and anyone seeking motivation to spark the “flamin’ hot” ideas that can change a life.

Down-to-earth and inspiring.
VOICES OF HISTORY
Speeches That Changed the World
Montefiore, Simon Sebag
Vintage (288 pp.)
$16.95 paper  |  Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-984898-18-0

The bestselling, prizewinning historian and novelist assembles speeches from historical figures.

Like penmanship, rhetoric no longer occupies a central role in a liberal education, and many contemporary readers may be surprised to learn that listening to public oratory was once considered an afternoon's family entertainment. But there is no doubt that stirring speeches have marked significant historical events, deplorable as well as admirable. Although Montefiore, winner of the Costa Biography Award, among many other honors, maintains that “speech has never been more powerful because television and Internet have never been more dominant,” his choices reveal that speeches often inspire an audience but rarely change their minds. Featuring more than 80 chapters, the book begins in ancient Greece and moves all the way through the end of 2020. Until recent centuries, all speeches were fictionalized. Plato wrote everything attributed to Socrates, Arrian described the words of Alexander the Great, and Matthew quoted Jesus, all long after their deaths. Historians maintain that these speeches recorded accepted tradition, which is not reassuring. Writers assume a modest degree of literacy in their audience, but public speakers aim to reach every listener. Archaic prose makes pre-20th-century rhetoric sound dignified, but modern examples often seem to be addressed to the least educated. The admirable sentiments of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris after their Nov. 7, 2020, election victory are expressed through high-minded clichés. Donald Trump’s 2015 speech announcing his candidacy for president deserves inclusion because it heralded a dramatic shift in American politics, but it’s nothing more than subliterate bombast. Montefiore does not ignore villains—e.g., Robespierre, Stalin, Hitler, bin Laden—who are presented as villains without being especially interesting. Readers of this selection of primary sources will understand why we love diligent historians, which Montefiore does most certainly. They do the boring work (reading primary sources) and fashion a fluid narrative from the research.

A veteran historian collects an easy paycheck for a book best suited to devoted students of world history.

WILLIE NELSON’S LETTERS TO AMERICA
Nelson, Willie with Pipkin, Turk
Harper Horizon (272 pp.)
$27.99  |  Jun. 29, 2021
978-0-7852-4154-6

An epistolary grab bag of memories, lyrics, jokes, and homespun philosophy from the legendary musician.

As an indefatigable touring artist, Nelson (b. 1933) has had a lot of time on his hands during the pandemic. Following his collaboration with his sister, Me and Sister Bobbie, the road warrior offers a loose collection of lessons from a full life. If you’ve never read a book by or about Nelson, this one—characteristically conversational, inspirational, wise, funny, and meandering—is a good place to start. The book is filled with lyrics to many of his best-known songs, most of which he wrote but others that he has made his own as well. For those steeped in The Tao of Willie (2006), some of the stories will be as familiar as the songs—e.g., the origin story of his nicknames, including Booger Red and Shotgun Willie; his time as a DJ and a door-to-door Bible and encyclopedia salesman; early struggles in Nashville with “all the record executives who only see music as a bottom-line endeavor”; and return to his home state of Texas. Many of the personal stories about family and friends can be found in Me and Sister Bobbie, but they are good stories from a rich life, one of abundance for which Nelson remains profoundly grateful. So he gives thanks in the form of letters: to Texas, America, God, golf, and marijuana; the audiences who have supported him and the band that has had his back; those who have played any part in Farm Aid or his annual Fourth of July concert bashes; and departed friends and deceased heroes, one of whom, Will Rogers, answers him back. Nelson even addresses one to Covid-19, which looms over this book, making the author itchy and antsy. Even at 87, he can’t wait to be on the road again.

Another amiable book that is just what you’d expect from Willie.

THE COMPLETE MEMOIRS
Expanded Edition
Neruda, Pablo
Trans. by St. Martin, Hardie & West, Adrian Nathan
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (496 pp.)
$20.00 paper  |  Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-374-53812-5

The Nobel Prize–winning poet’s memoirs, newly expanded.

Nearly 50 years after the posthumous publication of the memoir of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), translators St. Martin and West offer a new edition, adding 19 sections of material from lectures, travel notes, and hitherto lost, unfinished, or unpublished fragments, along with
"A lucid (in the sky with diamonds) look at the hows, whys, and occasional demerits of altering one's mind."

**THIS IS YOUR MIND ON PLANTS**

Pollan, Michael

Penguin Press (288 pp.)

$28.00 | Jul. 6, 2021

978-0-593-29690-5

Building on his lysergically drenched book *How To Change Your Mind* (2018), Pollan looks at three plant-based drugs and the mental effects they can produce.

The disastrous war on drugs began under Nixon to control two classes of perceived enemies: anti-war protestors and Black citizens. That cynical effort, writes the author, drives home the point that "societies condone the mind-changing drugs that help uphold society's rule and ban the ones that are seen to undermine it." One such drug is opium, for which Pollan daringly offers a recipe for home gardeners to make a tea laced with the stuff, producing "a radical and by no means unpleasant sense of passivity." You can't overthrow a government when so chilled out, and the real crisis is the manufacture of synthetic opioids, which the author roundly condemns. Pollan delivers a compelling backstory: This section dates to 1997, but he had to leave portions out of the original publication to keep the Drug Enforcement Administration from his door. Caffeine is legal, but it has stronger effects than opium, as the author learned when he tried to quit: "I came to see how integral caffeine is to the daily work of knitting ourselves back together after the fraying of consciousness during sleep." Still, back in the day, the introduction of caffeine to the marketplace tempered the massive amounts of alcohol people were drinking even though a cup of coffee at noon will keep hanging on your brain at midnight. As for the cactus species that "is busy transforming sunlight into mescaline right in my front yard"? Anyone can grow it, it seems, but not everyone will enjoy effects that, in one Pollan experiment, "felt like a kind of madness." To his credit, the author also wrestles with issues of cultural appropriation, since in some places it's now easier for a suburbanite

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**AT THE CHINESE TABLE**

**A Memoir With Recipes**

Phillips, Carolyn

Illus. by the author

Norton (256 pp.)

$27.95 | Jun. 15, 2021

978-1-324-00245-1

A food writer and cookbook author recounts her love story with Taipei and Chinese cooking and with her husband and his family.

In a smooth mixture of memoir, family biography, cookbook, travelogue, and travel writing, Phillips ably conveys her knowledge of Chinese cuisine even though she is not Chinese. She is a White American from Hawaii who moved to Taiwan in 1997 to explore and learn Mandarin "by some sort of magical osmosis." Phillips ran into the obstacles one might expect—cultural differences, loneliness, language barriers—but she endeavored to overcome these challenges by accessing the complex culture through its delicious food. Along the way, she fell in love with a Taiwanese man, J.H., who is now her husband. The narrative is most enjoyable when the author narrates her memorable experiences with meals both decadent and delicate, painting vivid pictures of enticing aromas and flavors. Describing one deceptively simple dish, she writes, "the egg white melted on my tongue into a puddle of perfectly seasoned chicken stock, ginger, and wine. Intrigued, I pinched off a side of the egg, eager to find and taste the yolk. There was none. The whole thing was a fusion of albumen and savorniness, a ridiculous yet tasty poke in the eye." However, the author's detailed retelling of J.H.'s family history sometimes feels out of place, as do the often dry, lengthy historical tangents. Recipes appear throughout, often tied to engaging stories of the author's life with J.H. as a young couple in Taipei, falling in love and making food for friends and family. Helpfully, Phillips often includes substitutes for ingredients difficult to find in the U.S. and tips for achieving the most authentic results, recounting which shop owners, cooks, or friends passed the tips along to her. It may take an extra trip to the store, but the recipes are worth the effort. The line drawings are pleasant if unexceptional.

A uniquely presented story of love and food that reaches across genres and generations.

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**EDITORIAL**

Editorial notes about where the material was found and why it was included. In addition, the translators have appended a detailed chronology of Neruda’s life. Some additions are brief, including “the only known version in writing of this phrase: ‘What is my poetry? I don’t know. It would be easier to ask my poetry who am I.’” But other new material offers salient insights: for example, a chapter on Federico García Lorca’s “intimate disposition,” which Neruda omitted from his original manuscript because he feared that prejudice about homosexuality would compromise the prestige of a poet he loved and admired. Lorca, Neruda wrote, “emanated a splendid intelligence the way a precious stone refracts rays of light.” Neruda was certain that Lorca was murdered by fascists in Spain, who, “as in Germany and Italy, specialized in the extermination of assorted gods.” The fresh material is skillfully woven into the original memoir, which Neruda called his “journey around myself,” with evocations of his family and childhood, global travels, friends and foes, carnal desires, aspirations and achievements as a poet, and celebration of the natural world, which “made me euphoric.” Overall, the selections round out Neruda’s image as a poet who strived “to denounce what contributes to backwardness and lift up the hopes, open the possibilities, increase the joy of the human race.” A final editorial note presents a helpful list of the “texts added to this edition.”

Emendations that contribute to a nuanced portrait of a complex man.
Hitler’s mail. Before the Normandy landings, Allied leaders Price delivers a fascinating account of the problems Flowers Bletchley Park emphasize the iconic Enigma machine, which difficult project called “Tunny.” Deployed by Germany in 1942, Colossus arrived in January 1944. The first electronic digital fame they deserved. Price’s account is unlikely to change this, from Germany, Italy, and Japan as well as other machines. In devising a new kind of machine. He worked on it with electrical engineer Tommy Flowers, another Turing protégé, who computer, it flabbergasted observers by churning out decryption achievements of [World War II] and the launch of the digital age.”

The satisfying revelations about Allied code-breaking have produced numerous books. The best is probably Stephen Budiansky’s *Battle of Wits* (2000), but it’s a field with an endless supply of intriguing material. Historical accounts of Bletchley Park emphasize the iconic Enigma machine, which enciphered messages from Germany’s military. In fact, Britain’s massive code-breaking dealt with many traditional codes from Germany, Italy, and Japan as well as other machines. In this page-turning study, Price focuses on a particularly difficult project called “Tunny.” Deployed by Germany in 1942, it used a machine vastly more complex than Enigma to send high-level messages between Berlin and army commands throughout Europe. By 1943, Bletchley had cracked its code, but decrypting a single message took days using the latest calculators, which were mechanical. It was then that Price’s titular geniuses went to work. Recruited by Alan Turing, then a relatively unknown mathematics professor, Max Newman devised a new kind of machine. He worked on it with electrical engineer Tommy Flowers, another Turing protégé, who proposed using electronics, an idea greeted with skepticism because it required vacuum tubes, which were considered unreliable. Despite a lack of enthusiasm, work began, and Price delivers a fascinating account of the problems Flowers and his team overcame before the massive machine called Colossus arrived in January 1944. The first electronic digital computer, it flabbergasted observers by churning out decryptions 500 times faster than before. Soon Bletchley was reading Hitler’s mail. Before the Normandy landings, Allied leaders knew that their deceptions had convinced Hitler that the invasion would occur elsewhere. After victory, all the Colossus machines were destroyed, and their designers returned to civilian life, sworn to secrecy. When the story became public in the 1970s, a few modest honors came their way but not the fame they deserved. Price’s account is unlikely to change this, but he tells a terrific story.

An entertaining history of brilliant minds at work against the Nazi behemoth.

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**FRIDA KAHLO AND MY LEFT LEG**

Rapp Black, Emily

Notting Hill Editions (160 pp.)

$19.95 | Jun. 15, 2021

978-1-912559-26-8

Memoirist Rapp Black muses on the connections between her life and that of artist Frida Kahlo in this slim, loosely connected book of essays.

In three previous books, including this year’s *Sanctuary*, Rapp Black examined the impact of the loss of her left leg as the result of a congenital birth defect and the heartbreaking death of her 2-year-old son, who suffered from inherited Tay-Sachs disease. Throughout these circuitous essays, the author circles back to these subjects, often repeating herself from chapter to chapter and frequently tying her suffering to that of Kahlo, with her “many accidents and wounds and operations and recoveries.” It’s the suffering Kahlo who comes through most clearly here, as Rapp Black chronicles her travels to Mexico City to gaze at the room in the house, now a museum, where Kahlo kept her “corsets, special shoes and prosthetic legs,” vivid photos of which illustrate the book. Noting the “disorienting” experience, the author writes, “I feel as though I am entering a sacred space with a touch of haunt.”

The author views Kahlo as an imaginary friend or even a twin, someone with whom she can ally against those with “normal bod- ies, easily moving bodies, bodies that did not come apart like a cheap Barbie doll.” Another pilgrimage took Rapp Black to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where she viewed the clothes that represented Kahlo’s “quintessential ‘look.’ ” The essays make more sense as free-standing works than as elements of a larger whole, in part because they’re arranged with no regard for temporal sequence. As a writer, Rapp Black is capable of elegantly expressing pain and sorrow, and she is clearly well versed in Kahlo scholarship. Structurally, however, the book is disjointed, its insights available in sentences or phrases rather than an organized, sustained argument.

Glimpses into the ongoing repercussions of loss.

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**THE CONSTITUTION OF KNOWLEDGE**

A Defense of Truth

Rauch, Jonathan

Brookings Institution Press (280 pp.)

$27.99 | Jun. 22, 2021

978-0-8157-3886-2

A senior fellow at the Brookings Institution analyzes and proposes solutions to an “epistemic crisis”: Americans besieged by trolls and cancelers are having trouble telling truth from lies.

Rauch spares neither right- nor left-leaning activists in his latest salvo in America’s information wars. Building on his...
"A powerful synthesis of recent world history that should disabuse readers of any notion of American exceptionalism."

**AFTER THE FALL**

**Being American in the World We’ve Made**

*Rhodes, Ben*

Random House (384 pp.)

$28.00 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-984856-05-0

A former Obama administration adviser examines the slow fall from grace that led to Trump.

The assumption that America was somehow different from the rest of the world was an article of faith in his childhood, writes Rhodes. "In the span of just thirty years, this assumption would come crashing down," he adds, undermined by the very thing that had heralded greatness: a robust capitalism that produced global inequality; undermined the working class, and encouraged official corruption. “To be an American in 2020 was to live in a country diminished in the world," he writes. With that diminution, other nations rose: Putin’s Russia, but especially Xi Jinping’s China. “In Singapore,” writes Rhodes, who traveled the world to write this book, “a senior government official told me casually over drinks that Asia had moved on from America—speaking as if this gleaming capitalist construction had almost been seamlessly handed off to the Chinese.” Meanwhile, other global leaders behaved like Trump—notably Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, who was once an anti-communist liberal but found more opportunities to exercise power as a nationalist, quietly suppressing opposition while keeping the beer flowing. “Perhaps this was how fascists got away with it through history...there’s enough normal life out there for people to grab on to,” Rhodes writes. Even in the surveillance state of China, this holds true, at least for ethnic Chinese—and, notes the author, Trump is said to have approved of Xi’s program of concentration camps for dissident Uighurs. The author clearly shows that fear and self-censorship work in the U.S. as well as anywhere in the world. As for the pandemic and Trump’s failings there, the U.S. emerges as “a country that killed hundreds of thousands of people through our own unique blend of incompetence and irrationality,” no model for anyone. It’s a stinging, and entirely well-founded, rebuke of a political strain that shows no signs of disappearing.

**A powerful synthesis of recent world history that should disabuse readers of any notion of American exceptionalism.**

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**THE POET AND THE PUBLISHER**

**The Case of Alexander Pope, Esq., of Twickenham Versus Edmund Curll, Bookseller in Grub Street**

*Rogers, Pat*

Reaktion Books (448 pp.)

$35.00 | Jun. 10, 2021

978-1-78914-416-1

An account of 18th-century literary shenanigans.

Three centuries ago, there were no marketing and sales gurus at publishing houses, so authors and booksellers had to find other means to publicize their books. It was not always a virtuous process. Rogers, a noted authority on Alexander Pope, delivers a lively tale about one of the nastiest and most famous protracted feuds in literary history: between the Catholic poet Pope and Edmund Curll, a “rascally publisher” of obscene items who “spent his career dodging...the law.” Telling the story in the form of a trial, Rogers unearths reams of primary source materials or “exhibits” and extensive quotations to show how the clashes between them evolved. After a fulsome assessment of the time—politics, religion, battles of wit, Grub Street—the London they lived in, and sketches of the two antagonists, the trial begins. In 1714, Pope published his five canto *The Rape of the Lock;* Curll, with no right to it, nonetheless issued his own edition. The feud had officially begun. Beginning in 1716, each assaulted the other via a series of damaging pamphlets. Pope was busy with his edition of Shakespeare’s plays and his translation of the *Odyssey* while Curll spent some time in jail for lewed publications. The publication of Pope’s *The Dunciad,* Rogers writes, was “more than a work of literature. Its appearance constituted an event.” Curll was mentioned in it often, and he...
responded with his *Pepiadi*. The feud took its “strangest turn yet” with Pope’s published letters, which Curril pirated, resulting in the now-famous 1741 copyright case, *Pope v. Curril*, which Pope won. In an enlightening, overlong narrative, Rogers delivers the case, one lying “thickly documented in the archives.” Readers can deliver their own verdict: Who was the most maligned? A highly detailed, literary tit for tat for fans of publishing and literary history.

**LETTERS TO MY WHITE MALE FRIENDS**

*Ross, Dax-Devon*

St. Martin’s (240 pp.)

$24.99 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-250-27683-4

A Black man speaks hard truths to White men about their failure to dismantle systemic racism.

A “child of the Black bourgeoisie,” journalist Ross first learned “the shadow history of Black revolutionary struggle” in college. He accepted that he “directly benefited from the struggle that generations of Black folks had died in the name of, yet I wasn’t doing anything to help those who hadn’t benefited.” The author calls the White men of his generation, Gen X, to also recognize their complicity and miseducation. “We were fed cherry-picked narratives that confirmed the worthlessness of Black life,” he writes, “The euphemistic ‘culture of poverty,’ not systemic oppression, was to blame for the conditions in which so many Black people lived.” The story that White people have been told about Black people is “missing a major chapter,” and Ross thoroughly elucidates that chapter with a sweeping deep dive into decades of American social history and politics that is at once personal, compelling, and damning. Through a series of well-crafted personal letters, the author advises White men to check their motivations and “interrogate the allegedly self-evident, ‘commonsense’ values and beliefs” that perpetuate inequality and allow them to remain blissfully unaware of the insidiousness of racism and the ways they benefit from it. Ross condemns the “pathological unwillingness to connect the past with the present” and boldly avoids the comfortable “both sides” rhetoric that makes anti-racism work more palatable to White people. “It is on you,” he writes, “to challenge the color-blind narratives your parents peddle.” The letters are consistently compelling, covering wide ground that includes the broken criminal justice system, gentrification, and the problem with framing equity work as “charity.” Finally, Ross offers practical guidance and solutions for White men to employ at work, in their communities, and within themselves. Pair this one with Emmanuel Acho’s *Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Man."

A fiery, eloquent call to action for White men who want to be on the right side of history.

**I AIN’T STUDDIN’ YA**

*My American Blues Story*

Rush, Bobby with Powell, Herb

Hachette (320 pp.)

$29.00 | Jun. 22, 2021

978-0-306-87480-2

A richly detailed account of a bluesman’s full life.

Although Rush (b. 1933) is a Grammy winner and an inductee of the Blues Hall of Fame, the showman hailed as “The King of the Chitlin Circuit” has never achieved the widespread renown of B.B. King, Muddy Waters, or others whose names are sprinkled throughout this vibrant and personable account. This makes his fresh story more intriguing because he didn’t really achieve his acclaim until after the turn of the century, as a veteran artist in his 60s and 70s who had returned to his native South after decades knocking around the blues scene of Chicago. He seems somewhat like the last man standing—he and Buddy Guy, with whom he has forged a latter-day friendship, recounted here. The author chronicles an eventful life: formative years in Louisiana, where the son of a preacher first played on homemade instruments; musical apprenticeship in Arkansas, including a stint in a minstrel troupe, after leaving home in his early teens; his move to the blues capital of Chicago before he was old enough to drink. Though he made the right friends and developed something of a following—particularly in smaller cities in the Midwest—he never landed the big hit or lucrative record contracts. “From 1964 to 1971, my first seven years of recording, I had been on seven different labels,” writes Rush, who augmented his income with “day jobs, night jobs, a hot dog truck, and a barbecue joint.” He found a following in out-of-the-way joints, playing for older Black audiences, while other blues artists were finding favor with a younger, mostly White crowd. He became well known in the juke joints as a flashy entertainer, but his recent career surge has found him and his music returning to a rawer, roots-y sound. This book is an entertaining tale of “how I became an overnight sensation. It just took me fifty years to do so.”

A fascinating story well told.

**BRAINSCAPES**

*The Warped, Wondrous Maps Written in Your Brain—and How They Guide You*

Schwarzlose, Rebecca

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (320 pp.)

$28.00 | Jun. 15, 2021

978-1-328-94996-7

A thorough delineation of neural representations, or brain maps, that affect our sensory, motor, cognitive, and emotional capacities.

Schwarzlose, a neuroscientist at Washington University in St. Louis, explores literal brain maps, within human and animal
“Comparisons will be made to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*—and they should be. We can only hope Seneff’s work goes on to rival Carson’s in reach and impact.”

**TOXIC LEGACY**

*How the Weedkiller Glyphosate Is Destroying Our Health and the Environment*

Seneff, Stephanie
Chelsea Green (272 pp.)
$24.95 | Jul. 1, 2021
978-1-60358-929-1

A senior research scientist at MIT sounds the alarm on the herbicide glyphosate, the active ingredient in Roundup and other agrochemicals.

Seneff takes us on a shocking biochemical journey through the deleterious effects of glyphosate on the environment and humans. The author clearly explains the ever growing body of scientific evidence of the insidious consequences of its continued, massive application across the world. As Seneff shows, the herbicide is the common denominator to a swath of environmental and human health problems, from obesity to autism to toad die-offs. The herbicide disrupts the uptake of minerals by plants and kills the bacteria, fungi, and other organisms that have symbiotic relationships with plants for mutual health. The direct effect on humans is dire, as glyphosate damages the gut microorganisms our bodies use to synthesize the amino acids that build proteins. This affects everything from liver and kidney functions to fertility and autoimmunity. Seneff is precise about the biochemistry involved, but she is a genial, attentive guide. “I know this is technical but stay with me,” she writes. When she ventures into new, even controversial work, she is diligent in her analysis but candid about such territory: “I propose…,” “may be damaging….” “Autism is not due to glyphosate exposure alone.”

The two most salient—and devastating—points that Seneff highlights: First, glyphosate, which shows up in our soil, water, and
even air, is disturbingly pervasive...ubiquitous...nearly impossible for even the most diligent person to avoid.” Second, the agricultural industry, taking a page from the tobacco industry’s playbook, does everything it can to hide the dangers: Monsanto and other companies censor research and proliferate junk science, raking in profits by turning a blind eye to the chronic illnesses resulting from glyphosate use. Comparisons will be made to Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring—and they should be. We can only hope Seneff’s work goes on to rival Carson’s in reach and impact.

A game-changer that would be foolish to ignore.

**CAN’T KNOCK THE HUSTLE**
*Inside the Season of Protest, Pandemic, and Progress With the Brooklyn Nets’ Superstars of Tomorrow*

Sullivan, Matt
Dey Street/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-06-303680-2

A sportswriter and investigative journalist delivers “a contemporaneous history revealing how everyone from LeBron James and Kyrie Irving to shifty billionaires and calamity-stricken Brooklynites were forced to evolve as frantically as the world did” during the pandemic.

In 2020, everyone’s story became one of life and death, of personal choices about racial inequality and political beliefs, of playing it safe or taking risks during a global pandemic. In this ambitious book, Sullivan captures all those aspects in the lives of the Brooklyn Nets, including one of the NBA’s biggest superstars, Durant, one of its most controversial, Irving, and the rest of a team poised to win a championship this season. The author embedded with the Nets back in 2019, when no one could have imagined the hundreds of thousands of Covid-19 deaths or millions of Black Lives Matter protesters taking to streets across the country. Sullivan’s eyewitness accounts of the team’s private and public moments and in-depth interviews with players and coaches yield explanations for those crises as well as behind-the-scenes details of some of the biggest stories in sports, including the international incident surrounding the Nets’ exhibition game against the Los Angeles Lakers in China and the deliberations over whether the team should finish out the 2020 season in the NBA–created bubble in Orlando. All of the author’s cogent reporting allows him to place these events in a deeper context. “It continues to be a despicable and particularly American reality,” he writes, “that the oppressed so often, and especially with the undue pressure of television and social media, are expected to both withstand and overcome, to survive and speak out at once.” He also reveals remarkable details about Durant’s recovery from injuries, Irving’s Indigenous roots and headline-grabbing behavior, Spencer Dinwiddie’s forward-thinking business strategies, and Garrett Temple’s plans to study law.

More than a basketball book, this helps explain race relations, celebrity power, and personal choice in a changed world.

**FALLOPIAN RHAPSODY**
*The Story of the Lunachicks*

Hachette (352 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-306-87448-2

A brash, attitude-heavy history of the all-female 1990s pop-punk act.

Formed in New York City in the late 1980s, the Lunachicks were never a critical darling or commercial success. But they earned an adoring cult following thanks to a unique jokey persona steeped in John Waters–style trash culture and a determination to succeed at a time when women artists were marginalized. They recall (the memoir is written collectively) having pint glasses flung at them onstage and having their gigs canceled because another all-woman act had recently played a venue. That stoked a defiantly rude attitude—sample chapters: “Close Encounters of the Turd Kind,” “We Left Our Farts in San Francisco,” “Binge and Purgatory,” “Cumming Into Our Own”—that for better and for worse made them an island unto themselves. “We were horror movie creatures and we were cartoons and we were political and we were feminists and we were a punk band,” they write. “No box existed for us.” Readers will root for them, partly because they endured so much: perverted fans, drug addiction, sleazy male musicians, and manipulative producers. Sonic Youth’s Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon took the band under their wing early but seemed determined to force them into a “foxcore” pigeonhole. Readers will also appreciate the candid storytelling: Drummer Becky Wreck describes her regular stint on the Howard Stern Show; bassist Squid goes sacrificially deep on her heroin and cocaine addictions; and everybody has a story about a trashed hotel room or hairbreadth escape from some alcohol-soaked drama. Their fixation on burps and farts didn’t endear them to Riot grrl intellectuals, but they were feminists all the same: “Those totally normal actions that happen to every single species on the planet are deemed foul and improper for women? Fuck you, we’re gonna weaponize them and come after you.”

Trashy rock ‘n’ roll fun—a Thunderbird alternative to typical rock-memoir Chardonnay.

**VOYAGERS**
*The Settlement of the Pacific*

Thomas, Nicholas
Basic (224 pp.)
$25.00 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5416-1983-8

A scholarly survey of the current state of knowledge on the ancient peopling of Oceania.

Blending ethnohistory, archaeology, and linguistics, anthropologist Thomas asks the big questions about “a civilization that has seldom been...
recognized as such.” Who were its progenitors? Where did they come from? How did they accomplish such daring acts of navigation and exploration? To the first two questions, the author reaches far back into the past to study the dispersal of humans out of Africa and into Southeast Asia, from which protohumans such as *Homo floresiensis*, dubbed the “hobbit” for their short stature, fanned out into the islands of the South China Sea and what is now Indonesia. From Papua New Guinea, modern humans of the *sapiens* variety began to sail to nearby islands, usually keeping sight of land. The ancestors of the modern Polynesians, an Indigenous people who settled in what is now Taiwan, did them and the people of the Lapita culture one better. Using a sophisticated knowledge of the stars and the movement of ocean currents, they sailed all the way across the Pacific over generations. Thomas notes that in early encounters with Polynesians, European explorers theorized about their origins while marveling at the accomplishments of these sailors, concluding that “a single ‘great nation’ had dispersed itself across the vast ocean” because of the pronounced cultural continuities among the peoples who settled places as remote as Rapa Nui and New Zealand. Even so, as Thomas astutely observes, there were also profound differences. The Hawaiians developed a near-feudal royal system, for instance, “very different from the comparatively decentralized political forms that emerged in the Marquesas and among New Zealand Maori.” The author’s academic tone makes the book largely of interest to specialists, though his view that the Polynesians have long been “archipelago dwellers” well aware of their distant relatives on other atolls and high islands brings a welcome world-systems approach to Oceania, an understudied region.

*Students of exploration and world cultures will find value here.*

**THE REPUBLICAN PARTY OF TEXAS**

_A Political History_

Thorburn, Wayne

Univ. of Texas (544 pp.)

$35.00 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-4773-2251-2

Or, what a long rightward trip it’s been.

The Republican Party, notes former Texas GOP director Thorburn, was formed in Wisconsin in 1854 to further the abolitionist cause. This put it squarely against slaveholding Texas. While there were many leaders opposed to secession, “none were willing to associate with what was perceived as a small, new northern party prior to the end of the Civil War.” After that conflict, the Republican Party grew somewhat in influence, though it quickly split into conservative and progressive wings. The conservative one, by Thorburn’s account, held sway early and kept its hold on the GOP, which, in Texas, took a long time to gain statewide power. Even when Dwight Eisenhower captured the presidential vote in 1952 and again in 1956, “it was deemed socially unacceptable in various parts of the state to be identified as Republican.” At the same time, even as rural Texans would sometimes come out to gawk at Republican candidates such as George H.W. Bush, the party hewed to a conservative line and, with the likes of politicians such as John Tower, helped shape the national GOP in a rightward direction. This entailed difficult conversations about big-tent versus little-tent ambitions. Whereas Bush sought to appeal to minority voters and mend intraparty divisions, later representatives such as Louis Gohmert (ushered in thanks to redistricting) sought no such niceties. In the main, Thorburn writes, the Texas GOP, like the national one, has adopted an us-vs.-them stance. The author projects that Texas will remain in the red column, for all progressive activists’ hopes of its going blue. Even though younger voters seem more inclined to liberalism, the 2020 election still went to Trump in the state—though with down-ticket races earning higher numbers than the presidential race, with Trump’s biggest fall in numbers coming from “the state’s six largest counties.”

*Students of American politics will find Thorburn’s history valuable.*

**LINCOLN IN PRIVATE**

_What His Most Personal Reflections Tell Us About Our Greatest President_

White, Ronald C.

Random House (368 pp.)

$28.00 | May 4, 2021

978-1-984855-09-1

A collection and analysis of Lincoln’s notes to himself.

Lincoln’s immortal words would barely fill a chapter, and he didn’t keep a diary. However, throughout his life, he scribbled innumerable notes and even modest essays. Meant for his own eyes, these rarely saw the light, but he kept them. Historians find them a source of insight into his thoughts, and they regularly appear in scholarly collections of his writings. “The point of many of Lincoln’s notes to himself was not to rehearse language and ideas for subsequent speeches,” writes historian and Lincoln scholar White. “Instead, they served as a private pressure valve so that he could better use his persuasive combination of calm logic and humor.” Biographies and popular histories quote liberally from the president’s writings, and this book is no exception. Wide-ranging, they are a mixed bag and include a poetic musing on his first sight of Niagara Falls; a dense, 10-page discussion of the pros and cons of the protective tariff; speech fragments; and innumerable scraps, ranging from a few sentence to long lists and charts regarding presidential appointments and campaign strategy. Occasionally, readers will encounter writing of genuine historical value, such as a public statement Lincoln proposed to release if defeated in the 1864 election or arguments pointing out the irrationality of slavery. These fragments appear in the appendix, and readers who turn to them first will realize that, while Lincoln may be immortal, most of what he put on paper
is not. Many will feel grateful to biographers, who read everything that great men and women wrote so that we don’t have to. Fortunately, White is a formidable scholar, one of the leading authorities on Lincoln and his milieu. He devotes most of the text to summarizing the work and explaining what Lincoln was thinking and doing at the time. A fine interpretation of Lincoln ephemera.

THE SACK OF DETROIT
General Motors, Its Enemies, and the End of American Enterprise
Whyte, Kenneth
Knopf (432 pp.)
$30.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-525-52167-9

The fate of a company too big to fail. By the 1960s, General Motors was a respected automaker, produc- ing more than half the cars in the U.S.; in 2009, it begged for a bail-out along with Ford and Chrysler. In an adroit, thoroughly researched history, biographer and telecommunications executive Whyte focuses on GM as exemplary of pressures that led to an economic decline in the 1970s and continue to shape the economy. As the author demonstrates, GM was undermined by an influx of foreign competition; a sudden surge in oil prices in 1973, which led Americans to abandon big cars; and, emphatically, a crusading reform movement that swept up lawyers, congressmen, and consumers and demonized big business. Prominent among the reformers was Ralph Nader, “a secular, twentieth-century Puritan” deeply influenced by critics of capitalism such as C. Wright Mills, Vance Packard, and John Kenneth Galbraith. Bolstering congressional investigations into auto safety, Nader underscored manufacturers’ culpability for negligent car design and for marketing “speed and aggression.” With 40,000 people killed annually in traffic accidents, Nader rejected the notion that education of drivers, enforcement of laws, and engineering of roadways were adequate responses. When his exposé Unsafe at Any Speed was published in 1965, the San Francisco Chronicle called it “a searing document that may become the Silent Spring of the automotive industry.” Far-reaching changes followed. By 1975, all states had consumer protection agencies; tort law penal- ized manufacturers for hazards even if they were not caused by negligence; and businesses like GM were portrayed as “villains, enemies of the public good.” Whyte argues persuasively against assuming “the altruism of crusaders and reformers,” some of whom are intent on “assigning blame and sacking rich targets.” The constant warfare between the bringers of private goods and the champions of public goods, Whyte warns, “is self-defeating for liberalism” as well as for a thriving economy.

An authoritative contribution to business and automo- tive history.

WHEN EVIL LIVED IN LAUREL
The “White Knights” and the Murder of Vernon Dahmer
Wilkie, Curtis
Norton (400 pp.)
$28.95 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-324-00575-9

A retired University of Mississippi journalism professor recounts the story of a Mississippian who infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan and served as an informant for the FBI.

Wilkie has reported on civil rights for more than 50 years. In his latest book, he digs into White supremacy and voter sup- pression with a welcome excavation of the neglected story of Tom Landrum, a courageous Jones County youth court coun- selor who, at the request of the FBI, joined and provided secret reports on the organization known as the White Knights of the Mississippi Ku Klux Klan, which had murdered civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner the previous year. Landrum went undercover after growing disturbed by the racism of local officials, who kept Black residents from registering to vote in part by requiring them to answer questions such as, “How many bubbles are in a bar of soap?” The author draws on Landrum’s written FBI reports and other credible sources in this account of how prosecutors won convictions of a group of White Knights implicated in the murder of Vernon Dahmer, a longtime county NAACP president who had worked to register Black voters and died after Klansmen firebombed his house. Wilkie has reconstructed some conversations, which results at times in dialogue perhaps too neatly expository and requires him frequently to quote Klan members’ use of derogatory racial terms. (Wilkie quotes mem- bers’ use of the N-word 100+ times. It’s never used gratuitously but rather demonstrates the virulent racism.) Nonetheless, the author skillfully examines a case full of cloak-and-dagger intrigue: passwords, death threats, secret codes, clandestine meetings in wooded areas after dark, and well-maintained sus- pense about whether the White Knights would discover the spy in their midst. In different ways, Landrum and Dahmer risked their lives to fight appalling injustices, and anyone looking for underappreciated civil rights heroes might profitably start with either man.

A true-crime tale that offers a rare insider’s perspective on the KKK in its heyday in Mississippi.
AS A WOMAN
What I Learned About Power, Sex, and the Patriarchy After I Transitioned
Williams, Paula Stone
Atria (288 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-982153-34-2

A transgender woman chronicles her difficult journey from “alpha male” and evangelical leader to life in the body that feels most natural to her.

Paula was born Paul in West Virginia, raised to follow in the footsteps of an evangelical pastor father. Paul went to Bible college and became a pastor, “guaranteeing a life of cognitive dissonance.” Though he “did not dislike being a boy...from as early as I can remember, in my heart I longed to be a girl.” He married and was ordained into the Christian ministry, raising three children. Then, by transitioning from Paul to Paula, Williams “exploded the family narrative and shocked a whole denomination.” After transition, she lost employment, lots of money, most friends, and the privilege routinely accorded White men. Today, the author is a pastor and pastoral counselor in Boulder County, Colorado, as well as an activist for gender and LGBTQ+ equity. She has broken free from evangelism to “embrace a more generous expression of the Christian faith,” and consequently, the fundamentalist church has rejected her. Nonetheless, the author continues to describe her journey in religious terms, seeing her transition and life experience as a “sacred and holy adventure.” As she notes, “healthy spirituality can be a solution to the damage done by bad religion.” However, the author has also discovered that living as a strong female is not as easy as living as an alpha male, as many of the same traits (confidence, decisiveness) are perceived differently according to gender. More often than not, men are judged by their content, women by their looks. Delivering lectures, progressive sermons, and TED Talks, Williams describes “the surprises of living as a woman, and particularly the shock of losing my male privilege.”

Not just a compelling personal memoir, this book holds lessons for all of us.

THE HEARTBEAT OF TREES
Embracing Our Ancient Bond With Forests and Nature
Wöhleben, Peter
Trans. by Billinghurst, Jane
Greystone Books (264 pp.)
$26.95 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-77164-689-5

The bestselling author of The Hidden Life of Trees returns with another heartfelt collection of essays celebrating the natural world.

In his latest, German forester and nature writer Wöhleben writes that while “there has been renewed interest in ways to immerse ourselves in nature,” many of us have ignored it. We have allowed our lives to become filled with artificial lights, sounds, and scents, all of which have adverse effects on our well-being. Drawing on scientific evidence and his many years of experience, the author extolls the wonders of the forest, including the calming effects of the colors and aromas of nature as well as the growing popularity of “forest bathing” as therapy. Wöhleben also points out the many direct health benefits of plants and trees—e.g., using willow bark to cure headaches, maple leaves to treat insect bites, and spruce resin to make chewing gum, not to mention the nutritional value that can be found in the leaves of a wide variety of plants across the world. The author discredits many of the myths that prevent people from exploring the outdoors, including fear of assault, encounters with dangerous animals, and exposure to allergens. Throughout, he emphasizes the importance of conservation. Other topics include the introduction of invasive species to forests through global trade and tourism, the impact of fertilizers, and the link between the destruction of indigenous forests and climate change. In an attempt to raise awareness and protect ancient forests and their communities, Wöhleben describes the measures he has implemented in Germany, including the first burial grounds in which a person can choose the tree under which they will be laid to rest, programs offering leases for plots of forest, seminars for hunters to end fox hunting, and educational tours for children.

A persuasive invitation to get outside and bathe in nature, perfect for tree huggers and fans of the author’s other books.
CHILDREN’S

These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

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MY TREE
Lim, Hope
Illus. by Na, Il Sung
Neal Porter/Holiday House
(32 pp.)
$18.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-8234-4338-3
Everyone knows we need more diverse books for kids. But how do we measure progress? The gold standard is the Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s annual report of Diversity Statistics, which measures the numbers of books both by and about Black, Indigenous, and people of color against the total number of books published for children. One of my favorites, however, is what I call the Hallmark holiday metric: How many books published with an eye toward commercial success offer mirrors for Black, Indigenous, people of color, and LGBTQ+ families?

Five years ago, I lamented that of the 31 picture books in our Mother’s Day and Father’s Day roundup, a whopping three featured characters of color. Fifteen featured nonhuman characters. And what about LGBTQ+ characters? Completely absent.

So how do things look now? Notably, our Mother’s Day and Father’s Day 2021 roundup is significantly smaller, with just 15 titles, perhaps reflecting market saturation of mommy and daddy fuzzy-animal books—only three concern nonhumans. And from a diversity standpoint, the numbers show real improvement. Of the 12 depicting humans, two present two-dad families, two celebrate Latinx parents, one records an Indigenous mother’s preparation for her child’s birth, one depicts a South Asian mother-and-son pair, and two opt for a collective approach.

Delightfully, many of these books are better than the often syrupy norm for the genre, which should prompt sharing well beyond the holidays they are published to coordinate with.

Possibly the most delightful thing about this year’s crop is the completely coincidental appearance of NoNieqa Ramos and Jacqueline Alcántara’s *Your Mama* (Versify/HMH, April 6) and Matt Ringler, Raúl the Third, and Elaine Bay’s *Strollercoaster* (Little, Brown, May 4). The former a celebration of motherhood and the latter of fatherhood, they come together to give Latinx families culturally distinctive experiences. *Your Mama* plays on “yo’ mama” jokes in the text, and the illustrations add a tattoo motif as a mother and child go about days full of love and companionship. *Strollercoaster* sees a dad managing his toddler’s tantrum with a high-speed zoom in the stroller through the barrio that zings with excitement even as it (finally) puts the tot to sleep.

In *I Sang You Down From the Stars* (Little, Brown, April 6), Inniniwak author Tasha Spillett-Sumner and Tlingit illustrator Michaela Goade combine talents to deliver a lyrical, Indigenous meditation on the bond between mother and child that begins before birth. Speaking throughout to her child, the mother describes gathering sacred items and then welcoming the baby into a community of love.

Two-dad couple Ryan Brockington and Isaac Webster turn their family story into a celebration and validation of the many different family structures children see nowadays in *Daddy & Dada* (Little, Brown, May 4). Four-year-old Rumi introduces readers to her family, both nuclear and extended, and the families of many of her friends as well. Illustrator Lauren May depicts Rumi and her family as White and surrounds them with families that vary in gender and racial presentation.

Corey Egbert populates her illustrations for Carol Lynn Pearson’s poem *Day-Old Child* (Gibbs-Smith, March 9) with four mother-child pairings, offering racially diverse representation among the families of these babes (one of them an interracial two-mom couple). This inclusive, explicitly religious offering is a rarity.

Rafael López also opts for a collective cast to illustrate Jessica Young’s lyrical *I’ll Meet You in Your Dreams* (Little, Brown, March 9), giving readers two separate parent-child pairings—both people of color—to follow as the children grow from babies to adults, with the parent figures expressing their love and support throughout their offspring’s life changes. These characters are beautiful but also rendered porous enough to allow many families in.

There are gaps, to be sure. But that’s progress.

Vicky Smith is a young readers’ editor.
A science teacher trains kids who are playing in irrigation ditches how to swim, eventually leading them to the Olympics.

In the 1930s, on the Hawaiian island of Maui, migrant workers cut sugar cane, leaving their kids to their own devices. In the hot sun, the kids swim and dive in the irrigation ditches that run through the fields, but the police yell at them and chase them out. When science teacher Soichi Sakamoto sees this, he decides to help the kids. He convinces the authorities to let the kids use the ditch, which he trains them to treat like a swimming lane. Sakamoto creates a daily program for them to follow, making his students swim upstream to make them stronger. Over time a pool is built, and the Three-Year-Swim Club is established with dreams of the Olympics. But war interrupts their dreams until they finally get their chance in the 1948 Olympics. Told in clipped, rhyming verse, this is a quick, sim-}

A sprite nurtures both confidence and community as she embraces magic. Sprites once looked after and nurtured all plant life. Once humans appeared in this corner of suburbia, taking on landscaping duties, the sprites stepped back, but they still revel in the glories of gardens. New to the neighborhood of Sylvan Trace, sprite Wisteria quickly gets an introduction to the best backyards. Although the sprite crew is welcoming, she can’t help but feel a little left out and decides to do some of her own exploring. Stumbling upon a notoriously poorly maintained garden on Meadowgreen Drive, Wisteria uses her magic to help it along, finding delight both in her work and in the child resident’s joy. In a sense, young human Elena—who meets Wisteria in the now flourishing garden—is new as well. She’s been trying her best to rescue the garden her over-worked mom has neglected. Both sprite and gardener recognize that they’re better off working together. This gentle story is full of charm and is an affirming tale of teamwork, initiative, and determination. The detailed linework in combination with the retro color palette of pinks, oranges, purples, and greens create an expressive tone that supports the narrative. Wonderfully emotive faces charmingly convey character and lush surroundings, and interesting angles capture the awe of nature. The cast of sprites and humans displays a wide range of physical appearances.

A feel-good fantasy of flowering friendship. (design notes) (Graphic fantasy. 10-18)
“A captivating, stirring tale of family, friendship, the environment, and our place in the world.”

**WILLA OF DARK HOLLOW**

**SMALL NAP, LITTLE DREAM**
Amie Aíkens-Núñez, Talia
Illus. by Colomba, Natalia
Nancy Paulsen Books (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-525-51782-5

Four youngsters romp and frolic in the woods with their forest friends. They jump and climb; they clap and laugh. The entire day is filled with an energetic exploration of the fanciful world around them. Running with squirrels and dancing with rabbits has never been so much fun. After reading a few good books, it’s time for a nap. With the welcome respite come little dreams—sueños. Rainbows, smiling stars, and friendly clouds surround the happily dreaming children. Wakefulness brings a joyful resumption of their carefree play in anticipation of more sweet dreams. Aíkens-Núñez’s declarative four-word “me” statements call attention to each specific action of the characters: “Look at me RUN.” Spanish vocabulary, signaled with boldface, is immediately introduced in paired mixed-language sentences: “Mis pies go fast.” The pattern is not consistently maintained, however, and language transitions can be awkward: “Look, I’m AWAKE! / Mi cuerpo rested!” The glossary preceding the story includes Anglicized phonetic pronunciations of the Spanish words used. These unfortunately render some vowel combinations phonologically as hiatuses when instead they should be diphthongs: “Pee-EHR-nahs” instead of “pyehr-nahs” (legs), and “see-EHS-tah” instead of “syehs-tah” (nap). Colomba’s whimsical illustrations feature a diverse crew of children (two White-presenting, one Black-presenting, and one with olive skin and long, black braids) in snugly attire for a cool fall day, but the foliage does not indicate autumn. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A slight, uneven, well-intentioned contribution. (Picture book 2-4)

**ARE YOU A CHEESEBURGER?**
Arnaldo, Monica
Illus. by the author
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-300394-1

Grub loves cheeseburgers, although his real-life cheeseburger experience is limited. When Grub finds Seed in the garbage, he plants him in the hopes of growing a cheeseburger plant. Seed isn’t exactly sure what he’s going to grow into, but he wants to make his new friend happy. When he finally blooms, he’s not quite what Grub had been hoping for. This utterly charming book is full of humor in both the text and the adorable illustrations. Grub’s expressive face is delightful, whether he’s disappointed, deep in contemplation, or giving a hard side-eye.

The primary moral of the story is that we should accept our friends for who they are, not try to change them. But the author also incorporates some more subtle and sophisticated lessons. Seed’s calm, cheerful attitude toward his unknown future models an open-minded acceptance of change. Grub’s initial disappointment and ensuing loving acceptance feel emotionally authentic and sweet without being saccharine, highlighted by the affecting double-page illustrations. Both characters experience growth and discovery in their identities, demonstrating that it’s OK to not know exactly what the future holds for you. Don’t mistake these messages for preachiness, though. It is enjoyable purely as a funny and touching story about a raccoon and a seed who are friends. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Silly and heartwarming in equal measure. (Picture book 4-8)

**WILLA OF DARK HOLLOW**
Beatty, Robert
Disney-Hyperion (384 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-368-00760-3
Series: Willa of the Wood, 2

A young Faeran girl puts everything on the line to save her home and the family she loves.

Emerging from the charred ruins of the Faeran forest lair, 13-year-old green-skinned, brown-haired Willa has formed a new family with humans who care about the Great Smoky Mountain as much as she does. Unfortunately, the Sutton Lumber Company has plans to clear the forest for railroad tracks. Willa’s adoptive father, Nathaniel, has become a leading voice against the destruction, making him a target. After he is arrested on suspicion of murdering loggers, Willa asks for help from her Faeran clan, but they blame her for the death of their leader and subsequent loss of their old home. Even the forest itself has grown hostile as strange, deathly cold creatures attack. Adelaide, a new blond, blue-eyed friend, and Hialeah, Nathaniel’s White and Cherokee daughter, join Willa in protecting the forest, clearing Nathaniel’s name, saving the Faeran, and unraveling the mystery of the malicious beasts. This duology closer is a captivating, stirring tale of family, friendship, the environment, and our place in the world. At every turn, Willa is faced with higher stakes and decisions that are even harder to make; the consequences of each choice weigh on her heart. The gorgeous prose and imagery of the mountains will inspire in readers a deep admiration for nature and support for Willa’s fight.

A fantastic, heartbreaking crescendo that echoes beyond the final page. (Fantasy. 10-14)
THAT’S NO DINO!
Or Is It? What Makes a Dinosaur a Dinosaur
Becker, Helaine
Illus. by Tremblay, Marie-Ève
Kids Can (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5253-0023-3

A look at some of the physical features that distinguish true dinosaurs from other large, extinct creatures.

Becker tries here to create an unambiguous definition of dinosaur by comparing 11 prehistoric animals to a checklist of (supposed) dinosaur characteristics, but the attempt is likely to leave readers more confused than enlightened. “Dinosaurs had grasping hands,” for instance. Does T. rex? Well, no…but its ancestors did, so thumbs-up. How about Sacisaurus? Thumbs-down—even though no fossil hands have so far been found for that species. Does Quetzalcoatlus make the cut? No, because it had batlike wings, and “most dinosaurs didn’t.” Except, she admits, for that one kind that did. Protorosaurus? No, because it did not live in the Mesozoic Era. The birds of our era? “Dino experts say yes!” To be fair, even said experts can’t come up with a universally accepted definition, and eventually even the author seems to throw up her hands, switching in the last several pages to discussions of bird hips versus reptile hips and remarks about dinosaurs in general. Along with depicting all of the dinos and nondinos in the illustrations with the same creepy, staring eyes, Tremblay muddies the waters even further with a lineup of unlabeled skulls with varying numbers of holes in them in illustration of one of the principles of dinosaur-ness. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A brave effort, doomed from the start. (glossary, index, print and web sources) (Informational picture book. 9-12)

CRANKY RIGHT NOW
Berry, Julie
Illus. by Hatam, Holly
Sounds True (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-68364-664-8

Somebody’s cranky.

Like all other characters in this picture book, the first-person narrator isn’t named. She presents as a Black girl with light-brown skin, her hair styled in Afro puffs. The text details that she’s cranky for many reasons, chief among them her mischievous little brother, who is also Black and has darker brown skin and a cloudlike Afro. Illustrator Hatam adroitly uses facial expressions to depict the protagonist’s displeasure with her brother and her angst at perceived injustices meted out by her parents (mom shares the brother’s coloring while the father shares the main character’s). Such details as the narrator’s red, scowling “cranky boots” and interactions with the family’s pets add further interest. The text is masterful in its misdirection and displacement of responsibility: “It’s not my fault that certain people / have no patience at all. / And the cat ate the cookies. / Nothing is fair. / And nobody cares.” While the scenarios feel quite realistic, about three-quarters of the way through, the text begins to use end rhymes: “Then, chances are, after a good, tired flop, / The cranky in me will decide to stop.” This transition both feels disjointed from the beginning part of the book and somehow has the effect of leaching some of the emotional power from the text—and it may make some readers feel confused if not cranky.

True to life, if lacking cohesion. (Picture book. 3-6)
TEAFLET & ROOG
MAKE A MESS
Birdsall, Jeanne
Illus. by Dyer, Jane
Knopf (96 pp.)
$16.99 | $19.99 PLB | May 11, 2021
978-0-593-17911-6
978-0-593-17912-3 PLB

In the land of Trelfdom, a trelf brother-and-sister duo must prepare for a cleanliness inspection from a strict inspector on the eve of a grand party.

It’s the 10th annual Strawberry Jam Party, and Roog’s in a tizzy. As the cooking and baking expert, he’s working hard to prepare all the tasty food—including cakes, pies, waffles, croissants, and more—for the celebration. His animal-loving sister, Teaflet, spends her time helping out animals in need, occasionally disrupting Roog’s laborious kitchen work. So when a letter arrives announcing a cleanliness inspection from the very strict Inspector Maple, Roog twirls into distress. If Teaflet and Roog fail the inquiry, they’ll have to clean Inspector Maple’s house. “It’s a disaster! If we’re cleaning our house, we can’t be having a Strawberry Jam Party,” exclaims Roog. To calm her brother’s nerves, Teaflet volunteers to clean the inspector’s living room for last-minute accommodations. The narrator remains oblivious and noticeably jealous. She’s upset by Peanut’s clear distress, is deterred, and narrates her disappointment each time a new family friend drops against which the vibrant, colorful characters pop. Still, the straightforward linear panels, colored by Efird, will be easy to decode, but the switching point of view among Peanut, Butter, and Crackers, upset by Peanut’s clear distress, are determined to help the youngest member of their “fur family.” The trio all get drawn into separate adventures, but when chance brings the aspiring rescuers together with Peanut in the pen with the big dogs, they collaborate to save one another. The comic illustrations are a good match for both the dogs’ exuberance and for the cat’s humorously careful posture of ennui. The straightforward linear panels, colored by Efird, will be easy to decode, but the switching point of view among Peanut, Butter, and Crackers as they have their separate adventures will be more of a challenge for younger readers. Final art not seen.

Characters seamlessly work both as pets with animal traits and siblings with recognizable new-student fears. (Graphic fiction, 5-8)

THE COT IN THE LIVING ROOM
Burgos, Hilda Eunice
Illus. by D’Alessandro, Gaby
Kokila (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-593-11047-8

From her small apartment in Washington Heights, New York City, a young girl dreams of the perfect place to sleep.

Guest after guest relies on the cot in the Afro-Latina protagonist’s living room for last-minute accommodations. The narrator imagines an ideal night with the living room all to herself. As a family friend has dibs on the cot, all illustrated with playfully patterned backdrops against which the vibrant, colorful characters pop. Still, when Raquel, Edgardo, or Lisa sleep over, readers see glimpses of the precarious circumstances necessitating their stays even more of a challenge for younger readers. Final art not seen.

Characters seamlessly work both as pets with animal traits and siblings with recognizable new-student fears. (Graphic fiction, 5-8)

FETCH!
Baddock, Paige
Illus. by the author with Efird, Kat
Viking (96 pp.)
$12.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-593-11746-0
Series: Peanut, Butter, and Crackers, 2

A puppy has a rough first day of what’s effectively doggy kindergarten in a comical graphic adventure.

Peanut, the floppy-eared puppy lives with Butter the cat and Crackers the dog. Crackers is excited to teach Peanut all about doggy school, where you learn to be a good dog (good dogs get treats). After Peanut and Crackers leave their crate at Barktown Doggy School, though, Crackers and the “middles” are separated from Peanut and the “littles.”

Tiny Peanut is an easy victim for a pack of bully puppies (many of whom wear dog clothing of varying degrees of silliness). But as the narrator remains oblivious and noticeably jealous. She’s upset by Peanut’s clear distress, is deterred, and narrates her disappointment each time a new family friend has dibs on the cot, all illustrated with playfully patterned backdrops against which the vibrant, colorful characters pop. Still, when Raquel, Edgardo, or Lisa sleep over, readers see glimpses of the precarious circumstances necessitating their stays even more of a challenge for younger readers. Final art not seen.

Characters seamlessly work both as pets with animal traits and siblings with recognizable new-student fears. (Graphic fiction, 5-8)
THE SECRET GARDEN
A Graphic Novel
Burnett, Frances Hodgson
Adapt. by Marsden, Mariah
Illus. by Luechtefeld, Hanna
Andrews McMeel Publishing (192 pp.)
$11.99 paper  |  Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5248-5815-5

Burnett’s iconic novel gets a graphic reenvisioning.

Marsden, graphic-novel adapter of Anne of Green Gables (2017), hopes to entice a new wave of young readers with her interpretation of the classic tale. Following Burnett’s narrative, after the death of her parents, tempestuous young Mary is sent to live with mysterious Uncle Craven in his sprawling estate on the moor. Her displeasure with the situation is evident from the beginning, when she is introduced with a prominent scowl and obvious attitude. However, time at Mistlethwaite Manor softens Mary’s hard exterior as she makes friends and discovers the wonder of nature. When she finds a walled garden and a sequestered cousin, she learns she is able not only to begin her own voyage of healing, but to help her uncle and cousin as well. Luechtefeld’s orderly panels employ a deliberate earth-toned palette, starting with a decidedly dark feel and gradually lightening as the characters move through their own personal struggles with grief. Marsden takes liberties with the original text, glossing over such details as Mary’s colonialist beginnings and the deaths of her parents; readers see little more than her standing graveside. A concluding note includes an explanation that “we chose to leave out [the Indian] parts of the story because they don’t do justice to the history of British oppression in colonial India.” The core of Burnett’s tale is present, however, often ably conveyed in lovely wordless scenes.

A visually appealing adaptation. (Graphic adaptation. 7-11)
Ten years ago, Jodie Patterson thought her child Penelope, then 3, was her daughter. Then he explained to her he was her son. She told her family’s story first in an online documentary made by Cosmopolitan magazine. She expanded on it in her memoir, The Bold World. Now she brings it to a child audience with Born Ready (Crown, April 20), with illustrations by Charnelle Pinkney Barlow. In it, Patterson writes in her son’s voice as he helps his family and his school community understand his gender identity, drawing strength from both their love and his karate practice. The story movingly places the experiences of this Black transgender child at its center, claiming his place. We spoke with Patterson via Zoom from her home in Brooklyn. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

You’ve been so clear that your memoir was your story as a cisgender woman learning from your son. I’d love to know what made you decide to make that leap from telling your story to telling your son’s story.

After I wrote my memoir, [I learned that] families wanted to share it with their children. And I thought to myself; it’s not really a kids book; there might be an eighth grader who could appreciate it, but it’s really not a kids book. I wanted to address the families that wanted our experience in a format that was OK for kids.

I [also] wanted to take it outside of the complexity of [the] adult brain and let my kids speak. They’re complex as well, but they’re different. And I thought that story was really, really special. How do kids support each other? It’s genderless, it’s racially agnostic. I really wanted to show how children are shifting for the ones that they love and how they’re successful.

What does your son think of it?
Well, for the record, Penel came to my room last night and said, “I’m changing my name. It’s going to be Penel going forward.” So I would like to just note that. He is 13, and he’s definitely ready for his name to be Penel.

He’s really proud of the book. He gets a kick out of reading it with me, [and] he thinks it reflects the family really well. Penel is planted, and he’s sturdy. As long as I don’t bring it into his classroom, he’s great with it. He thinks this book can help other kids.

Who do you see as the audience for this book?
I want trans kids to see that I hold them up and put them front and center, particularly Black trans kids and trans kids of color. I also think that anyone in a mothering position, a leadership position, needs to take a look at the stories of kids who are different so that we can figure out ways to support them. [Society has] taken a top-down leadership approach, which is professionalizing not only the office, but the home. And that approach is not working, you
see it, our families are fragile. I think parents are asking for some new language, some new paths forward. The answers lie within our kids. The answers lie within those who are different. The answers lie within those who are bold. The answers lie within those who are changemakers and revolutionaries. I think Penel is revolutionary. Anyone looking for some answers for today’s dilemmas can pick this book up and see how communities can shift.

You made a really conscious decision to present best parenting practices in the book.

I’m writing now a lot about radical parenting. I honed in on that over the last 10 years with Penel. I’ve definitely looked at practices in the Black community, which is very radical and feminist in its nature. And then I watched that through my own experience. And then I’ve listened to what Penel and his siblings have told me. And then I thought, Well, what actually did this teach me? We have to raise and allow our kids to be activists—encourage them to spot the problem, and then fix the problem, right? So we have to really pay attention to our kids, we have to give them ownership, tell them that they’re responsible for things, and back them up. You have to give them strength to trust themselves. Penel found that strength by practicing karate.

My favorite moment in the book is when you and Penel are shown in profile. And Penel says, “I hold Mama’s hand and transfer some of my ninja powers to help her understand.”

We have energy, and we can transfer energy. And energy goes past time and space and matter. I actually got something from Penel. He was only 3, so it couldn’t have been just his words. I was raised by a mom who meditated, and we thought about [things] beyond the body, like energy. There was a gap between what Penel knew and what I knew. And he helped to close that gap.

That illustration is a really perfect example of how the pictures can add visual meaning to words. How did you feel when you saw Charnelle Pinkney Barlow’s pictures?

I was so lucky to have landed on the same moment in time with this illustrator. There was a lot of back and forth, which I don’t think is typical. And she welcomed all of my comments—even small things, like should the eyes be open or closed. Just as it took time to develop the language, it also took time to develop the imagery. Good things take time and integrity. She really just sat with this for months. And when I saw the end result, I got teary, for sure. I really, really liked how she gave us life.

When Penel saw the pictures, his jaw dropped. He was so excited that his dad looked like his dad and little baby Othello looked like Othello. He was tickled.

Where did the title Born Ready come from?

The karate master would always say, “P, you ready? You ready for this?” And Penel would be like, “Born ready.” He and his brothers were using that all the time. If you ask them if they’re ready for something, they’ll tell you, “I’m born ready,” which means there’s nothing that I’m not prepared for in this human experience. He’s not always taking home the gold medal. But he’s ready for the challenge.

Is there anything that you want to say about the book that we haven’t covered?

You asked what it felt like to look at the images. When I see our family and I see the book and I see the words and the message that we are giving, it doesn’t go over lightly, because there’s a mythology that Black folks don’t embrace gender diversity, and Black folks don’t embrace the LGBT community. And it’s just not true. It’s literally not true. In the process of making this book, I really insisted that our African culture was in our house and our Blackness was visible. And we were not racially ambiguous. We’re all kinds of colors and hair textures and features. I wanted that to come across. So when I look at this book, I feel really proud of the work that I did, the illustrator did, and the publisher did to portray this as a Black, queer, trans story—all of that, not just some of that.

Born Ready received a starred review in the March 15, 2021, issue.
WHAT COMES NEXT
Buyea, Rob
Delacorte (192 pp.)
978-0-525-64802-4
978-0-525-64803-1 PLB

Can a dog be a guardian angel in the hardest of times?

When sixth grader Thea Ettinger’s best friend, Charlie Gabriel, dies in a terrible accident while she is with him, Thea’s life is turned upside down. She stops speaking and can’t handle school; ultimately, her family moves to another town, hoping to give her a fresh start. When the family decides to adopt a rescue pup, it’s the dog (who has a lazy eye, just like Charlie’s) who picks Thea—not the other way around. Once Jack-Jack starts sleeping on her bed, Thea’s nightmares dissipate, and his companionship leads her back to a more familiar self. Eventually, with the help of her younger sisters, an elementary school teacher, new friend Rory, and others, Thea finds a way to confront her grief and to heal in her own time. While some of the plot points seem improbable and the story unfolds in fits and starts, Buyea, author of the Mr. Utterupt series, brings a steady hand to demonstrating emotionally healthy family moments and adults who care, even if they are occasionally misguided. Short chapters contribute to the fast pace and may appeal to reluctant readers. Main characters appear to be white; Rory introduces Thea to sign language that he has learned because his father is Deaf.

Upbeat, unflinching, and solid. (Fiction. 8-12)

GERALDINE PU AND HER LUNCH BOX, TOO!
Chang, Maggie P.
Illus. by the author
Simon Spotlight (64 pp.)
978-1-5344-8468-9 paper
Series: Geraldine Pu

A Taiwanese American girl works through several lunchbox moments.

Geraldine Pu loves the surprise Taiwanese lunches her grandmother makes her. She also adores the smiling purple lunchbox she calls Biandang, who faithfully keeps her food warm and occasionally expresses a few thoughts. Geraldine is delighted at school one day to see that Amah has packed her yellow curry for lunch. Her enthusiasm is quickly dampened when new classmate Nico catches a whiff of her curry and exclaims, “EW!” This causes the whole lunch table to join in piling on criticisms. The microaggressions take their toll. The next day Geraldine’s classmates—a diverse bunch—mock her yet again about her lunch being different. After this, she decides to skip eating despite the temptation of the delectable bao. To top it all off, on the bus the kids make fun of her surname, Pu. Once home she throws her beloved Biandang, with immediate regrets. A new challenge arises in the simple, evenly paced plot when Amah packs her stinky tofu, known for its potent smell. Despite her apprehensions, Geraldine realizes her own power to stand up for herself and others when Nico mocks Jamaican classmate Deven’s lunch. Chang offers brightly colored comics textured with scribbled panel borders, splotches of color, and dotted splats of ink. A guide to reading a graphic novel, glossary, recipe, and note explaining Taiwanese culture are included.

A refreshing celebration of individuality, friendship, and exploration. (Picture book 4-8)

ZURI RAY TRIES BALLET
Charles, Tami
Illus. by Sordo, Sharon
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-291489-7

Zuri Ray loves trying new things but decides ballet camp needs a boost.

Zuri Ray, a biracial (Black/White) girl with a curly Afro, loves trying extraordinary things, especially with her friend Jessie Colón, a bespectacled, brown-skinned Latinx girl. Zuri and Jessie take turns choosing activities. But when Jessie chooses a weeklong ballet camp, Zuri is more tolerant than excited. In class, Jessie is a natural while Zuri’s arms and legs do not cooperate. Zuri goes home wanting to quit, but her family convinces her to keep trying. Classes don’t really improve, so after a pep talk with the teacher, Zuri shakes things up in class, shocking the other students with soccer clothes, loose, puffy hair, and kicks instead of leaps. Jessie is infuriated. When the friends make up, they agree that even though they don’t have to like the same things, they can make things fun together. This sweet picture book is a fun departure from the typical ballet story, with a markedly diverse class headed by a Black teacher, and a wide array of activities and interests for the best friends to try, together and with family. Sordo’s bright, busy illustrations express the characters’ personalities and moods with energy and pizzazz. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A refreshingly realistic take on family, friendship, and exploration. (Graphic early reader 5-9)
“Cherry-Paul does an unparalleled job of presenting this complex information to younger readers.”

**STAMPED (FOR KIDS)**

*Racism, Antiracism, and You*

Adapt. by Cherry-Paul, Sonja Kendi, Ibram X. & Reynolds, Jason

Illus. by Baker, Rachelle

Little, Brown (176 pp.)

$13.99 | May 11, 2021

978-0-316-16758-1

A remixed remix of a foundational text.

Kendi’s *Stamped From the Beginning* (2016) is a crucial accounting of American history, rewritten and condensed for teens by Jason Reynolds as *Stamped* (2020). Educator Cherry-Paul takes the breadth of the first and the jaunty appeal of the second to spin a middle-grade version that manages to be both true to its forebears and yet all her own. She covers the same historical ground, starting with the origins of anti-Blackness and colonialism in medieval Europe, then taking readers through the founding of the U.S.A. and up to the present, with focuses on pivotal figures and pieces of pop culture. Cherry-Paul does an unparalleled job of presenting this complex information to younger readers, borrowing language from Reynolds’ remix (like the definitions of segregationists, assimilationists, and antiracists) and infusing it with her own interpretations, like the brilliant, powerful, haunting metaphor of rope woven throughout. “Rope can be a lifeline,” she says, and “rope can be a weapon…. Rope can be used to tie, pull, hold, and lift.” Readers are encouraged to “Think about the way rope connects things. Now think about what racist ideas have been connected to so far: Skin color. Money. Religion. Land.” Baker’s stark portraiture paces the text and illustrates key players.

Exhilarating, excellent, necessary. (timeline, glossary, further reading.) (Nonfiction. 10-14)

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**MORE THAN A LITTLE**

Clark, M.H.

Illus. by Metzger, Cécile

Compendium (48 pp.)

$14.95 | Jun. 29, 2021

978-1-970145-47-4

A heartfelt “thank you” to a special friend.

Speaking in the first person and addressing an unidentified friend as “you,” the author begins this little tribute by expressing appreciation for all the friend is and does. Assuring the friend that “where you are, things are brighter,” the author adds, “you’re a gem, you’re a peach, you’re a wonderful friend.” Admitting it’s hard to find the right words (even in a “giant...dictionary”), the author asserts the friend is “gooder than good” and “kinder than kind,” and there’s just no way to describe the friend’s inner light and spirit. Indeed, knowing this friend is part of the author’s life “makes even the rainy days feel more alright.” Present on all the author’s “brightest days,” the friend has clearly made “more than a little” difference in the author’s life. The rhyming text adds quiet cadence to this somewhat abstract ode to friendship while precise, small-scale illustrations, rendered in pale tans and greens, provide a visual context featuring a fox and a squirrel wearing old-fashioned shirts and knickers. Each page turn reveals the two friends together: kite-flying, picnicking, gathering honey, fishing, catching fireflies, drinking tea, sheltering under a toadstool, dancing, hopping across lily pads, cycling, swinging, star-gazing, sleeping in hammocks, and sharing all their brightest days surrounded by delicate botanicals.

A gentle paean to friendship most suitable for that perfect friend. (Picture book. 7-10)
When Perigold tosses the useless gem away, a tower abruptly (Graphic fantasy. 5­10) from the best Saturday-morning cartoons. Kevin surely does not appreciate being called a “big cuddly fluff-
Kevin hides in the laundry or on the bookshelf…no luck. Grumpy find out the gem is worthless, but they accidentally step on a sprouts from it, bonking Dagzobad’s pet monster in the kisser. Kitquaroo? (And is it really necessary?) Corbett’s graphic-
ower—her house is pretty creepy and full of some questionable objects. They venture into her dark cellar, but, alas, the monster turns out to be a faulty pipe. They fix it, and she insists on paying for the service with a giant pink gem. At the broccito stand (a portmanteau for a broccoli-filled burrito) they not only find out the gem is worthless, but they accidentally step on a broccito belonging to the evil, mustachioed kitty Dagzobad. When Perigold tosses the useless gem away, a tower abruptly sprouts from it, bonking Dagzobad’s pet monster in the kisser. Then the ghost of Earl Mortimore rises to tell them the his -
tory of Kitquaroo, an ancient kitty monster slayer. It seems
their adventures are just beginning: can they revive the Guild of Kitquaroo? (And is it really necessary?) Corbett’s graphic-

An adventure in giggles for feline fantasy aficionados. (Graphic fantasy. 5­10)

THE CAT WANTS CUDDLES
Crumble, P. Illus. by Gifford, Lucinda
Orchard/Scholastic (32 pp.) $7.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-338-74122-3

Does Kevin the cat want a cuddle?
Probably not—but maybe.
Kevin does not want cuddles...right now. Yes, Kevin may be cute, but this black cat with white snout and paws does not want a tickle or (perish the thought) a cuddle. Kevin wants a bath—self-administered, of course, and without spectators! Maybe if Kevin hides in the laundry or on the bookshelf...no luck. Grumpy Kevin surely does not appreciate being called a “big cuddly fluffy” (that is fluffy winter fur, not fat). Kevin escapes out the window. But back inside, the dog looks like he is enjoying the cuddle he is getting while Kevin is sitting out in the rain. Dag! Maybe Kevin does want to be cuddled. Once the dog’s knocked out of the human’s lap, cuddles are nice—for a second, but then it’s too much! Kevin needs space—don’t humans understand a cat’s need

for space? Crumble and Gifford deftly capture a kitty’s love/hate relationship with its humans, and their funny tale will resonate with human kitty lovers of all ages. Humans who just want to be left alone will also identify with Kevin. The amusing cartoons focus on Kevin’s sour expression, which rarely changes throughout the cat’s futile attempts to avoid affection. Kevin’s human is represented only from the shoulders down; their hands are pale. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An entertaining Australian import, especially for cat lovers. (Picture book. 4­8)

RUBY’S REUNION DAY DINNER
Dalton, Angela Illus. by Southerland, Fiestenia
Harper/HarperCollins (32 pp.) $17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-0-06-301574-6

Will this be the year Ruby gets to make and share a dish at the annual family reunion?
Once a year, Ruby’s African American family gets together for a reunion and soul food dinner. Every year her relatives prepare their signature dishes, and this year Ruby wants to make one, too. Affectionately nicknamed “Lil’ Bit” by relatives, Ruby doesn’t know what to make, and when Auntie Billie questions if she’s big enough to help in the kitchen, Ruby begins to have doubts, too. Nevertheless, fueled by her mother’s confidence that she will find her special something to make, Ruby approaches her family members in hopes that they will allow her to help them, but there’s no use, Ruby is just too small. Readers will feel Ruby’s discouragement even as their mouths begin to water at the meal her family is assembling. Finally, she ventures outside, where she notices a stand of lemon trees and she gets the bright idea to make a refreshing pitcher of lemonade—which is just what they all needed. This is a charming book that works well as a read-aloud, especially as a lap read with children who are gaining independence and want to do more than they are able. Ruby’s well-drawn expressions support the use of this book as a picture walk with very young readers. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

When life gave her lemons, Ruby made lemonade. A sweet read—and lesson—for young readers. (Picture book. 4­6)

YOU’RE A STAR, LOLO
Dalyn, Niki Illus. by the author
Catalyst Press (96 pp.) $12.95 | $7.95 paper | May 11, 2021
978-1-946395-51-1
978-1-946395-46-7 paper
Series: Lolo Early Reader Series

Bright-spirited Lolo is as curious, kind, and helpful as ever in this third installment in her eponymous series.

“Drawn tenderly and told in a way that honors the characters and their culture.”
YOU’RE A STAR, LOLO
Lolo, who presents as Black, lives with her mama and doting grandmother—Gogo—in South Africa. In four episodic chapters, Lolo mixes up a treat for Mama in “Lolo’s Special Soup”; seeks a noisy monster in “Lolo’s Scary Night”; teaches Gogo about gardening in “Lolo’s Snail Garden”; and goes on a seemingly unending adventure with Gogo in “Lolo’s Holiday.” Readers will relate to Lolo’s earnest attempts to be helpful, her sad and fearful moments, and her excitement at being able to teach Gogo something she learned in school (which is racially integrated). When Mr. Speedy can only take them part of the way home after their holiday visit with Aunty Boni, Gogo sticks out her thumb to obtain a ride with a minibus full of choir members on their way to a church meeting. A fruit-and-vegetable cart drawn by a donkey concludes their eventful trip, which leaves Lolo “floppy-schloppy-tired” and happy to see Mama at the door. This final chapter presents adult readers, particularly teachers, with the opportunity to start conversations on how transportation can be different from country to country, imparting a cross-cultural exploration. Though not an #ownvoices book, this, like the others in the Lolo series, is drawn tenderly and told in a way that honors the characters and their culture.

Another winning addition—Lolo is indeed a star! (Fiction. 5-8)

THE SHIP OF FORTUNE

de Solminihac, Olivier
Illus. by Poulin, Stéphane
Simply Read Books (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 25, 2021
978-1-772290-40-0

When the beach gear is forgotten, some inspired DIY with natural objects saves the day at the sea.

Michao, a grown bear, drives the narrator, a young fox wearing overalls, and Marguerite, a young sheep wearing a blue sundress, to the beach. They have a full day planned, with swimming, playing with a beach ball, building sand castles, and floating on their inflatable crocodile. But when they arrive at the beach and open the trunk, they find that all of their beach gear has been forgotten at home. At the fox’s suggestion, Michao tries doing magic to make it all appear, but that doesn’t work. The fox doesn’t know what to do. Michao, though, gets an idea from the ships on the horizon. While Marguerite wades, he teaches the fox to build a ship out of twigs and seaweed. They all then wade into the water and set their ship to sail, imagining where it might end up as the day fades and they head home. This French import feels unusual, with unclear relationships among the animals and an open ending, but the movement from eager anticipation to disappointment to rescued day of magical moments will be familiar to families. Lush illustrations on oversized spreads successfully evoke the feel and mood of a day at the beach. The characters’ proportions’ and anatomy are humanlike, elevating the surreal mood.

A surprising mix of characters in a lovely setting. (Picture book. 4-9)

PALETERO MAN

Diaz, Lucky
Illus. by Player, Micah
Harper/HarperCollins (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-301444-2

Money flies out of an excited Latinx boy’s holey pockets as he runs toward his favorite drippy, slurpy treat.

Is it tamales? Korean BBQ tacos? NO! There’s only time for one thing today: an ice cold paleta from Paletero José. “In the hottest month, / on the hottest day, / in the city of Dreamers, / California—I.A.” This semibilingual rhyming story races down Eighth Street with the protagonist, who greets food vendors and shopkeepers as he goes, to the teeming park where the Mexican paleta pushcart’s bell rings. Now for the hard part—which flavor to choose? “¿Chocolate, elote, / sandía, o fresa, / arroz con leche, / miel, o cereza?” The boy’s adamant; only piña will hit the spot. A smiling José hands over a pineapple paleta,
WORDS WITH...

Ali Stroker

The Tony Award winner drew on her experience using a wheelchair and channeled her inner theater geek for The Chance To Fly

BY STEPHAN LEE

Ali Stroker’s career has always been about firsts. The actor first came to national prominence when she appeared on the talent search series The Glee Project and later was cast as Betty Pillsbury on Glee in 2013. Two years later, she became the first actor who uses a wheelchair to appear on a Broadway stage when she played Anna in the 2015 revival of Spring Awakening. She then became the first person with a disability to win a Tony Award for her role in the critically acclaimed 2018 production of Oklahoma!

But for all of these milestones, Stroker had to face major challenges as a performer who’s been paralyzed from the chest down since the age of 2, and she channeled some of these experiences into The Chance To Fly (Amulet Abrams, April 13), about a 14-year-old named Nat who defies her parents’ wishes and auditions for a children’s production of Wicked. Nat, who’s partly based on Stroker, delves into the theater world and meets supportive new friends but also has to get past limitations others put on her as well as her own insecurities. Stroker talked to Kirkus by phone about what everyone can learn from Nat’s story, whether or not they have a disability, and about the joy of infusing her theater geekery into this middle-grade debut. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How did The Chance To Fly come to be?
Well, I had always dreamed of writing a book, but since I’m primarily a performer, I didn’t know where to begin. Then, two years ago, Stacy Davidowitz, the co-writer on the book, came to me, and she was thinking about creating a character in a wheelchair for one of her books, and she wanted to interview me. In that moment, I asked, “What if I wrote it with you? And what if this character had her own book?” And she was like, “Are you kidding me? I would love that.” So that was the beginning of The Chance To Fly.

From that point, how did the rest of the character of Nat come to you?
Nat is a perfect combination of me and Stacy. I knew that I wanted to base a lot of her on me, but it was also really important as an actress to create a character, someone who was not just exactly Ali. Plus, both Stacy and I grew up doing theater, so a lot of the scenarios and situations that Nat finds herself in are based on real things that have happened.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the book is Nat’s having to contend with all the parts of theater
that weren’t necessarily built from the beginning to include people with disabilities. Were those based on your real experiences?

Yes, that was a part of the book that was really important to me to include. People know the highlights of my career and all the wonderful things that have happened, but there have also been really, really challenging parts that have created kind of who I am today.

Specifically, around choreography—I’ve had numerous situations growing up and in school, where people just assumed that I couldn’t dance. I always felt so strongly about being a dancer, and I was like, “Listen, I don’t dance like everybody else, but I dance.” I move, and I have a movement vocabulary. At this point in my career and life, I’m able to articulate that, but at the time, I just wanted to explore what was possible while living and moving on wheels. I always felt such an enormous amount of support from my peers, which is why we created the character Hudson, who comes over to figure out how to translate “Dancing Through Life.” I always felt like my peers had my back and they believed in me. So that’s probably my favorite part of the book, when they come together and dance together and Hudson’s in their own wheelchair, and they get to experience this beautiful moment of both being on wheels and exploring what that meant for the choreography in the show.

That was such a cool scene—I’ve never read one like that before.

It’s one of those private, vulnerable moments that I’ve had with people. When we went to outline this book, I really wanted to include the moments that were scary growing up—the first time when I was meeting new people, or getting cast in a show, or auditioning, or trying to figure out how to translate the movements. Those were the moments that I wanted to put out into the world, because they are so relatable, whether you’re in a wheelchair or not: being nervous and afraid and so exposed, then coming out the other side and feeling more confident than ever.

As a theater nerd, did you get a kick out of writing all the many references and puns about musicals?

That was such a fun part of writing this book, because it allowed both Stacy and I to let our theater kids come out. It just reminds me of that hashtag right now, #ifyouknowyouknow for theater people. It’s a part of what makes the book really specific.

And why did you choose Wicked in particular as the musical that Nat and her friends are working on?

Elphaba [the green-skinned protagonist of Wicked] is such an inspiration. Everyone limits her yet she believes that she can overcome and be unlimited, and that’s directly what we wanted that storyline to be. It was a perfect musical to choose!

What do you want readers to take away from Nat’s story?

No matter whether you have a disability or not, everyone has challenges, everyone has limitations. And if you are able to be creative and trust other people and have a group that has your back, I really believe you can do anything. And what’s exciting to me is that there are all these problems that happen in this story, and it’s about who is unafraid to roll up their sleeves and get creative in solving those problems. That is such a gift—when we grow up with challenges in parts of our lives that are really hard, we’re so equipped everywhere else to solve problems and to overcome and move past things that come our way.

Stephan Lee is the author of K-Pop Confidential. The Chance To Fly was reviewed in the March 1, 2021, issue.
A successful stylistic departure from prevailing trends toward dialogue-heavy, present-tense narration.”

MATASHA

Erens, Pamela
IgKids (296 pp.)
$18.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-6240-125-4

It’s a life-changing year for a sixth grader on the threshold of puberty in 1970s Chicago.

The only child of affluent Jewish parents, Matasha, 11, is a budding novelist. She’s also tiny. Although her precocity and slight stature have targeted her for bullying at her private school, she fears and resists the daily growth-hormone injections her doctor proposes. She clings to Jean, her only friend, but their fraying friendship breaks after Matasha, whose imagination has fixated on a missing boy from their neighborhood, pressures her into searching for his body. When Jean turns on her, Matasha’s loneliness deepens; bullying induces self-lacerating shame, but she survives. In the grim-faced photo of the Vietnamese girl her mother wants to adopt, Matasha fears a potential bully, then feels guilty when her attorney father dismisses the project. It’s a cold household: her father rarely home; her mother self-absorbed; their Polish housekeeper kind but distant. Although family dysfunction leads Matasha to a shocking discovery, her parents’ emotional disengagement has a freeing upside: It begets agency, if she has the courage to choose it and keep writing. Lauded author Erens’ middle-grade debut unfolds at a steady, measured pace, a successful stylistic departure from prevailing trends toward dialogue-heavy, present-tense narration. Matasha’s journey captures in rich, pellucid tension her parents’ emotional disengagement has a free- ing upside: It begets agency, if she has the courage to choose it and keep writing. Lauded author Erens’ middle-grade debut unfolds at a steady, measured pace, a successful stylistic departure from prevailing trends toward dialogue-heavy, present-tense narration. Matasha’s journey captures in rich, pellucid tension her parents’ emotional disengagement has a free- ing upside: It begets agency, if she has the courage to choose it and keep writing. Lauded author Erens’ middle-grade debut unfolds at a steady, measured pace, a successful stylistic departure from prevailing trends toward dialogue-heavy, present-tense narration. Matasha’s journey captures in rich, pellucid tension her parents’ emotional disengagement has a free-

DO YOU REMEMBER THE SUMMER BEFORE?

Fairgray, Richard
Pixel+Ink (192 pp.)
$22.99 | $12.99 paper | May 4, 2021
978-1-64595-003-5 paper
978-1-64595-004-2
Series: Black Sand Beach, 2

A preteen tries to unravel the mystery of his family’s beach house in this series’ second volume.

Dash, a 12-year-old White boy, has no memory of vacationing at Black Sand Beach last summer, but having found a diary with his handwriting from the summer before, he’s determined to figure out how this could be. Other things are strange too. In his diary, he used a different name; he’s starting to remember two ghostly girls he met in the woods last summer; his supernatural neighbor is providing offerings to a sea monster; and
Aimée Craft’s stunning children’s book debut gets to the heart of the meaning of treaties.

“Meditative, devotional, and vital.” ★Kirkus Reviews
“Exemplary . . . not often heard.” ★Quill & Quire
“SO POWERFUL! I can’t wait for this to be out in the world.” Traci Sorell, author of We Are Still Here

Ages 10+ | 9781773214962 hc

Reclaiming culture with fashion by Vogue’s Christian Allaire.

“Dazzling and empowering.” ★Booklist
“A vibrant read.” Kirkus Reviews
★A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection

Ages 12+ | 9781773214917 pb | 9781773214900 hc

Travel around the world with Survivorman!

“Fun, accessible . . . strong appeal.” CM Reviews
“Intriguing read.” Quill & Quire

Ages 8–12 | 9781773215075 pb

Every BODY is different!

“Beautiful and important.” ★Kirkus
“Current, engaging.” CM Reviews
“Joyous and empowering.” Mombian

Ages 3–5 | 9781773214726 hc
something is different about their neighbor’s bright green ram. It is clear that nothing is as it seems, but Dash, his two cousins (who are also White), and his friend (a girl of color) are ready to solve the mystery. Unfortunately, this sequel introduces even more questions to the mystery while making surprisingly little progress on those introduced in the opener, making for scant payoff and exacerbating other dissatisfying aspects of the story. Flat illustrations with a hodgepodge color palette, inconsistent lighting, and underwhelming use of space make for a jarring reading experience. The many flashback scenes are not made sufficiently visually distinct from current sequences to transition readers smoothly. Minimal context is provided to refresh readers’ memories, making this volume only for passionate readers of the first volume.

An underwhelming, underpolished steppingstone on the way to...who knows what? (Graphic suspense. 8-12)

BODIES ARE COOL
Feder, Tyler
Illus. by the author
Dial Books (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-593-11262-5

A bustling celebration of body positivity that lovingly features bodies, skin, and hair of all kinds. “Big bodies, small bodies / dancing, playing, happy bodies! / Look at all these different bodies! / Bodies are cool!” begins this engaging picture book, extolling the variety and splendor of human bodies in gentle, singsong text. With shared public spaces as the backdrop of her full-bleed spreads—and a refreshingly lack of fanfare—author/illustrator Feder depicts people of many races, genders, disabilities, and physical attributes enjoying one another’s company, emphasizing connection rather than explanation. Whether riding a crowded bus, painting a community mural, or playing in a public park, no individual’s body is on particular display. Instead, young readers are able to people-watch through the pages, observing difference within the context of community. Most notably, Feder chooses clear and unapologetic language to describe body characteristics, challenging the negative connotations that are often attached to those bodies. Though the illustrations are a bit jam-packed, their richness and detail easily make up for the busy feel. Perfect for read-alouds, this offering introduces young readers to include queer families and characters wearing headscarves and turbans as well.

Depicting societally marginalized human bodies in all their joyful, normal glory, this book is cool. (Picture book. 3-10)

TEA TIME
Ferry, Beth
Illus. by Waldmottke, Dana
Putnam (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5247-4108-2

A day for tea or a day to tee (off)? Hippopotamists Frannie and Grandy, her grandfather, are both preparing for an outing, though each has a different type in mind. Frannie heard tea, so she packs up a picnic lunch, blanket, and tea set. Grandy understood tee, so he collects clubs, balls, shoes, bug spray, and sunblock with the intention of teaching Frannie how to play golf. The mutual misconception continues until the warmly illustrated duo arrive at the golf course and Frannie rushes to a green to spread out her blanket and meal, which is demolished by a driven ball. Unperturbed, the two seamlessly change things up and simply go to the clubhouse for tea and continue their afternoon with a game of minigolf, which Frannie comes to love. Readers are left to their own devices to figure out the mix-up, as there is no obvious moment of recognition by either Frannie or Grandy of their miscategorization, which seems a lost opportunity to introduce at least the idea of homonyms. Moreover, readers don’t get to see Grandy switching gears, which could have added some humor. Still the pair’s loving companionship rings true, and young readers may enjoy figuring out the problem themselves (perhaps with some help). (This book was reviewed digitally)

A pleasant if imperfect celebration of a grandfather-granddaughter relationship and an introduction to the game of golf. (glossary) (Picture book. 3-6)

CONSTELLATION OF THE DEEP
Flouw, Benjamin
Illus. by the author
Tundra Books (48 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-7352-6896-8

Fascinated by plants, Fox journeys deep underwater in search of one that glows in dark ocean depths. The star of *The Golden Glow* (2018) has another sweetly satisfying adventure. While he and his cousin Wolf are hiking along the coast, a sea gull tells them of a luminescent underwater plant. Now Fox has a new goal. Donning borrowed scuba gear and bringing along an underwater camera, he explores an aquatic meadow, a kelp forest, and a coral reef before reaching a deep abyss, where he notices his camera is missing. Flouw’s illustrations alternate pages of storyline with others that display an array of labeled examples: diving equipment, creatures of the near shore, species of underwater vegetation (giant algae), and shapes of colorful coral. Originally published in French, this Canadian title is unusual in its specificity about plants but predictable in its inclusion of the problem of marine plastic trash. Just inside the abyss, Fox encounters and unwraps a whale entangled in a fish net filled with trash—and, fortuitously, Fox’s
camera, which captured a picture of the glowing plant in its fall. While hiking, fully anthropomorphic Fox and Wolf wear hoodies and trekking pants; later they dine on grape pâté sandwiches and mushroom juice. The varying blues of the ocean become dark and deep; the lighter colors of the shoreline suggest the edges of a day; and the warm tones of Wolf’s den affirm the comfort of home. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

*A fresh, original introduction to the underwater world.*

*(Picture book: 3-7)*

LOBE YOUR BRAIN

*What Matters About Your Grey Matter*

Gill, Leanne Boucher
Magination/American Psychological Association (32 pp.)

$16.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-4338-3046-4

An overview of the brain and nervous system.

Two narrators—one brown-skinned, one pale—in lab coats give a “tour” of the brain’s structure, particularly its four lobes: occipital, temporal, parietal, and frontal. In speech-balloon dialogue, they begin by exploring the interaction between the brain and spinal cord, likening the spinal cord to “a busy highway” that transmits sensory information to the brain, which in turn directs the body to dance to music or to “move your brother’s arm away when he touches you...again!” Kid-friendly examples abound as they trace the brain’s various parts, and the bright, geometric uncredited illustrations cheerfully—if

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“In addition to telling a ripping yarn, this book gives readers an accurate and structured beginner’s foothold in the classics.”

ATHENA

This graphic novel brings plucky illustrated energy to the story of the goddess Athena. With both engaging, whimsical illustrations and cheeky humor, the Greenbergs retell the classical exploits of the Greek goddess of wisdom and war, Athena, from her painful birth from the head of Zeus and beyond. Readers watch the goddess best Poseidon, help Perseus defeat Medusa, meddle unpleasantly with mortals like Arachne, start and end the Trojan War, aid Odysseus on his journey, and generally learn to interfere less and help more throughout her adventures. In addition to telling a ripping yarn, this book gives readers an accurate and structured beginner’s foothold in the classics that will keep them reading. With its introduction to characters, visual cues across illustrations, breathtaking splash pages, glossary, and readers guide, the book opens the door to the Trojan War, The Odyssey, and Greek mythology. Further, part of what makes the Greek gods attractive and interesting is their humanity—and that is not lost here, either. Athena is brave and wise but also jealous and meddlesome and vain. She makes mistakes and is far from perfect, but that makes her all the more a hero for every reader.

Three cheers for Athena, smarts, and bravery! (Graphic mythology 8-12)

DUCKSCARES
The Nightmare Formula
Greenwald, Tommy
Illus. by Ferrari, Elisa
Amulet/Abrams (208 pp.)
$12.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-4197-5077-9
Series: Disney’s Spooky Zone

The famous Disney duck triplets, Huey, Dewey, and Louie, travel to Berlin and uncover a sinister plot.

Huey, Dewey, and Louie are living with their uncle Donald in Duckburg when they’re appointed International Student Ambassadors by the National Association of Studious and Talented Youth. This gives them the opportunity to become exchange students and live in several countries for two-month stints in each. First on the list: Germany. The triplets arrive in Berlin, and a rather transparent mystery reveals itself when a schoolmate starts behaving strangely after being gifted a soccer ball by the mysterious Dr. Z. The light mocking of German culture (cuisine and names in particular) is in poor taste. Dewey, being the middle brother and feeling left out,
narrates, but the other brothers chime in regularly. Unfortunately, the varying fonts used for each brother aren’t easily distinguishable and may lead to confusion for readers. Additionally, seemingly arbitrary words are set in boldface, and more than halfway through the book, speech bubbles begin to appear—questionable design choices that may also perplex. Ferrari’s spot art is featured on nearly every page and should help attract reluctant readers. The triplets are easily recognizable, and all characters are very expressive. There’s not much here that won’t be obvious to astute readers, but it may draw in fans of the TV show DuckTales. Oh, and this one isn’t for arachnophobes!

No surprises here. (Adventure. 5–8)

**IT’S RAINING TACOS!**

Griff, Parry
Illus. by Emmerich, Peter
Harper/HarperCollins (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-06-300647-8

A birthday disaster becomes a taco bonanza!

“It’s my birthday! / It’s going to be great! / Birthday, with pizza and cake. / All my friends will come celebrate.” And there’s a new pet, a fluffy dog. What could be better? Unfortunately, while everyone is out in the backyard playing in the bouncy house, that new dog has a pizza feast! (Even the pepperoni!) But wait! There’s the cake and the birthday wish. Blow out the candles, and what’s that sound? “It’s raining tacos, from out of the sky. / Tacos, no need to ask why. / Just open your mouth and close your eyes. / It’s raining tacos!” The party guests dance in the torrential taco rain with upturned umbrellas. They catch shells, meat, lettuce, and cheese (lots of cheese). What a great way to celebrate: new dog, cake, friends, and a taco rainstorm. Griff fashions his song (of YouTube fame) into a picture-book celebration of a favorite Tex-Mex treat by setting it at a youngster’s birthday party. The song’s lyrics form the bulk of the text, and they wend their way across the illustrations of racially diverse guests snagging tacos from out of the sky. Illustrator and animator Emmerich’s bright and spritely cartoons are a perfect match for this exuberant salute to crunchy, cheesy yums. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Fine fare for fans of the song (or tacos). (Picture book. 3–7)
sponsored by the publisher, cleverly uses a repetitive structure and limited vocabulary to introduce various animals and terrains. Recurring questions like “Who has the hat now?” appear alongside illustrations before each subsequent animal is named, playfully inviting readers into the story. À la the classic Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? front and back endpapers depict bright bands of color—in this case, the colors and pattern of the hat. Those colors pop on every page, making the hat easy to spot. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A wild—and funny—hat chase. (Picture book. 3-6)

THE PACK
Harrison, Lisi
Delacorte (208 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-593-18070-9

At boarding school in Washington state, Sadie discovers she’s part magical animal.
Sadie, 12, assumes she’s been sent to Charm House as a punishment for misbehaving. But the headmistress of her new school explains that Sadie, like all the other students, has an animal light: “a big, bright animal living inside her.” Sadie is really a lion, and her coarse hair, heightened senses, muscular build, and anger-management issues are simply a side effect of her lion light. Sadie and her classmates are taught to fight their instincts, become “domesticated,” and blend in with “typical humans” (a deeply disturbing goal presented neutrally at worst). Though she’s been a weirdo misfit her whole life, Sadie now discovers that, as a lion, she’s the top of the school food chain. The popular mean girls, the Pack, want her to join them—even though they hate Sadie’s snake roommate. Will Sadie’s urge to be popular turn her into a horrible mean girl? Meanwhile, somebody is stalking the girls at the school, knocking them out and physically assaulting them. Some minor plot threads are simply dropped, but the primary mystery resolves quite tidily. All characters with identifiable race seem to be White; their powers, however, are dominated by tropical and subtropical animals native to Asia and Africa, such as lions, tigers, hyenas, and chameleons.

There’s plenty of cliquey mean-girls fantasy novels that hang together better than this one. (Fantasy. 10-12)

UNCONVENTIONAL VEHICLES
Forty-Five of the Strangest Cars, Trains, Planes, Submersibles, Dirigibles, and Rockets Ever
Hearst, Michael
Illus. by Jensen, Hans
Chronicle Books (104 pp.)
$19.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-4521-7286-6
Series: Uncommon Compendiums

From Airboard to Zamboni, a lighthearted look at some of the wilder ways to get things or people from here to there.
This gallery of gadgets has the potential to be as world-rocking as Unusual Creatures (2012) and other volumes in Hearst’s Uncommon Compendiums series were. It will have young readers wondering why they should settle for a mundane bicycle or (later) car when options like a jet train, the multirider beer bike, or the steam-powered Liberty One rocket exist...not to mention no fewer than five different personal jet packs. Kids likely won’t mind that the author interprets his brief broadly enough to include a pizza-delivery drone and a swallowable pillcam. He also enhances his appreciative commentary (“How about this clunky monkey!”) with a musical soundtrack available on his website and by occasionally bursting into verse: “Hover here, hover there. / Hover in your underwear.” Jensen plays the straight man with staid, reasonably detailed images of each vehicle, usually in motion or viewed from a moderately dramatic angle. Some of his small, anonymized human figures (those not swaddled in crash helmets and protective garb, anyway) appear to be people of color. Several vehicles are hand-, foot-, or, in one case, ostrich-driven rather than high tech, and the author closes with a nod to the environmental benefits of public transportation.

Heady fare for budding inventors and engineers. (Nonfiction. 8-11)

ROAR-CHESTRA!
A Wild Story of Musical Words
Heidbreder, Robert
Illus. by Petričić, Dušan
Kids Can (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-5253-0274-9

Animal patterns fill a musical staff, and both conductor and baton are warmed up!
A wild array of bow-tied animals awaits their human conductor, who opens the performance with a spirited allegro beat. The fish, insects, and mammals leap and pounce. Now the beat slows down to an adagio tempo that puts the fauna to sleep. A gracefully swift upbeat by the conductor sends the critters, tummy side down, “gliding, slipping, sliding” in a glissando. But then quickly executed arcs through the air herald a staccato
beats that brings back leaping kangaroos and arcing dolphins along with jumping frogs and rabbits. Calm returns in dolce, as birds and koalas find love and pandas eat bamboo. But wait, this is not the end, as with the intensity of fortissimo, the baton flies out of the conductor’s outstretched fingers, and noisy giraffes, lions, and hyenas bellow and roar. Sigh. Peace returns in pianissimo as eyes close and animals snuggle down. A pronunciation guide complete with succinct definitions concludes this orchestral workout. Scratchy cartoon illustrations cleverly and colorfully depict the many musical moods with humor. Fingers will tap, hands will clap, and feet will stomp along with a reading that should have musical accompaniment. Perhaps The Nutcracker? And guessing which animal fits into which instrument case on the cover is an added element of fun. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Musical mayhem to entertain and engage. (Picture book. 3-6)
be the constantly sunny attitude expected of her. Pizazz feels trapped by an image she never wanted in the first place. As Pizazz outlines her laundry list of complaints, readers may find their empathy curdling quickly. There are only so many smarmy wisecracks one can take without a balance of earnest chuckles or splashy art, and the book has neither. Flat characters and square authority figures dance to the narrative’s well-worn song. At its core, there’s little to set this novel apart from the many other “misunderstood middle grader with attitude” books that flood school book fairs. Pizazz and most of her family have paper-white skin; some secondary characters appear to be people of color. Book 2, Pizazz vs. the New Kid, publishes simultaneously.

Pizazz may feel like she’s unique in her problems, but on paper she’s a dime a dozen. (Fiction. 8-10) (Pizazz vs. the New Kid: 978-1-5344-9245-5 paper)

Adapting her memoir Being Heumann (2020) for younger readers, the activist author relates her fight for disabled people’s equality. The child of parents orphaned in the Holocaust, Heumann saw her polio—which resulted in the inability to walk, dress herself, or use the bathroom unassisted—as “no big deal.” The world thought otherwise. Pulled out of public school for being a “fire hazard” and sent to a segregated school where disabled students were infantilized and underestimated, she realized that she “wasn’t expected to be a part of the world.” Fortunately, her parents fought for her inclusion. After a hard-won legal battle to become a teacher, the politically active Heumann advocated for the passage of Section 504, a precursor to the Americans with Disabilities Act, and, later, the ADA itself. Stonewalled by government officials but aided by civil rights allies, she and disabled protesters across the country staged protests and grueling sit-ins despite a lack of food, aides, and phone communication. Heumann’s frank accounts of humiliation and dismissal are infuriating, but her conversational narration and snarky chapter titles (“Sorry, If You Could Just Hide Behind Everyone Else That Would Be Great”) keep the tone encouraging, and her accounts of disabled people’s camaraderie are heartening. Above all, she reassures readers that “activism makes a difference.” A reflective epilogue explores global disability rights, representation, and the importance of telling—and listening to—#ownvoices stories. Heumann presents White.

Insightful and empowering. (photo credits) (Memoir. 8-13)

**ROLLING WARRIOR**
*The Incredible, Sometimes Awkward, True Story of a Rebel Girl on Wheels Who Helped Spark a Revolution*
Heumann, Judith with Joiner, Kristen
Beacon Press (215 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-8070-0359-6

An Angelina Ballerina beginning reader about the importance of hard work.

When Miss Lilly announces dance partners for the Summer Festival Dance, Angelina is disappointed to be paired with Henry. Despite his best efforts and a clear passion for dance, Henry messes up every step in dance class. But with a little encouragement from Miss Lilly, Angelina helps Henry learn the choreography in time for the festival. Their final performance isn’t quite perfect, but that’s OK because they worked hard and had fun. Fans
of Angelina Ballerina, introduced in 1983 by author Holabird and illustrator Helen Craig, will blithely follow the pirouetting mouse through another beginning-reader adventure. The single, simple storyline supports developing readers who are, like Angelina and Henry, practicing a new skill. The text, “based on the stories by Katharine Holabird,” according to the title page, is printed in a large, easy-to-read font with just one to two sentences per page, although sometimes the sentences are a bit long for the target audience. Due to the text’s lack of word repetition, newly independent readers may struggle with challenging new words such as gasped, complained, and encouraged. However, kids who already love Angelina will most likely be motivated to continue reading despite the occasional daunting vocabulary word. Matching Craig’s style, Deas’ illustrations support the text in a clear fashion. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Emergent-reader Angelina Ballerina fans will find much to love, despite obstacles. (Early reader: 6-8)

SOUNDS ALL AROUND
The Science of How Sound Works
Hughes, Susan
Illus. by Rooney, Ellen
Kids Can (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-5253-0250-3
Series: The Science of How

A basic introduction to the properties and measurement of sound.

A short-haired, brown-skinned child and a dog with a bandanna around its neck serve as cheerful guides through informal informational text and textured, cartoon illustrations. Everyday scenes, like a busy city street, appear alongside more fanciful ones, like a dog-versus-child drag race. Descriptions of various sounds lead into explanations of sound’s forms and functions as well as related facts about animals (for example, bats use echolocation) and prompts for experiments that readers can do on their own (like feeling for vibrations in your neck when you hum). Concentric circles and repeated curves help readers spot sound waves in every situation. The content is broader than it is deep: While it doesn’t contain a complete physical description of a pressure wave, for instance, it does have a simple basic explanation of how sounds travel from the world into our brains. It doesn’t diagram human inner ear bones, either, but it does feature a nifty graph of the hearing ranges of 12 different animals. One notable misstep is the spread about decibels, which fails to communicate that this measure of sound’s power doesn’t increase in linear fashion; 20 dB is not 10 plus louder than 10 dB, but 10 times louder. That’s pretty important for readers trying to follow the recommendation “To keep your ears safe, stay away from really loud noise!” (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A decent overview that’s more approachable than a textbook. (activity, glossary) (Informational picture book: 5-10)

WALKING FOR WATER
How One Boy Stood Up for Gender Equality
Hughes, Susan
Illus. by Miles, Nicole
Kids Can (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5253-0249-7
Series: CitizenKid

This true story shows how a boy in Malawi changed his family’s habits to improve gender equality. Victor and Linesi are 8-year-old twins. Every morning, they say goodbye to Mama and race to the kachere tree, where they part ways. Victor, a boy, goes to school, but now Linesi, a girl, goes to the riverbed with a bucket to fetch water for the family, like the other women and older girls. At school, Victor enjoys English lessons from his funny teacher, and one day, Mr. Tambala talks about gender equality. The homework is to notice whether boys and girls are treated equally. After school, Victor notices that the girls do chores while the boys go to school, play games, and do homework. He decides to try to teach Linesi at night, but it doesn’t work. He talks to his family, and they agree to make a change: Victor and Linesi start taking turns going to school and fetching water. Soon, their friends make a similar change, and perhaps more changes will come to their village. This inspiring story is a thoughtful representation of a community on the brink of change. Victor shows how an individual’s actions can ripple out to change a culture and others’ lives. The joyful illustrations make clever use of full scenes and boxed vignettes to show activities, dreams, and choices within a visually monochromatic setting. The characters’ smiling faces defy stereotypes and offer hope. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A lovely story with many uses. (author’s note, resources, glossary) (Informational picture book: 4-10)

WARRIORS
Winds of Change
Devel. by Hunter, Erin
Jolley, Dan
Illus. by James L. Barry
HarperAlley (224 pp.)
$12.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-304323-7
Series: Warriors Graphic Novel

Feral felines face power struggles after a regime change.

In this full-color graphic adaptation of the popular Warriors series, brown tabby Mudclaw is the deputy for the WindClan, one of the many cat clans residing in a new territory uninhabited by the Twolegs. As second-in-command, Mudclaw is poised to take over for WindClan’s leader, Tallstar, but as Tallstar’s health declines, he names a different successor, known as Onewhisker, dividing the clan and angering Mudclaw. When he is approached by a cat from a neighboring clan, Mudclaw begins to worry that
Today, Clara is lying on the grass like a “lazy lizard dreaming.”

It’s a beautiful day for counting clouds. For listening to the trees. For feeling the soft grass and watching ants. Clara’s daddy is worried. Is Clara sulking? Wouldn’t Clara like to go to the pool with friends? Go for a bike ride? Come bake some muffins? Clara thinks poor Daddy doesn’t understand. He would like Clara to be busy from morning till night, like her friend Rémi, who is always in one lesson or another. But Clara is enjoying thinking about anything, or thinking about nothing, or dreaming about nothing. It is beautiful and peaceful. Perhaps when Daddy finishes with the muffins, they will sit together, “doing nothing.” Clara’s contented smile while floating in and out of a dreamlike state on a grassy hill is inviting and convincing. Small creatures populate the scenes, a few at a time, sometimes mysterious meaning and weight. When waves pull a dead sea turtle back into “the vast ocean,” she tells the babe, “I think that is a good thing. At any rate, it is a thing. I am telling you this because I know you will understand.” Readers old and young will recognize the profound mutuality felt between grandmother and grandchild throughout this enchanting book, straightforward in affect but brimming with love. Its small trim emphasizes the intimacy of their relationship.

Incantatory pictures and words project a fresh world for people of all ages. (Picture book: 3-6, adult)

A grandmother records beach days spent with her grandchild in lyrical language and expressive artwork.

Kalman’s notes from her shore summer with Darling Baby turn into a gorgeous recounting of shared discoveries (seashells, stones, silver fish, rabbits) and experiences (a lightning storm, a bustling party, a nap on the lawn). Vivid full-bleed spreads deliver Technicolor experiences in vibrant strokes of pigments and words as well—Kalman incorporates hand-lettered text (in alternating emphatic caps and romantic script) into these charming paintings, allowing her voice and her images to seamlessly cohere. Readers bask in Kalman’s bright visions of summer’s sweetness absorbed alongside a child just getting the world. The pair, at either end of mortality, find stones and shells and note that “Oskar the dog looked unhappy in his sweater.” Kalman’s ebullient illustrations, delightful portraiture, and idiosyncratic phrasing imbue the quotidian with complex (sometimes mysterious) meaning and weight. When waves pull a dead sea turtle back into “the vast ocean,” she tells the babe, “I think that is a good thing. At any rate, it is a thing. I am telling you this because I know you will understand.” Readers old and young will recognize the profound mutuality felt between grandmother and grandchild throughout this enchanting book, straightforward in affect but brimming with love. Its small trim emphasizes the intimacy of their relationship.

**NOTHING AT ALL!**

*Jarry, Marie-Hélène
Illus. by Dubois, Amélie*

Simply Read Books (32 pp.)
$16.95 | May 18, 2021
978-1-772290-27-1

A welcome celebration of calm in a busy, distracted world. (Picture book: 3-8)

**TEMPLE ALLEY SUMMER**

*Kashiwaba, Sachiko
Trans. by Udagawa, Avery Fischer
Illus. by Satake, Mibo*

Restless Books (240 pp.)
$18.00 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-63206-303-8

One curious boy, the ghost of a long-dead girl, a mysterious old temple, an unfinished story, and several weeks of summer vacation add up to an unforgettable adventure.

Kazu and his family live in a sprawling old house in Japan. One night, Kazu is shocked to see what seems to be a ghost in a white kimono leaving the altar room. He’s even more shocked when his friends insist this girl, Akari, has always been around. Meanwhile, Kazu decides to do his summer homework project on local history, an idea sparked by an old map that labeled his street Kimyō Temple Alley, a name whose meaning implies the dead can come back to life. Kazu is led deeper into the puzzle
In a sweet, naturally inserted subplot, Mei, who wears trousers, function.

Bunyan, Auntie Po is a guardian figure, protecting the logging Chinese workers, leaving frustrated Mei angry at her own helplessness. The friendship between Mei’s father and the camp boss in particular highlights the difference between offering verbal support and taking meaningful action. The clean, expressive linework and muted watercolors portray both the dangerous realities of logging and quiet, emotional moments with equal effectiveness.

A timely and ultimately hopeful tale. (author’s note, bibliography) (Graphic historical fiction. 10-12)
The children go outside to walk the maze and rest in a storage shed that is “warm...dark...and safe.” When Mina remarks, “My house is boring,” Pie helps Mina see that what Mina thinks is familiar is pretty special too. As a last sensory experience, Mina bravely tries the outdoor lunch, replete with foods unfamiliar to Mina (but possibly quite familiar to readers). Knetzger’s candy-colored panels overflow with whimsy; readers may be as relieved as Mina for the reprieve in the shed. The faux hand-lettered, adjective-rich text features short sentences but little repetition, fitting it for somewhat experienced readers. Mina has very light brown skin; Pie and Pie’s mom are extremely pale. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An engaging friendship story full of imaginative details for young explorers. (Graphic early reader. 5-7)

**MILA MISSES MOMMY**
Koppens, Judith
Illus. by Nijs, Anouk
Clavis (24 pp.)
$14.95 | May 4, 2021
978-1-60537-623-3
Series: Mila

Mila misses Mommy, but her teacher and friends at school help her get through the day.

Mila, a small Black girl, lives with her mommy on some days and with her daddy on others. Today, her mommy drops her off at school and must leave without ceremony. Her racially diverse classmates are playing with puzzles and building towers, but Mila doesn’t feel like joining in. When it’s time to clean up and time for snack, Mila doesn’t feel like tidying or eating. Her tummy hurts. Her teacher, who is White, diagnoses the problem as a case of Mila missing her mommy. She assures Mila that everyone misses their mommy sometimes. After her friends agree, they dress-up with Mila to help her forget about her sadness. Mila feels better and appreciates her friends. The narrative is written in a simple, repetitive first-person voice from Mila’s point of view. Mila’s plight is a familiar one, and the diagnosis and solution are somewhat instructive. However, the provision of answers and solutions from others feels unsatisfying, and the switch in her focus through distraction falls flat. The illustrations, saturated with bright colors and textured like crayon drawings, do little to clarify Mila’s emotional state or enhance the story arc. The thin, all-black, faux handprinting type is a bit difficult to read, particularly when set against dark backgrounds.

This Dutch/Flemish import doesn’t quite accomplish what it sets out to do. (Picture book. 3-7)

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**THE UMBRELLA**
Lebedovich, Lisa
Illus. by the author
Simply Read Books (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-772290-52-3

When he realizes a little rain cloud is following him around, Sebastian responds by carrying an umbrella everywhere.

Sebastian is inside his home when he notices the cloud. He finds a large, red umbrella to carry around to protect himself from rain. The umbrella covers his head and shoulders completely and so keeps him dry, but it also keeps him from playing games, meeting new friends, talking to people, or even seeing the sky. One day, while playing kick-the-acorn in the park, Sebastian encounters a girl lying in the grass reading a book. She invites him to see a comet, but he says he can’t because of his umbrella. She asks why he is carrying an umbrella when it’s a sunny day with not a cloud in the sky—and indeed, even his little gray cloud has disappeared. Sebastian can finally put his umbrella away and look at the sky with a new friend. The book’s opening holds potential for both humor and profundity, and whichever line pulls the reader in will not disappoint. Curiosity and suspense propel the narrative, and the sudden change in circumstance invites readers to consider what roles feelings...
and relationships play in Sebastian’s environment. Crisp, simple illustrations show Sebastian, who is White (as is his new friend), in a variety of settings, with compositions that highlight key moments in his journey.

This sweet, humorous story respects and encourages children’s emotional intelligence. (Picture book. 4-9)

**THE THING I’M MOST AFRAID OF**

Levine, Kristin  
Putnam (336 pp.)  
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021  
978-0-525-51864-8

Her father’s new job in Vienna, Austria, forces a 12-year-old American girl out of her comfort zone.

It’s 1993, and Becca lives in northern Virginia, dividing her time between her divorced parents. When she learns her father will be moving to Vienna for work and she will be spending two months with him over summer vacation, Becca, who suffers from anxiety and panic attacks, must face her fears. Traveling to Europe is just the beginning, as she is anxious about passing through the metal detector she believes causes cancer and developing blood clots on the long flight. But with a little help—her mom is flying with her, and she has her Doomsday Journal, where she writes down everything that weighs on her mind—she does it. In Austria, Becca meets Sara Tahirovic, the 19-year-old Bosnian Muslim au pair from Sarajevo who will be looking after her and Felix, the bookworm son of her father’s new girlfriend. Becca Levine slowly and realistically reveals Becca’s growth, including her shifting relationships with her father, Sara, and Felix. Main characters read as White.

An important story about anxiety, change, and courage. (author’s note, further reading) (Fiction. 10-13)

**MY TREE**

Lim, Hope  
Illus. by Na, Il Sung  
Neal Porter/Holiday House (32 pp.)  
$18.99 | May 4, 2021  
978-0-8234-4338-3

An old plum tree reminds a small immigrant child of life in Korea.

“In the backyard of our new home stood an old tree. Tall, crooked, quiet. It reminded me of the persimmon tree that shaded our porch in Korea.” With spare and empathic text, this little black-haired child displays the vulnerability that comes when moving to a new country. The family has moved to America, with white picket fences and cardinals in the yard. Homesick for the life left behind, the child, who narrates, names the tree Plumee and finds comfort in watering and caring for her. The parents, wordless, unpack boxes labeled “fragile” in the foreground. Na’s whimsically stylized illustrations are richly emotive, using space and perspective to make the tree strong and protective and the child small. When a storm levels the tree to the ground, the child remembers Grandma’s wisdom, from Korea: “An old tree knows how to lie down when it is time.” Even fallen, the tree becomes a playground for the child, sparking imaginative play by becoming a treehouse, a rocket, an island, and a ship. There is a calm symbolism throughout the story—of old memories and new places, of homesickness and adaptation, of being uprooted and the thrill of new life. Lim and Na’s collaboration has captured the essence of quiet immigrant resilience.

Transcending time and place, this gentle book will take root in many hearts. (Picture book. 4-8)

**THE SECOND RACE OF RABBIT AND TORTOISE**

Luo, Dan  
Illus. by Huang, Jie  
Reycraft Books (48 pp.)  
$18.95 | May 28, 2021  
978-1-4788-7408-9

Will Rabbit learn from his mistakes or repeat them?

Rabbit and Tortoise begin their race. Overconfident Rabbit naps and then plays along the route only to find Tortoise waiting at the finish line. The next day, they line up for another race. Rabbit is determined to win this time. Rabbit passes a nice shady napping spot and is tempted to stop. Then he remembers what Granddad Goat says: “Learning from the past is how you improve. If you never fix your mistakes, you will always fall behind.” Rabbit keeps running. In a twist, Tortoise, who is sure Rabbit is napping, takes a snooze himself. At the rocky hills, Rabbit is even more ready for a break, but he remembers his mother’s advice about learning from others and keeps on running. Tortoise, on the other hand, stops to play with some fish despite the urging of spectators. A cat and then a butterfly try to get Rabbit to stop to rest or play, but he runs on in order to prove he can learn from past mistakes. Rabbit finishes first, and the animals celebrate. Tortoise asks Rabbit’s secret; Rabbit replies, “You taught me not to repeat my past mistakes.” Huang’s stylized, cartoon animals add significant pep to this fable from Aesop and its instructive second act. Round-headed Rabbit will elicit giggles as he runs, eyes shut tight with determination, perspiration dripping from his forehead, and feet frantically churning to stay ahead. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Imported from China, a lesson well taught if that’s what’s sought. (Picture book. 3-6)
Debut author Machias’ novel explores genderfluidity and gender nonconformity as elements of navigating middle school. Told in two alternating narrative voices, the story follows Ash and Daniel, a pair of Ohio seventh graders who are on a shared mission to rescue an old dog the world doesn’t seem to have room for, a not-so-subtle metaphor highlighting the vulnerabilities faced by all abandoned souls. Throughout their growing kinship, Ash and Daniel struggle with the divergent expectations of those around them: Ash with shifting gender presentations and Daniel with his emotionality and sensitivity. Entering a new school and feeling pressured to pick and disclose a single gender, Ash’s conflicts begin with trying to decide whether to use the boys’, girls’, or gender-neutral bathroom. The school’s diverse Rainbow Alliance is a source of support, but Ash’s parents remain split by more than divorce, with a supportive mom and a dad who tries but fails to understand genderfluidity. Daniel, who has a talent for photography, is a passionate animal lover who volunteers at a local kennel and initially believes Ash is a girl. Ash’s synesthesia amplifies the tension as Ash and Daniel discover a mutual romantic interest. The novel grapples with the impact of society’s overly simplistic messages, but the characterizations at times lack depth, and there are missed opportunities to explore the subtleties of relationships. Main characters are White.

An optimistic journey of self-acceptance. (Fiction. 10-13)

A confident kid invites readers to join in a hunt for treasure. The protagonist, a kid with long, straight, dark hair and tan skin, heads to the bay with Papa and their dog. The beach there, the protagonist promises readers, is full of hidden bounty ripe for discovery. On the way, they pass a shop that sells souvenirs that some might consider treasure. The protagonist assures readers, though, that treasure is always best when we find it for ourselves. The child first searches the sand, uncovering some beach stones, and then in the water, discovering what might be a whale’s tooth. Diving into the cold water, the kid finds everything from a rusty key to a bubble wand. Some of the treasures espied, like cocoons, must be left behind, the mere observation a joy in and of itself. When it is time to go, the narrator must decide what treasure is worth taking with her— and what’s best left to the beach. The book’s soft, warm pastel palette and MacKay’s trademark diorama technique together create the feeling of a hazy, lazy day on the beach. The lyrical text is enjoyable at the line level, employing rich vocabulary and a flowing and natural rhyme scheme. The meditative narrative clearly communicates the importance of valuing and respecting nature without ever being pedantic or preachy. Beautifully captures the thrill of finding natural treasures. (Picture book. 3-6)

Take a magic-carpet ride to far-flung and seldom-seen locations. Readers can follow a young, pale-skinned, khaki-clad adventurer as they set out on their magic carpet to explore unusual, unexpected, and sometimes dangerous spots around the world. Locations visited include the exclusive interior of Air Force One, the remote depths of the Mariana Trench, and the (potentially) fatal shores of Brazil’s Snake Island, among others. Each adventure follows a uniform template, whereby the location is introduced in a sweeping double-page painting with an introductory paragraph followed by another spread of images and facts. The illustrations are attractive, a bit reminiscent of work done by the Dillons in the 1970s and ‘80s. Alas, while the text correctly states that the Upper Paleolithic art in France’s Lascaux cave features only one depiction of a human, the introductory illustration interpolates without explanation a probably Neolithic hunting scene with several humans from a Spanish site—which is both confusing and wrong. Trivia fans will enjoy the mixture of fact and speculation about the various locations; a small further-reading section in the back points to more information. While the potentially off-putting choice of magic carpet as conveyance is never explained, there is a disclaimer warning readers that the book’s creators will not take responsibility if they suffer calamity trying to actually visit any of these places. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Superficial but kind of fun. (Nonfiction. 10-12)
“With well-paced energy and a satisfying final spread, this sweet tale turns a day at the beach into a magical experience.”

NOAH’S SEAL

Marklow, Layn
Illus. by the author
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5362-1851-0

A day at the beach with Nana becomes an adventure when seals are involved.

Noah has spent several days at the seaside with his grandmother. While Nana works on fixing up their boat, Noah waits eagerly for the day when they can go out for a sail and see the seals. On this day, Noah is playing in the sand and notices that the pile of sand he has made looks awful lot like a seal. After adding stones and seaweed to make spots and a face, he is quite pleased with his new friend. But a storm comes, and he and Nana must hide in the boat until it passes. Noah is saddened to find his friend gone when the storm passes. The boat is fixed, but it’s time to go home. Unless...what’s that out in the water? A friend beckoning them to sail today? With well-paced energy and a satisfying final spread, this sweet tale featuring a brown-skinned boy and his loving adult, a woman of color, turns a day at the beach into a magical experience.

The fact that Noah and Nana have the beach all to themselves

and even Disney’s Frozen franchise, this will be popular with a wide swath of readers. Main characters read as White.

A veritable buffet of fantasy conventions. (Fantasy. 8-11)
“Sure to tickle more than a few ribs.”

SLOTHE & SQUIRREL IN A PICKLE

An unlikely pair finds an enterprising approach to acquiring a vehicle.

Round-headed, flat-faced Sloth and small, wiry Squirrel are friends. When Squirrel sees a tandem bike zip past their tree, he wants one immediately. He wants to “go FAST!” Sloth at first only opens an eye to see what’s up but goes along (“s-l-o-w-l-y”) to the bike shop with his friend. Squirrel and Sloth discover that bicycles are expensive, so they take on a job as pickle packers to earn enough to buy one. The pickle-packers manage a magnificent blue-feathered peacock, is not impressed with their work. However, he pays them—mostly in pickles—and Sloth, the thinker to Squirrel’s doer, comes up with an idea that pays off. When Sloth’s tropical ice pop plops to the ground (because he eats very s-l-o-w-l-y), he invents a new treat. The success of their pickle-pop business means that Sloth and Squirrel can successfully address their need for speed in a way that doesn’t put Sloth to sleep. Mealey’s entertainingly silly, original plot includes plenty of dialogue and subtle wordplay, both visual and textual. Collier’s low-key palette and expressively droll cartoon characters keep each double-page spread lively. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Sure to tickle more than a few ribs. (Picture book. 3-6)

SLOTH & SQUIRREL IN A PICKLE
Mealey, Cathy Ballou
Illus. by Collier, Kelly
Kids Can (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-5253-0238-1

Sonja Sotomayor

Medina, Meg
Illus. by Flint, Gillian
Philomel (80 pp.)
978-0-593-11601-2
978-0-593-11602-9 paper
Series: She Persisted

For chapter-book readers, the biography of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

Newbery medalist Medina pens this entry in the chapter-book She Persisted biography series, a spinoff of the picture-book series by the same name by Chelsea Clinton and Alexandra Boiger. Writing in an engaging and accessible style, Medina introduces children to the young firecracker—described by her family as being “like an ají,” the Spanish word for a hot pepper—who would grow up to be the first Latina justice and only the third woman to serve on the Supreme Court. Sotomayor’s capacity for persistence and practical problem-solving is evidenced throughout her life. When, as a schoolgirl, she realized she did not know how to be a good student, Sotomayor simply asked “the best student in her class…to teach her how to take notes and how to study for tests.” In a nod to Justice Sotomayor’s Hispanic background, each chapter is titled in...
Spanish (“Creciendo y aprendiendo,” “Sueños,” etc.), but the narrative text is in English. At the end of the book Medina offers suggestions for children to gain confidence and “persist.” Children on the upper end of the target audience may want to read about the life of this remarkable woman in Sotomayor’s own words in *The Beloved World of Sonia Sotomayor* (2018).

The compelling story of an inspirational role model. (references) (Biography. 6­9)

**DAKOTA CRUMB**  
*Tiny Treasure Hunter*  
Michalak, Jamie  
Illus. by Murphy, Kelly  
Candlewick (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | Jul. 6, 2021  
978-1-5362-0394-3

Meet Dakota Crumb, treasure hunter extraordinaire.

Never mind that she is a mouse; her small size is no hindrance to her bravery. Dakota lives deep under a great city’s art museum. At night she scurries about the museum with a mouse-sized sack, searching for treasures that she can carry away. She is quick witted and keen eyed and able to escape by a whisker from any danger. Though she snags a painting and a statue that are small enough to toss into her sack, her goal this evening is to find the Purple Jewel of Egypt with the help of a treasure map. Of course she finds that treasure, and it tastes good too. The clock keeps ticking toward morning as the tale’s pace slows and quickens with Dakota’s need to creep past dangers, swoop a treasure into her sack, pause to read her map, or even slows and quickens with Dakota’s need to creep past dangers, swoop a treasure into her sack, pause to read her map, or even freeze in fear. Readers will need sharp eyes to identify the actual treasures, but the effort is rewarded by admission through a tiny door under the big museum to the Mousehole Museum—curated by the amazing, clever Miss Crumb. Murphy’s gray- and purple-hued nighttime cartoons perfectly track the action from Dakota’s close-to-the-ground perspective, depicting her as an intelligent, confident, and independent female. A closing activity invites readers to embark on their own treasure hunts to find other items to be seen in the museum on a second read.

A delightful, entertaining romp with lots of surprises. (Picture book. 2­6)

**I LOVE MY FUR!**  
Miller, Kelly Leigh  
Illus. by the author  
Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)  
$17.99 | May 4, 2021  
978-1-5344-7895-4

Bigfoot’s fur is amazing...but does everyone really admire it as much as Bigfoot does?

On the way to school one day, Bigfoot’s friends—a witch, an elf, and a vampire by appearances—all compliment Bigfoot’s silky, brown fur. Bigfoot blushes but thinks, “I love my fur! It’s so fluffy! It’s so soft!” Bigfoot talks about nothing but fur (even when a dragon classmate tries to talk about a new book). Bigfoot starts advising everyone on hair/fur care (even though the ET has no hair and the gorgon’s topped with a head of snakes). When Bigfoot’s mother suggests a furcut, Bigfoot declines: “Fur this beautiful should never be cut.” Allowed to grow uncontrollably, it begins to cause problems. It inundates the class’s show and tell. It trips up a unicorn classmate and gets stuck in everyone’s recorders in music class. Bigfoot finally notices that the others aren’t focusing on the hair (when it isn’t interfering with them), and at last Bigfoot understands. After a massive furcut, Bigfoot begins to take an interest in classmates’ concerns. Bigfoot learns there’s more to life than fur, and everyone is better off. Miller’s cute, colorful button-eyed creatures inhabit a mix of graphic panels and full-bleed illustrations that do the heavy lifting for Bigfoot’s tale, with text relegated to occasional dialogue balloons and some simple declarative sentences. The attitudes and problems of Bigfoot’s classmates are only presented visually, giving young readers the opportunity to read expressions and make inferences from them. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A good conversation starter about looking beyond ego. (Picture book. 2­6)

**WHAT DOES LITTLE CROCODILE SAY?**  
Montanari, Eva  
Illus. by the author  
Tundra Books (40 pp.)  
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021  
978-0-7352-6813-5

Montanari presents Little Crocodile’s preschool day as a series of sounds, from the alarm’s “ring ring” to many “MUHH’s”—kisses celebrating Big Crocodile’s return.

Visual cues disclose Little Crocodile’s increasing anxiety as they “hup hup” up the stairs to the classroom door, where a bespectacled caregiving elephant greets them. The multispecies playmates oink, meow, tweet, and ribbit; the “wolf says arooooo!” Except for the fact that these children are all animals, it’s an instantly familiar scene. “And what does Little Crocodile say? // WWWAHAH / WWWWAHAH”—a meltdown sure to resonate with grown-ups galore. Many sounds (all conveyed in the author/illustrator’s hand lettering) are familiarly represented: the “splash” of water in the sink, the “vroom vroom” of the car. Refreshing additions include the zipper’s “zzzt,” the “bleep” of the car’s keyless lock, and the group lunch’s “nom nom.” Montanari’s simple crayon drawings tenderly telegraph the elephant’s expertise in easing Little Crocodile’s transition to the preschool setting. Cuddled on teacher’s lap for storytelling, followed by some “rat-a-tat”-ting on a big drum, the croc is soon leading the line of trumpet-playing children. As the “nap goes ZZZ ZZZ,” the little ones, zonked, sprawl in an amusing array of positions. Big Crocodile’s arrival and a farewell “see you tomorrow!” wrap up an emotionally—and aurally—rich day.

This endearing take on a common preschool scenario will make an appealing read-aloud at home or school. (Picture book. 3­6)
**ARLO DRAWS AN OCTOPUS**

**Mortenson, Lori**  
Illus. by Sayegh Jr., Rob  
Abrams (40 pp.)  
$16.99 | May 4, 2021  
978-1-4197-4201-9

When Arlo becomes frustrated with his octopus drawing, he finds encouragement in the drawing of a newfound friend.

“One day, quite unexpectedly,” Arlo, a brown-skinned boy with curly hair, bursts into his home having made a decision: He is going to draw an octopus. But the head he draws doesn’t look quite like an octopus head. He picks up another crayon and draws eight arms. But the arms don’t look like octopus arms. By the time he finishes the suction cups, Arlo is dismayed by how little resemblance his drawing bears to an octopus. “Per-turbed,” he crumples up his drawing and tosses it away. When he goes to retrieve it for proper disposal, the crumpled drawing he picks up is not his at all. It is an octopus’ drawing—of Arlo! Each subject likes the other’s rendering, and Arlo is inspired anew. Arlo’s roller coaster of emotions will feel comfortably familiar to anyone whose enthusiasm has ever been dampened by perfectionism. When he gets back on the proverbial horse, readers will feel relief and may themselves have learned a thing or two about not being too hard on oneself. Dramatic characters in smooth colors mix with crayon-textured embellishment for an engaging foray into Arlo’s emotional journey. Arlo never questions the sudden appearance of this marine creature in his home, adding an appealing layer of absurdity and causing readers to question what’s imagination and what’s reality. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**Well-written and full of fun surprises. (Picture book. 3-8)**

**HAM HELSING**

**Vampire Hunter**  
Moyer, Rich  
Illus. by the author  
Crown (240 pp.)  
$12.99 | Jun. 1, 2021  
978-0-593-30891-2  
Series: Ham Helsing, 1

A hapless hog hunts creepy creatures. In this graphic series opener, readers meet Ham Helsing, a lovably bumbling, bubble-gum–pink pig descended from a long line of failed vampire hunters who have each blundered their way into an untimely demise. The citizens of Mud Canyon ask Ham for help dealing with a rogue vampire who has fed upon wealthy Laurence the Land Baron. Soon Ham assembles a motley crew that includes a pair of treasure-obsessed rats, ninja pig Ronin, and a young werewolf. Together, they find that the enemy they sought may not truly be the culprit. Now, with the help of a lederhosen-clad, socially anxious boar and a gassy ursine mercenary named Knuckles, they must face a sinister spider-woman and her shadowy accomplice to save Mud Canyon from total annihilation. Told through full-color panels with a high-energy animated sensibility, Moyer’s silly romp will delight fans with its abundant silliness and visual gags (complete with a pooping squirrel, a barfing fairy, and copious spider-squishing). While humor reigns supreme, fast pacing, clever character development, and a surprise ending (that both ties up one arc and leaves a tantalizing cliffhanger for subsequent adventures) add unexpected depth. Disappointingly, Ronin, the one prominent female character, is dressed in a skimpy costume that sexualizes her, in stark contrast to modestly clad Ham.

**Hammed-up horror makes for more giggles than gasps. (bonus short story) (Graphic fantasy. 7-11)**

**COSMIC PIZZA PARTY**

**Murphy, Nick & Ritchey, Paul**  
Illus. by Tormo, Bea  
Andrews McMeel Publishing (160 pp.)  
978-1-5248-6733-1 paper  
978-1-5248-6807-9

A scrappy intergalactic team runs a traveling pizza restaurant in a food-based universe.

With narration provided by Cosmic Pizza Party’s android intern AL-N (pronounced “Allen”), each chapter serves as a stand-alone short story in this graphic novel. A helpful tip on the best cheese in the universe ends up being a trap; an advertising gimmick (a quantum-reality machine video game) goes rogue at a Calzonia royal birthday party; a bad review prompts them to fix a pizza crisis for a planet full of Plegans (who eat plastic and are sickened by organic materials); the hostile weather of a planet in the Marinaris System leads to destructively pyrrhic delivery attempts (this is the weakest chapter by far); and finally the team goes head-to-head against rival Papa Roni on the reality game show _The Slice Is Right_. The silliness of the concept—pizza ingredients as natural resources—is echoed in the shape of the ship (a food truck with wings, illustrated in a curvy retro-futuristic aesthetic), the punny humor, and wild character designs. Delivery pilot Meg, an anthropomorphic sloth, and pizza chef Suzie, a mecha-slug, both use female pronouns; robot AL-N and money-minded Mohs, a rocklike being, both use male pronouns. Despite the wackiness, the characters take their pizza business seriously, and they invite readers to as well—lengthy backmatter features additional art, profiles, quizzes, and pizza recipes.

**Like an out-of-this-world pizza: cheesy, saucy, and delicious. (Graphic science fiction. 7-10)**
“Mo and Beau have a sweet relationship that is delightful in its uniqueness.”

Mo and Beau 2

Nastanlieva, Vanya
Illus. by the author
Simply Read Books (40 pp.)
$15.95  |  May 4, 2021
978-1-92701-897-2

Mo the mouse takes lessons from his friend Beau the bear on how to be scary.

When Mo asks Beau to teach him how to be “very very scary,” Beau is skeptical. After all, Mo is a little mouse; how can he scare the other animals? Beau tries showing Mo how to be scary by “mak[ing] his eyes and eyebrows like this,” making his “ears like that,” and “roar[ing] like this!!!” Alas, each time, Beau’s expressions more cute than scary. Mo and Beau have a sweet relationship that is delightful in its uniqueness. The simple storyline makes for a satisfying read-aloud—or read-along.

This duo has staying power. (Picture book, 3-8)

Mo’s expressions more cute than scary. Mo and Beau have a sweet relationship that is delightful in its uniqueness. The simple storyline makes for a satisfying read-aloud—or read-along.

This duo has staying power. (Picture book, 3-8)

DINO-GRO

Myers, Matt
Illus. by the author
Random House (48 pp.)
$17.99  |  $20.99 PLB  |  Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-593-17988-8 PLB

Dino-Gro’s doggy friendliness (not to mention size) recalls Dino-Gro has outgrown the house. Forced at last to move outdoors, the blue behemoth sadly wanders off...but lumbers back, huger than ever, to the rescue (“Wet!”) when a mighty storm floods the neighborhood. In the lightly caricatured illustrations, Dino-Gro’s puppy friends look at the comical final scene as Cole’s mom’s remark that “Mo and Beau have a sweet relationship that is delightful in its uniqueness.”

Mo’s expressions more cute than scary. Mo and Beau have a sweet relationship that is delightful in its uniqueness. The simple storyline makes for a satisfying read-aloud—or read-along.

This duo has staying power. (Picture book, 3-8)

THE MYSTERY OF THE MEANEST TEACHER
A Johnny Constantine Graphic Novel

North, Ryan
Illus. by Charm, Derek
DC (160 pp.)
978-1-77950-123-3

John Constantine joins the DC middle-grade stable.

John Constantine wasn’t always the dreamy occult detective envisioned by co-creator Alan Moore in the comics. This middle-grade graphic novel re-creates the character as Johnny Constantine, a fish-out-of-water Brit making his way in an American boarding school. On the run from some hostile spirits in his native England, Johnny hides out at the Junior Success Boarding School in Massachusetts. But America has its own fair share of demons—like Johnny’s homeroom teacher, Ms. Kayla. With the help of a fellow outcast named Anna (a character who may be more than what she seems), Johnny fights to reveal Ms. Kayla’s true nature. With crisp coloring and crackling panel work, this is the best of DC’s middle-grade graphic novels yet. A smart introduction to a lesser-known character, the novel benefits its main characters’ lack of all the cultural baggage that surrounds Batman, Wonder Woman, or Superman. Constantine’s mystical surroundings make for enchanting compositions, making this the best-looking DC book as well. Anna and Johnny develop an endearing friendship, and last-minute reveals will have DC fans tickled pink. Johnny and Anna are White, and Ms. Kayla is Black; overall, the student body appears to be diverse.

A terrific middle-grade debut for a classic DC antihero. (Graphic paranormal adventure, 9-12)

THIS IS RUBY

OLeary, Sara
Illus. by Marley, Alea
Tundra Books (32 pp.)
$17.99  |  May 25, 2021
978-0-7352-6361-1

Ruby shares a busy day with readers. An unnamed narrator introduces the reader to Ruby, who “can’t wait to share her day with you.” Readers are invited into Ruby’s room, where the various activities with which Ruby keeps herself busy are on display. Among many other things, Ruby likes to invent things, to “figure out how things work,” and to “do excavations” with her best friend, Teddy (a puppy).
She travels backward and forward in time in the time machine she has invented. Readers are encouraged to stay involved in Ruby’s world while doing some self-reflection with questions sprinkled throughout: “Can you feel [your skeleton] underneath your skin?” and “What kinds of things are you curious about?” Brown-skinned Ruby, with her sweet smile, huge Afro, and dynamic curiosity, is an engaging protagonist in whose world readers will delightedly immerse themselves. The illustrations use a tropical palette and a range of double-page spreads and vignettes, including a lovely wordless spread, to achieve an inviting narrative that feels complete with introduction, deep imagination, and a thoughtful farewell to readers. Ruby is an inspirational character and, for truly imaginative young minds, a wonderful playmate.

Step right into Ruby’s fabulous world, full of the ordinary and extraordinary. (Picture book 3-8)

**ALL THE FISH IN THE WORLD**

Opie, David
Illus. by the author
Peter Pauper Press (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Jul. 15, 2021
978-1-4413-3578-4

Mudskipper shows Trout that it’s not so easy to say “what makes a fish a fish.”

There are thousands of ways to be a fish. While most fish have scales, fins, backbones, a streamlined shape, and gills for breathing underwater, there are surprising exceptions. As he did with the kiwi in *All the Birds in the World* (2020), Opie picks an outlier to be a main character in this introduction to a wide-ranging animal category. Spread by spread, Mudskipper shows Trout ways that fish are alike and different in underwater scenes filled with clearly recognizable fish. (Scene by scene, over 150 species are identified, according to the key in the backmatter). One spread shows fish that differ in shape and color; another, size; a third, different patterns; and a fourth considers scales. Varieties of sharks and rays illustrate the point that some fish skeletons are made of cartilage, not bone. Rotating the book 90 degrees reveals fish that swim in dark sea depths. The author also covers nests, eggs, and live birthing as well as different sensory organs, locomotion, and breathing. Finally readers learn what makes Mudskipper special. “There’s never just one way to be a fish,” Mudskipper concludes; narrative text clarifies: “Over 33,000 ways, to be a little more precise.” There’s solid science information in the text, but the story is carried through by conversation between the two named fish. Aquarium visitors will recognize some of the more striking species.

A broad and engaging introduction to the largest vertebrate group. (author’s notes) (Informational picture book 5-10)

**MOUSE MUSIC**

Overmeer, Suzan
Illus. by Berenschot, Myriam
Clavis (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-60537-636-3

This Dutch and Belgian import explores the communal power of music.

Isabel, a whiskered, rosy-hued mouse, plays the violin. Her brothers and sisters also play classical instruments. Whenever they hold concerts, the entire forest stops to listen. Isabel has an adventurous spirit. She likes to roam the forest in search of new sounds. One day, after finding a bird warbling an intriguing tune, Isabel calls her siblings to come and listen. They aren’t impressed. “This sounds very different from our music,” they sneer. “Our music is much better.” The family pooh-poohs each new sound that Isabel finds. Then one day, she happens upon another group of mice. They are teal (from the city, Overmeer is keen to point out), and one plays the guitar. Isabel’s family, again, thinks the music sounds strange. Isabel can’t take it anymore. “Stop!” she shouts. Her anger and frustration are conveyed by a giant scribbled tornado that swirls across the page. Differences should be celebrated, not ridiculed. And maybe, just maybe, they could make beautiful music together. The resolution is a bit slapdash and pat, but it’s positive nonetheless. Berenschot uses ribbons, bubbles, and droplets to represent music, creatively illustrating the sounds that are so very important to Isabel. Backmatter includes musical-education activities that connect back to the story. *(This book was reviewed digitally)*

A reminder to stop, listen, and appreciate. (Picture book 5-6)

**THE SHARK BOOK**

Page, Robin & Jenkins, Steve
Illus. by Jenkins, Steve
HMH Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-328-56949-3

“Almost perfect predators” are made less fearsome through this pictorial introduction.

Experts at the visual display of information return with this splendid album that presents 42 shark species, described and portrayed in torn- and cut-paper collage illustrations. Jenkins and Page have organized their information thoughtfully; spread by spread. They begin with species variety (headed with the evocative collective noun “a shiver of sharks”) and end with a thought-provoking pairing: shark attacks and sharks in danger (mostly from humans). Along the way they cover general topics—size, child-bearing, diet, and feeding habits—before describing particular species. There is the great white shark, of course, and the gigantic whale shark, hammerheads and other sharks with odd shapes, sharks that glow in the dark, sharks that live in surprising places, shark ancestors, and record holders. Though two-dimensional, the artist’s sharks are surprisingly realistic in their features, coloration, and shading. All
images are carefully labeled and shown with a human silhouette for scale. Set on a plain background, each is glossed with an accompanying informational paragraph printed in a friendly, faux handwritten typeface. Some spreads include range maps. There’s wonderful variety in these images. The basking shark, an enormous filter feeder, is shown with its giant mouth open wide. A biofluorescent chain catshark glows green on a black page. The multidimensional pattern of pointed shapes on the endpapers is also a nice touch. Best of all, page numbers make the index (itself information-packed) truly useful. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**Masterful. (bibliography)** (Informational picture book. 4-10)

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**BEARS AT THE BEACH**

**Parenteau, Shirley**  
Illus. by Walker, David  
Candlewick (32 pp.)  
$16.99  |  May 11, 2021  
978-1-5362-0838-2  
Series: Bears on Chairs

Parenteau’s beloved bears are back, this time at the sea. The sun is shining and the waves are crashing. Yellow, Fuzzy, Floppy, and Calico tromp to the beach, pails and shovels in hand. They are going to build a castle that reaches all the way to the sky! Big Brown Bear is there as well, overseeing the construction. The bears fill the pails with sand (Big Brown Bear comically uses Calico’s bottom to pack it down) and triumphantly overturn them. Oh no! The sand is too dry. They move close to the water to try that sand. But that sand is too soggy! They stare down at the sodden mounds in puzzled consternation. Yellow offers a possible solution: “We’ll build in between. / The sand will be damp / and our towers won’t lean.” They move partway down the beach, and it works! But then, while carving out windows and doors as embellishment, the castle collapses. These five pals are the picture of grit and perseverance. They start again. Will they figure out what changes to make? Walker’s cuddly, roly-poly bears (whose rotundity is echoed by the soft mounds of sand), learn to roll with the punches. Parenteau’s brief quatrains occasionally demand a forced stress, but by and large they scan neatly for a bubbly read-aloud. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**A sweet problem-solving romp for the preschool set. (Picture book. 3-6)**

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**MOTH & BUTTERFLY**

**Petty, Dev**  
Illus. by Aranda, Ana  
Nancy Paulsen Books (32 pp.)  
$17.99  |  Jun. 8, 2021  
978-1-5247-4051-1

Change is in the air! Two caterpillars romp happily through a garden, but something is about to happen! Minimal, energetic text and brightly colored illustrations full of kid appeal tell the tale of the two friends and capture the excitement of change in this exuberant introduction to the concept of metamorphosis and the differences between a moth and a butterfly. The story artfully incorporates the idea of change and the appreciation of differences and similarities between two friends with the concrete differences between the two insects that develop over the course of their life cycles; initial commonalities are described (legs, spots, eating habits) before the friends disappear into pupae to undergo metamorphosis, and then “POP!” Each appears in a new winged form (a moth and a butterfly), and differences are succinctly enumerated (color, movement, camouflage, sleep cycles). Warmth abounds, and life continues as the two friends see young caterpillars and greet them with a cheery “Happy Metamorphosis!” The simple text includes speech bubbles that add to the excitement and fun, and the author’s choice to focus on one big word and concept (metamorphosis) rather than a hefty vocabulary or the full life cycle (eggs are unmentioned) makes this a great choice for the very young.

**A deceptively simple mix of engaging story, appreciation of differences, and introduction to moths and butterflies. (Picture book. 3-6)**

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**HOW TO TALK MONSTER**

**Plourde, Lynn**  
Illus. by Lowery, Mike  
Putnam (32 pp.)  
$17.99  |  Jun. 8, 2021  
978-0-525-51580-7

A young boy can’t sleep because there’s a monster outside his bedroom window! He calls his parents to investigate, but the monster hides. The monster peeks through the boy’s window with an exclamation of “Goop-zee-googy!”…then enters the boy’s room to pinch his nose (“Zork! Zork!”). The boy is scared but musters up the courage to tell the monster to go away. He crawls back into bed triumphantly only to find the monster stealing his bicycle. When the monster crashes the bike, the boy is initially furious about the cycle’s ruined wheel despite the monster’s remorseful “Gibble”—until he notices that the monster is hurt and, just like any kid, needs some comfort and first aid. The boy realizes that the monster isn’t trying to scare him—the monster is trying to play! (Readers will have figured this out long before thanks to its expressive three-eyed face.) Together the two form a friendship that keeps them both up, making mischief despite the language barrier, until dawn. The story is drawn as a comic book, featuring speech bubbles and cartoon human and monster characters. The sparse text is entertaining and efficient, working together with the movement-packed panels to push the story forward. A backmatter Monster-to-English glossary allows readers to go back to earlier panels and translate. The boy and his parents all have pale skin.

**A lighthearted take on an unlikely friendship. (Picture book. 3-7)**
THE RUNAWAY PEA
Poskitt, Kjartan
Illus. by Willmore, Alex
Aladdin (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5344-9014-7

Can a legume on the lam ever find its hap-pea-ly ever after?

Dinner may be on the table and ready to go, but for one little pea, the adventure has just begun. Despite the protestations and mockery of the food left behind, the runaway pea “ping[s] off the plate” and into a series of unfortunate events. Without intending to, the pea plops into a dollop of sauce, tumbles into a dog bowl, is flung into an aquarium, avoids a mousetrap and a spider web—and that’s just for starters! As the pea’s adventures grow increasingly arduous, he finally rolls under the fridge, where the desiccated fruit he meets there tell him that now that he has touched the floor “you’re not loved anymore.” But what’s this? Could there still be a satisfying ending in store for this little green miscreant? This chipper British import keeps the action high as the pea pinballs from catastrophe to calamity. Clever perspectives amp the slapstick, and the anthropomorphic pea—he has two wide eyes and a mouth but no limbs—is surprisingly expressive. Expert rhymes scan without strain, and while having a good laugh may be the main takeaway here, the twist at the end may encourage budding gardeners to experiment with some plantings of their own. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Don’t play with your food. Find food at play! (Picture book 3-6)

SHIP IN A BOTTLE
Prabhu, Andrew
Illus. by the author
Putnam (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-984815-81-1

At the helm of her fine boat, a mouse finds a new home and a new life.

Fed up with Cat’s endless quest to eat her, Mouse fills the bottle around her ship with gingersnaps, a favorite treat, and floats away in search of a safer, happier existence. The journey isn’t altogether smooth sailing at first, what with rapacious sea gulls and other hungry creatures greeting her and depleting her cookie stash. Add in stormy weather, and Mouse seemingly has bigger problems than she had with Cat. Fortunately, she has courage, ingenuity, and strength on her side. When the bottle at last reaches the shore of a large city, the ship in a bottle turns out to be an even better deal than Mouse originally believed: She realizes her good luck in discovering welcoming, helpful new friends—and a new culinary delight (kids will easily relate). As for Cat? In the end, it’s still waiting, morosely and comically, at an open window. This simply told, sweet, gently humorous story will have great appeal for young readers/listeners, and Mouse is a quietly charming heroine kids will earnestly root for. Delightful, pastel-colored cartoon illustrations beguile, competently suggesting place, atmosphere, and emotional heft; their varied presentation in full spreads and softly outlined panels very ably drives the text. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Time spent in this bottle is time well spent indeed. (Picture book 3-6)

STRANGE PLANET
The Sneaking, Hiding, Vibrating Creature
Pyle, Nathan W.
Illus. by the author
Harper/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$14.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-304974-1

Pyle brings his Strange Planet cartoons to a child audience with a little help from a “strange furry creature.”

Introduced first on Instagram, then in book-length collections for an adult audience, Lifegiver and Offspring are two blue extraterrestrials intent on understanding Earth. They build this understanding through observations articulated through hyperliteral phrases that are sure to provoke readers’ laughter. After arising from a “rest slab” (bed), Offspring joins Lifegiver for a breakfast of “criss-cross floppers” and “sweet sauce” (waffles and syrup) before they begin recording their observations of a strange creature in their midst. Readers will recognize this creature as a white cat and will get a kick out of how the E.Ts describe and attempt to reenact its behaviors as it hides, sneaks, climbs, knocks things over, “observe[s] a flying creature” (a bird), plops down on their “observations document” (notebook), “vibrates when happy” (purrs), and rests. The uncluttered cartoon style allows the wry text to command attention, and while having a good laugh may be the main takeaway here, kids might just hone observational skills, too, and be inspired to pick up their own “ink cylinder[s]” (pens) to draw or write down their thoughts about the world around them. Kids who read this independently may well find extra fun in surprising their adults with new vocabulary; families who read it together may be inspired to make up their own. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Don’t be a stranger to this one. (Picture book 5-12)

VROOOM, VROOOM!
Ray, Mary Lyn
Illus. by Chung Julien
Beach Lane/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-4814-4933-5

A child playing with a toy car takes an imaginative road trip. The onomatopoeic title captures the fervency with which some children love their toy cars. “This is how I drive my car,”
“Sensitively grants agency to those who can’t shoot webs from their wrists.”

MILES MORALES

Rising star Reynolds draws on devastating real-life experiences to relate how the teenage Afro-Latinx superhero must discover a renewed balance of self even as he negotiates his immense responsibilities.

Puerto Rico, where Miles’ mother grew up, has experienced a very intense earthquake. Just as the family launches a community fundraiser to help, Spider-Man must attend to the proud people of Puerto Rico, challenging us all to recognize our shared responsibility.

Big heart and enduring life lessons make this a cherished addition to a viral character’s legacy. (Graphic adventure. 8-12)

THE MYSTERIOUS SEA BUNNY

Raymundo, Peter
Illus. by the author
Dial Books (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-593-32514-8

What’s 1 inch long, smells with its ears, and breathes through its butt?

Sea bunnies! Well, they don’t actually breathe through their butts, but their gills are on their rear ends….A gaggle of children is on the hunt for the elusive sea bunny. Their instructor is attempting to curb their loud enthusiasm (but failing at it) while demystifying the mysterious but incredibly cute sea slug known as the sea bunny. It moves along on a trail of self-producing gross slime, has terrible eyesight, and has a nifty secret weapon—poisonous sea sponges! No, it doesn’t fling sopping wet sponges at its enemies, it eats the sponges, which makes it taste disgusting.

Ingenious! Raymundo effectively uses large speech bubbles for the kids’ energetic questions and observations, with a smaller, unobtrusive type for the matter-of-fact commentary of their instructor. The interactions among children and adult are humorous, informative, and organic. By using the Q&A format, Raymundo allows the readers to be drawn in and participate in this charming underwater adventure. Raymundo’s experience as a Disney animator can be appreciated in these colorful, engaging illustrations. Who knew a tiny slug could convey so many emotions? The personalities of the characters come through loud and strong—from the endearing and unassuming protagonist to the ravenous villain.

Not just another fish story—will be a favorite with fledgling marine biologists and landlubbers everywhere. (Informational picture book. 4-7)

MILES MORALES

Shock Waves

Reynolds, Justin A.
Illus. by Leon, Pablo
Graphix/Scholastic (128 pp.)
978-1-338-64804-1
978-1-338-64803-4 paper
Series: Spider-Man Graphic Novel

Graphic design shines in this survey of light, color, what we see, and how we see it. Sharing both strengths and weaknesses with its companion Sound: Shhh….Bang….Pop….Boom! (2020), this overview combines pithy forays into the imagination and scientific observations with exuberant, creative illustrations highlighted by generous use of Day-Glo orange and vivid blues. The science is usually clear but does occasionally become hard to parse—and, sometimes, hard to read due to tintype and poor contrast. In no
obvious order the Ukrainian creators focus on a broad range of topics including eye color and structure, common signs and symbols, optical effects and illusions, Braille, photography, primary and mixed colors, and (with the rationale that “I envision more than what my eyes can see”) even smell, hearing, touch, and taste. The visuals are often riveting, though an uncaptioned photograph and several asterisked explanations relegated to the back endpaper are signs that the spotlight is on page design, not content. Moreover, the stylized human figures throughout are not rendered with an obvious eye to diversity; for instance, all of the faces are paper white in a full-page gallery of expressions, and in another of eyeglass wearers, just six of 25 present female, and there are just two with dark skin. Still, every page up to the closing bucket list of things “worth seeing” in and beyond our world offers a rewarding sight and/or insight.

A memorable overview, artistically at least, but mostly flash. (Informational picture book. 7-10)

**TOMOKO TAKES THE LEAD**

Rosewater, Kit
Illus. by Escabasse, Sophie
Amulet/Abrams (176 pp.)
$14.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-4197-5172-1
Series: The Derby Daredevils, 3

“It’s camp and roller derby! Where can you go wrong?”

The third installment of the Derby Daredevils shifts to Tomoko’s perspective as summer break approaches. Rather than hitting the trails and camping with her uncle as usual, Tomoko is going with her entire league to a sleep-away roller derby camp. Tomoko is not as excited as her friends because meeting new people is terrifying for her. Upon arrival, Tomoko is shocked to learn they are staying at a large convention center in the middle of Dallas, and she sees her worst fear realized when a girl starts bullying her. Worst of all, her friends don’t notice. When the Daredevils decide to sneak out into the city for a little while, they become lost. It’s up to Tomoko to use all her wilderness skills to navigate them back before anyone notices. The journey back is fraught with tension and revelations, and Tomoko learns that taking the lead also means standing up for yourself. This highly illustrated chapter book is light-hearted and fun yet willing to take on hard topics. Tomoko’s experiences with microaggressions—for her larger size and Japanese heritage—are not usually discussed with so much honesty and humor for middle graders. Rosewater excels at using the different perspectives of her diverse cast of characters to help Tomoko define what is happening to her and to ultimately confront her bully.

This book will roll off the shelves. (Fiction. 8-12)

**WANDA’S WORDS GOT STUCK**

Roseland, Lucy
Illus. by Bowles, Paula
Nosy Crow/Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-5362-1719-3

A tale of school-based anxiety in a magical setting.

Wanda the witch loves arriving early for school so that she can sit quietly in her classroom reading. Alas, that pleasure lasts only until her noisy classmates arrive. Unlike them, Wanda feels too nervous to speak aloud in class. So when new classmate Flo arrives with the exact same problem, the two instantly bond. Practicing spells together for the upcoming school magic contest, Flo grows more confident than Wanda. But when the contest goes awry and Flo’s in trouble, it’s Wanda who finds the right words at the right time. The gentle rhyming text never strains or fudges its sometimes surprisingly wise wordplay. “Now, some words are meant well but come out all wrong. / And some are important and ever so long. / Some words can be brave, even if they’re just small. / And sometimes, you find, you don’t need words at all.” Seeing Wanda and Flo both confronting their fears may encourage young readers with anxiety to do the same. The cartoon art puts a gentle spin on the otherwise Halloween-worthy setting. Wanda reads White, Flo reads Black, and their classmates are a variety of different races.

Which witches watching their witchy words will win out? Just wait! (Picture book. 4-7)

**WORLD RECORD ANIMALS**

Růžička, Oldřich
Illus. by Pernický, Tomáš
Albatros Media (32 pp.)
$14.95 | May 25, 2021
978-80-00-05931-0

A gallery of nature’s fastest, slowest, biggest, strongest, ugliest, most beautiful, most dangerous, longest-lived, and farthest-traveling animal record holders.

The book is inconsistent from the start. The six contestants for “Fastest Animal” are all large ones, from cheetah to Usain Bolt, but “Strongest” pits several insects against the elephant and gorilla. The competition format also becomes muddled. The Masai giraffe (tallest), anteater (longest tongue), and blue wildebeest (“largest herd,” debatably) all share space with a blue whale, among other animals in the seemingly arbitrarily chosen “Largest” category. Even a pretense of comparing measurable dimensions or achievements is eventually abandoned for an array of baby animals. The writing, in the uncredited translation from Czech, measures up to Pernický’s flat, ordinary animal images. It informs readers that pronghorns are “aptly named” because their “horns are shaped like prongs,” that the “job” of a domestic duck is “to provide feathers and eggs,” that two lions that preyed on Kenyan railway passengers were
“cannibalistic,” and that as the snail is a hermaphrodite “it’s hard
to tell if it’s a boy or a girl.” (Spoiler alert: The answer is “Yes.”)
For similar competitions carried off more accurately and entertainingly, start with Carron Brown’s Animal Olympics, illustrated by Katy Tanis (2020), and Martin Jenkins’ Animal Awards, illustrated by Tor Freeman (2019).

Doesn’t get out of the starting gate. (Informational picture book. 7-9)

FISH AND SUN
Ruzzier, Sergio
Illus. by the author
HarperAlley (48 pp.)
978-0-06-307664-8
978-0-06-307663-1 paper
Series: I Can Read! Comics

Fish and Sun become fast friends in this Level 1 entry in the I Can Read! Comics series.

Fish, small and lavender-hued, is bored. It’s too dark and cold in Fish’s watery abode, so Fish tells Mom: “I’m going out.” Unfortunately, it’s “dark and cold and boring” at the surface too—that is, until Fish sees a yellow orb with long, spindly rays rise in the sky. “I’m Sun,” the friendly presence says, and a friendship is born. When Sun turns red and sets, Fish mourns the loss but happily reunites with Sun the next day after the clouds part. Young readers will identify with Fish’s extreme mood swings: ennui followed by elation followed by heartache (“I am afraid I will never see my friend Sun again”)—and joy once again when the pair reunites. Compositions are tightly focused and uncluttered; lines are simple and clean; and details delight, such as the fact that bees may range widely, and swarm activity is described as a springtime event, when it can also occur in summer and early fall. The information in the book, such as species identification and measurement units, is directed toward British readers. The flat, thin-lined artwork does little to enhance the story, but an “I spy” game challenging readers to find a specific bee throughout is amusing.

Friends of these pollinators will be best served elsewhere. (Informational picture book. 8-10)

ONE SUMMER NIGHT
Salzano, Tammi
Illus. by Sayegh Jr., Rob
Reycraft Books (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 28, 2021
978-1-4788-7033-3

Sea turtle hatchlings follow moonlight to find their ocean homes, but what happens if clouds get in the way?

In rhyming couplets, Salzano imagines the scenario: a dark, stormy night and hatchlings confused by a porch light. Luckily, in this community, there are turtle watchers to help. The porch light goes out; people line the beach to make a passage; and a bespectacled, slicker-clad girl with a flashlight guides the young turtles to the waiting waves, where they will be safe—at least from the threatening gulls. Basic facts about sea turtle emergence are woven into the narrative along with the anthropomorphic fantasy that a turtle might wave a flipper to lead the way or to say thanks to the helping humans. The language includes some evocative action verbs, but the rhythm of these couplets stumbles, with the expected stress sometimes falling on unimportant words. Sayegh’s cheerful illustrations are composed of clean shapes and interesting textures. The turtles have googly eyes and open-mouthed smiles. The flashlight-wielding girl has brown skin; the other humans have varying skin tones. The flat, thin-lined artwork is scattered—much like the scout bees—and as a result, both the nominal plot and informational content are tissue-thin. There are some interesting facts throughout the book, but many pieces of trivia are too, well trivial, to prove useful. For example, as the bees travel, readers learn that “onion flowers are round and fluffy” and “fennel is a plant that is used in cooking.” Other facts are oversimplified and as a result are not accurate. For example, monofloral honey is defined as “made by bees who visit just one kind of flower” with no acknowledgment of the fact that bees may range widely, and swarm activity is described as a springtime event, when it can also occur in summer and early fall. The information in the book, such as species identification and measurement units, is directed toward British readers. The flat, thin-lined artwork does little to enhance the story, but an “I spy” game challenging readers to find a specific bee throughout is amusing.

A sweet story with an environmental message. (Picture book. 3-7)
A young child uses their imagination to conjure up a boat, a sea, and an adventure. And that's just the beginning.

The story begins with wordless illustrations showing a child (illustrated with pale skin and red hair) dragging a box to their room. “I have a box. / I want a boat,” the child states. As the child's imagination kicks into gear, boat, rudder, sail, sea, map, and crew are all imaginatively conjured. But when a storm is asked for, things get a bit dicey. (It all ends well.) The clipped narrative delivers a sturdy bass line thrumming with appealing protagonist confidence, but it is the illustrations that make it all a resounding success. With both clarity and a confident understatement that echoes the confidence of the narrative, the full-color illustrations are presented with a fine attention to detail that enriches and deepens the story, enabling readers to use their own imaginations as they pick out what has changed and what is developing. On a broader scale, the page-by-page design also augments the theme: When the child's imagination hasn't yet soared, the illustrations are contained by white space on which the text is printed. As the child's imagination takes hold, the text is included inside the boxed illustrations, and as the imagination takes over, the illustrations become full-bleed double-page spreads.

All sails are set and pulling in this imaginative matchup of words and pictures. (Picture book. 3-8)
Can a scream become a creature in its own right?

Barbara’s a cat who stands upright in yellow boots and a red dress. Today she has a deep frown and a very bad mood. “It had started in the morning because of a sock problem. And at lunchtime there had been a strange pea.” The sock problem: one sock halfway onto one hind paw; another on her tail, one each held by a front paw—all different colors. The strange pea is olive colored and off-puttingly larger than her regular green peas. Ice cream falling from her cone onto the ground is the last straw, and “Barbara thr[ows] a GREAT BIG… / WOBBLER!” Few United States readers will know this British slang for tantrum—which Shireen paints like a close-up single scream—and the unfamiliar word brings extra gloriousness to the Wobbler’s manifestation as a great, red, googly-eyed creature, “gloopy and heavy, like an angry jelly.” For a while, the Wobbler keeps Barbara unhappy, forbidding offers of sympathetic chats, cuddles, and replacement ice cream from pals Otto, Martha, and Small Bob. But then—“Stinky bumhead!” Barbara and the Wobbler call each other, transitioning into giggles before the Wobbler disappears with a pop. The art is brightly colored and, though at first appearing simple, brings a clever, complex depth of emotion and expression, from fury and powerlessness to humor, gentleness, and relief. A picture glossary of bad moods closes the book with humor and empathy.

Funny, respectful, and cathartic—exhilarating. (Picture book. 3-7)

This girl-centered reclamation of Peter Pan introduces readers to a beloved—and transformed—Neverland.

In this retelling, the Roberts-Darlings are a blended family living in present-day Tulsa, Oklahoma. Twelve-year-old stepsisters Lily and Wendy share a half brother, 4-year-old Michael; recent high school graduate John is Lily’s brother and Wendy’s stepbrother; the Roberts side of the family is Muscogee Creek; and the Darlings are White immigrants from England. Shortly before Wendy and Mr. Darling are to relocate—amid growing marital tension—to New York for his new job, the three youngest children are visited by Peter Pan and Belle the fairy. Wendy and Michael are deceived into flying away with them to Neverland; skeptical Lily follows in hopes of saving her siblings. Wendy and Michael are taken in by the Lost, who are White boys kidnapped by Peter. Lily, meanwhile, is rescued by a group of Native youth—derided by Peter as Injuns—who are diverse in tribal citizenship, race, and other identities (one, for example, is two-spirit). Neverland, populated with Merfolk, fairies, and pirates, is richly described. Short chapters, plenty of action, and the wry voice of the omniscient narrator help make this title, with its themes of gender equity, Native pride, and environmentalism, accessible. The poignant dislocation of the Lost and the fierce familial love of the stepsisters illustrate the importance of remembering where you come from and to whom you belong.

A refreshing adventure that breathes new life into a classic text. (author’s note) (Fantasy. 8-12)
“I’m more of a hugger,” says the eponymous six-legged guide through the world of insect powers and superpowers.

Ants can carry 50 times their weight; hawk moths emit ultrasonic blasts to confuse predatory bats; nasute termites spray paralyzing venom; and stink bugs—well, “Super gross. But also super cool.” But June beetles...can’t do those things. Nor, as Burt the 10-lined June beetle unwillingly proves, can they run fast, fly very well, or even tap dance. They do have sticky legs, for what it’s worth—which is, it turns out, quite a lot when the only way to rescue friends from a spider’s web of “sticky bum strings” is to hug the spider and hold on. “What...is...happening?” gasps the arrested arachnid, all eight legs dangling limply as a beatific Burt clasps it tight—then: “Oh, crumbs.” Following a final group clinch, a closing gallery adds even more insect facts and friends. In the wake of Fairy Science (2019), Spires here flits to a different area of STEM for another playful but informative gander at the natural world that likewise artfully stirs a light to a different area of STEM for another playful but informative gander at the natural world that likewise artfully stirs a light

Loah's been left—again—in the care of the elderly Rinkers while her mother is on an Arctic expedition. A determined homebody, 11-year-old Loah doesn’t enjoy her mother’s long, sometimes perilous journeys. This one’s been unexpectedly extended since her mom, an ornithologist, believes she’s spotted a loah bird, the very rare animal for which Loah was named. Stiff, seemingly unemotional Miss Rinker and her brother, gentle, bumbling Theo, are nice enough, but they are inadequate substitutes for a mother who is so deeply engaged in her professional life. When Loah befriends Ellis (or L.S., whose real name is Little Squirrel), a girl just as deeply in need of TLC as Loah, it puts into motion a series of tender gestures. One lovingly crafted character after another (most seemingly White) reaches out to offer unexpected, desperately needed support, demonstrating a remarkable chain of interconnectedness. As Loah’s mother had said, “All living creatures depended on one another in ways big and small.” With mysterious noises emanating from Loah’s crumbling home’s turret, Ellis’ seemingly monstrous grandfather, a threatening, busybody home inspector, and a suspenseful accident in the Arctic, there is plenty to keep readers engaged in this heartfelt exploration of goodness. Never-intrusive environmental lessons are an added bonus.

Satisfying and life affirming: a perfect thing in the universe of juvenile fiction. (Fiction. 9-12)
IF YOU WERE AN ELEPHANT
Staub, Leslie
Illus. by Jones, Richard
Putnam (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-5247-4134-1

How might readers look, act, and live if they were wild African elephants?

“If you were an elephant, you’d be the biggest animal who lives on the land.” Thus begins the patterned text, with the titular phrase introducing a series of facts every few pages; all are told with a pleasant cadence and occasional rhymes or near rhymes. From the start, the text is engaging and full of whimsical imagery: After the opening text compares elephants’ ears to tent flaps and their thick hides to blankets, it says: “You’d turn the next page with your trunk, not your hand.” Readers learn about other animals of the savanna, herd behaviors, diet, mud baths, and more—along with a plethora of varied verbs and adjectives. The layout and artwork complement the text perfectly. The stylized art uses a broad but soft spectrum of colors and includes geometric patterns in the elephants’ habitat. The elephants themselves are rendered simply in solid colors and sport winsome faces and stances. A particularly clever illustration shows a baby elephant learning from its mother how to stamp warnings on the ground. The large, gray, tusked mother and her pastel, tuskless child are backgrounded by the page’s stark white; they stand high atop a crazy-quilt representation of sound waves. Good as a read-aloud and for emergent readers, it concludes in a way that leads equally gracefully to the author’s notes or bedtime. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Worth a trumpet. (Informational picture book. 3-7)

IT BEGAN WITH LEMONADE
Sterer, Gideon
Illus. by Cho, Lian
Dial Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 25, 2021
978-0-7352-2828-3

A young entrepreneur is ready to sell homemade lemonade, but everyone else has already staked out the best spots.

The nameless narrator rolls a colorful stand through the diverse city neighborhood and just keeps on going until reaching the countryside. Pushing it up a hill, the kid loses control, and the tall stand with the lemon on top goes careening through the woods until it finally stops near a river. Unexpectedly, a customer arrives! The kid serves up, and then a steady stream of customers float by: an octopus, two alligators, a sea monster, a diver in an old-fashioned helmet, and more. The kid needs to make more lemonade on the spot. After selling out and trudging home, the kid sleeps through the night dreaming about a future riverside lemonade empire. Careful readers will spot many reminders of the adventure in the kid’s bedroom. A toy octopus’s tentacles overflow from a chest, a diver’s helmet sits on the floor, pictures of sea animals and boats adorn the walls. The lines between reality and fantasy blur...but the tip jar is full. Bright cartoon illustrations are full of funny details (the lemonade-stand sign smiles and frowns expressively), and the alliterative text begs to be read aloud: “I sat for a long while, feeling terrible as a turnip,” the kid grumps at one point. The narrator has textured black hair and a ruddy complexion. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Encouragement for moguls-to-be and fun for everyone else. (Picture book. 3-7)

NUMBERS EVERYWHERE
Strauss, Linda Leopold
Illus. by Infante, Sara
Holiday House (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-8234-4321-5

Four-line poems introduce the numbers zero to nine opposite stylized, colorful mixed-media illustrations that incorporate them.

The relevant numeral is printed clearly over each poem and worked into the pictures, with dotted blue lines to help readers find them. This device sometimes works against itself. For example, the poem headed “9” reads: “Curve out and back in— / Do it once, then repeat: / A three is red pepper / On pizza. Let’s eat!” The poem is inviting, but the red pepper’s on the pizza slices opposite are obscured by the dotted blue lines superimposed on them. There are also three people to count and three tuning pegs on the banjo one kid plays. Those elements of the illustration are clear enough, but locating the numeral can be hard. Most pictures share this difficulty, although some, like the two balls of the snowman representing 8, are easier to spot. (Eight children play around the snowman, and there are eight pieces of coal marking its features.) The pictures include people with varying skin tones. In acknowledgment of the difficulty of the concept, a concluding double-page spread with number shapes incorporated into the composition is followed by an identical spread with the number shapes circled for readers to confirm their guesses. The rear endpapers offer each numeral with a corresponding number of thumbnails from the appropriate earlier spread for extra practice.

Hard-to-find numbers make this counting book one to skip. (Picture book. 3-5)
HOW TO BE AN ART REBEL
Street, Ben
Illus. by Wright, Jay Daniel
Thames & Hudson (80 pp.)
$17.95 | May 18, 2021
978-0-500-65164-3

How to make looking at art more fun—or at least not staid.

Led by a marmalade cat in a beret and leather jacket, the museum tour is largely designed to encourage “rebels” to look for symbols, metaphors, and messages, hidden or otherwise, in select art reproductions exemplifying various genres, subjects, media, and styles. Efforts to lighten the load with, for instance, references to “butts” and “boobies” in a chapter on “Nude Art,” a cartoon fart added by Wright to the Mona Lisa, and a 17th-century still life not of fruit or flowers but hunks of cheese by Clara Peeters (“one of the best cheese painters ever”) really only distract from Street’s often acute comments. Readers who look beyond the yuks will learn that the necklace of thorns Frida Kahlo placed about her neck in a self portrait evokes her chronic physical ills and the importance of understanding that abstract art isn’t about things but feelings. Refreshingly, though the genitalia in the Nude Art section are discreetly covered, the bodies on display include one with dwarfism, another that is pregnant and has no arms, and a third that is identified as the artist’s “coming-out.” Young viewers in need of a systematic course in how to see art had best look elsewhere, but they will come away with new tools, ideas worth mulling…and at least two bits of universal life wisdom: “Always have fun. And be weird.”

Street makes a better critic than comedian, but he has some solid insights to share. (glossary, list of artworks) (Nonfiction. 9-13)

THE ORPHEUS PLOT
Swiedler, Christopher
Harper/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-289444-1

A young Belter cadet deals with a rebellion in space.

Lucas Adebayo’s dream has come true: He’s the first Belter cadet in the Earther Navy. Well, the first openly Belter cadet—the true first was his adopted sister, Tali Chen, who’s posing as the only Martian. Though Tali’s actions are understandable given the Navy’s history of bias against people from the asteroid belt, who are marginalized and disdained by those from Earth, Luna, and Mars, Lucas is hurt that Tali doesn’t want anyone to know they are siblings. After Tali discourages him from joining the Navy with ambiguous, ominous warnings, Lucas sees her planting a device on the ship’s hull, investigates, and a rebellion plot unfolds. Lucas wrestles with guilt over his enjoyment of being in the Navy, loving the thrill of the chase but feeling conflicted about arresting Belters for relatively minor infractions while knowing how devastating imprisonment will be for them. Unfortunately, the theme of marginalized communities seeking justice is presented without nuance in a way that feels culturally disconnected from current events and seems to equate identity and difference with conflict while erasing the fundamental problem of an existing imbalance in power. The narrative’s assertion that the oppressed simply need to talk with their oppressors to bring about change feels simplistic at best, underestimating what is otherwise a well-paced and well-plotted book. Racial and ethnic diversity are suggested through names.

Disappointing. (Science fiction. 10-14)

JENNY MEI IS SAD
Subisak, Tracy
Illus. by the author
Little, Brown (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-316-53771-1

Jenny Mei may smile and joke around, but her best friend knows that inside, she is sad.

A small, unnamed Black child with two Afro puffs describes best friend Jenny Mei (who presents Asian): a girl who can smile, share, and make people laugh even though she’s sad. But when Jenny Mei has a bad day and acts out in school, the narrator is there for her in all the ways a friend can be: waiting after school while Jenny talks with the teacher, being a good listener, or just being together—with popsicles. After a quiet walk, a game of kick the rock, and a quick exhibition of blue and purple tongues, Jenny Mei begins to cry. But our narrator is there with her, “for fun and not-fun and everything in between.” The multiplicity of emotions and depth of friendship are conveyed by Subisak’s deceptively simple text (averaging one sentence per spread) and whimsical, attentive illustrations. The characters are drawn with black outlines, colorful outfits, and dots for eyes that seem to say it all. And while the reason Jenny Mei is sad is never explicitly stated, subtle clues will give perceptive readers an idea of what’s happening in her life. Focus, however, stays on what is most important: the quiet support of a friend who understands.

Intelligently and sympathetically demonstrates that children have complex emotional lives too. (Picture book. 4-7)
STRONG LIKE THE SEA
Swore, Wendy S.
Shadow Mountain (304 pp.)
$16.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-62972-902-2

A tween in Hawaii is challenged to overcome her fear of the ocean.
Alex, 12, lives near the ocean in Laie on Oahu, but a traumatic experience has left her unwilling to set foot in the water despite her friends’ coaxing. She misses her mom, an intelligence analyst on a Navy submarine, who like to challenge Alex with fun ciphers and codes. Her latest challenge takes Alex out of her comfort zone; to solve it, she’ll have to confront her fears to find the clues her mom has secreted. Alex’s busy, mainland-born dad and the Japanese American Tānakas—her mother’s hānai, or informal adoptive parents—provide occasional clues, but Alex must work out the answers. While the remarkable Hawaiian landscape, flora and fauna, and cultural features (racial and ethnic particulars excepted) are exhaustively and accurately detailed, the story falls flat. Alex is more tour guide than protagonist, translating Hawaiian and Pidgin words for nonlocal readers and slowing the action to describe or explain points of interest. With four wise adults guiding her, she’s seldom at a loss, and it’s her desperate struggle alone in the powerful ocean that make readers care.

though the sentiment displayed by these toucan characters shines through. Colorful cartoon illustrations augment the positive portrayal of the significance of younger-sibling ambition and self-worth supported by an older sibling’s cooperation and understanding. The birds live in a home with human furnishings but do not wear clothes (except slippers); they wear their head feathers, however, in a ponytail and pigtails. *(This book was reviewed digitally)*

Sisterly affection and admiration sweetly serves to strengthen the rapport between siblings. *(Picture book. 3-5)*

A Little Sister Story
Tod, Brandon
Illus. by the author
Philomel (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-593-11763-7

A little sister is eager to do everything big sister does.
A frustrated little toucan describes how her big sister can make her own breakfast, tie her own shoes, and read her own books. Big sister says, “I tou-can,” but little sister says “I tou-can’t.” No matter how diligent the effort, sometimes little sister is just too little. “IT’S NOT FAIR THAT I’M LITTLE.” But when big sister comes down with a cold and doesn’t feel like doing anything, little sister is there, ready to help. She gets her sister slippers and snacks, then tells her a story. Proud of herself, little sister decides she deserves a reward. Climbing to reach the candy jar atop the refrigerator, she tumbles, falls, and creates a mess. Big sister comes to the rescue, reminding little sister that she is still little. No matter; the love between these siblings wins out with little moments they share together. The play on the phrase *I can too* that so many younger siblings favor in their attempts to follow and copy may be lost on little listeners, yet the sentiment displayed by these toucan characters shines through. Colorful cartoon illustrations augment the positive portrayal of the significance of younger-sibling ambition and self-worth supported by an older sibling’s cooperation and understanding. The birds live in a home with human furnishings but do not wear clothes (except slippers); they wear their head feathers, however, in a ponytail and pigtails. *(This book was reviewed digitally)*

Sisterly affection and admiration sweetly serves to strengthen the rapport between siblings. *(Picture book. 3-5)*

POEM IN MY POCKET
Tougas, Chris
Illus. by Bisaillon, Josée
Kids Can (24 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5235-0145-2

An unnamed protagonist arrives home with a poem in their pocket. Unfortunately, the protagonist doesn’t realize that that pocket has a hole in it. Words, verses, and stanzas tumble out of the poet’s pocket, and a sudden wind scatters them down the stairs and into the neighborhood. Before long, the mischievous letters of the poem wreak good-natured havoc, fabricating new nonsensical words, creating new rhymes, and filling the world with puns. The poet runs after the letters, trying to catch them. Eventually, the poet gathers the letters together and tries to recreate the original poem only to find that it is a puzzle they are unable to solve. When the wind dies down, the rain starts, and the words are scattered again. Will the poet be able to recreate their poem? Or would words and letters rather be free to play? This rhyming picture book is a celebration of the flexibility of language. The illustrations incorporate age-appropriate puns, nonsense words, and other forms of wordplay that are sure to delight young readers and the adults who read to them. Although the text does not explicitly embrace diverse themes, in the illustrations, the protagonist is an ambiguously gendered kid of color. The brightly colored landscape looks urban, but it could be set almost anywhere in the world.

This book about wordplay strikes the “write” balance between silly and sincere. *(Picture book. 4-8)*

PARATOU, THE UMBRELLA
Traoré, Marion
Illus. by the author
Reycraft Books (24 pp.)
$15.95 | May 28, 2021
978-1-4788-7378-5

A story of what happens when we share.
Sékou, the village chief’s oldest son, travels to market with his father and returns with an object that no one thinks they need during the dry season in this West African village: a colorful parcours, W endy S.
*Shadow Mountain* (304 pp.)
$16.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-62972-902-2

“Culturally immersive, exquisitely illustrated, and endearingly playful.”
*Paratou, the Umbrella*
“Vandorn’s rounded monster/animal characters are creatively varied and intriguing, and her storytelling simple but nuanced.”

**MONSTER FRIENDS**

umbrella. Standing on a chair, the boy announces the umbrella’s availability to everyone, provided they return it to his father’s hut each evening. A mother shades her newborn beneath it; boys make money by using it as the roof of a “pee-shack” for bus travelers; and fishermen can use it to keep the elephants’ spray from soaking them at the riverside. By the time the umbrella returns, tattered and torn, Sekou has become the village chief, and his son starts the sharing cycle all over again. Traoré creates arresting cut-paper collage illustrations with bright, bold colors and simple shapes against generous white space that will invite readers back to the pages again and again. Reminiscent of Synthia Saint James’ artwork, the characters in this picture book have no facial features, but Traoré portrays them so expressively that they don’t need them; one can easily read joy, impatience, excitement, and welcome in their body language. The use of brown type against the constant white background reminds readers that brown is the visual default in this world of beautiful Black people. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

Culturally immersive, exquisitely illustrated, and endearingly playful, *Monster Friends* should be as widely shared as the umbrella. *(Picture book. 4-8)*

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**THE FLYERS**

*Turley, Beth*

Simon & Schuster (224 pp.)

$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-95447862-1

A quiet tween finds her voice during a weeklong magazine internship in Manhattan.

Seventh grader Elena Martinez and her best friend, Summer, love *Spread Your Wings* magazine. They both apply to be Flyers—the four readers selected annually to spend a summer week contributing to the September back-to-school issue. When only Elena, an aspiring therapist and songwriter, is chosen, she worries the experience will fracture her lifelong friendship with Summer, who has begun spending more time with a cross-country teammate and seems to resent being Elena’s only friend. Considering that socially anxious Elena can barely speak aloud in class, she’s especially intimidated about meeting Cailin Carter, a Flyer who is an elite Texas cheerleader, reality television star, and social media presence. After arriving in New York City, Elena supports fashion-loving Flyer Whitney Richards as she’s having a panic attack at the train station. The final Flyer, Harlow Yoshida, is a budding investigative journalist eager to sink her teeth into a good story. The author captures the awkwardness and excitement of four tween girls getting to know one another, learning about publishing, and having adventures in the city. The story also thoughtfully explores anxiety, self-esteem, and influencer culture. Elena is Puerto Rican, Whitney is cued as Black, Harlow is Japanese American, and Summer and Cailin are White; race does not play a role in the story.

A short, sweet tale of expanding horizons, nurturing friendships, and pursuing passions. *(author’s note) (Fiction. 8-12)*

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**SHADY BABY**

*Union Wade, Gabrielle & Wade Jr., Daynue*

Illus. by Whitaker, Tara Nicole

Harper/HarperCollins (32 pp.)

$18.99 | May 18, 2021

978-0-06-305403-5

Inspired by the authors’ own daughter, Shady Baby brings a vivacious style and presence to every part of her day and to all the people she cares about.

“Shady might be tiny / but she’s a mighty big deal!” Her day starts by coordinating fashion, then she drops beats at the pool and plays a quick pickup game with her stuffed animals, all followed by a trip to the park. When trouble brews among other kids at the park, who argue over swings and fall short on sharing, Shady steps up. “Shady stands real tall / flashing her famous side-eye. / Then she says to [the kids] / ‘You should give kindness a try.’ ” And they do, even helping Shady in kind when someone steals her toy. It’s all in a day’s work of being fabulous, and before bed, Shady relaxes and settles in for her favorite family snuggles. Laid out in rollicking rhyme, the text sets a pace as energetic as its protagonist, keeping the pages turning and the rhythm bouncing for storytime read-alouds and independent readers alike. Toddler enthusiasm and artful side-eye come to life in Whitaker’s bright, open spreads and saturated color palette, bringing vibrancy to Shady’s many boss moves. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

Serving looks and a little bit of shade with every reread. *(Picture book. 3-7)*

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**MONSTER FRIENDS**

*Vandorn, Kaeti*

Illus. by the author

Random House Graphic (272 pp.)

$12.99 | $15.99 PLB | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-98489682-7

978-0-593-12539-7 PLB

Reggie’s summer job as housesitter for a family away on travels turns out to be unexpectedly happy.

At a time that would normally be filled with exciting pursuits, Reggie is instead spending a quiet, solitary summer near the ocean. Reggie’s slightly unhappy and fearful vibe hints that all has not been going well in the monster’s life. There’s a pile of unanswered correspondence to deal with and an unsettling dream on the first night in the big house. Reggie is befriended by purple-spotted Emily, one of five sisters in a family of multi-hued, rabbitlike creatures. Emily is affable and talkative, ready to help Reggie overcome loneliness. Emily has her own misery at being dismissed by one sister who is scornful of her more whimsical sensibilities. Reggie and Emily find support in each other during a slightly scary adventure in a sea serpent’s lair. Reggie, who looks like an unprepossessing one-eyed, small blob with pointed ears, can, as demonstrated in the opening pages,
stretch like rubber to reach a high shelf—and has other, even more impressive, abilities that make appearances later. Vanderdorn’s sunny, not-quite-pastel palette transforms the shadows that accompany Reggie’s arrival into a landscape of green fields, colorful gardens, and warm blue sea. Her rounded monster/animal characters are creatively varied and intriguing, and her storytelling simple but nuanced.

A sweety encouraging look at the way friendship can mend heart and soul. (Graphic fiction. 7-10)

**CIAO, SANDRO!**
Varni, Steven
Illus. by Lozano, Luciano
Abrams (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-4197-4390-0

Take a tour of Venice from a dog’s-eye view.

Meet Sandro, a small black and tan dog with perky ears and wide cartoon eyes. He and his gondolier owner, Nicola, wear matching blue-and-white striped tops, with a dashing straw hat for Nic and a red neckerchief for Sandro. Together, they spend their days on the canals of Venice, but today Sandro “has[s] people to see, places to go!” and embarks on a secret mission that takes him, and readers with him, on an uneventful tour of the historic city. This confident little dog marches through small alleys, crosses bridges, and even boards a vaporetto (a Venetian water bus) to ensure everything is shipshape for—surprise!—Nic’s birthday party. Despite a hearty sprinkling of Italian phrases and Venice-specific terms (complete with a glossary at the back), the book really fails to convey the vibrancy of Venice, which, as a major global cultural center and tourist hot spot, is in reality constantly bustling with dense, diverse crowds conspicuously absent from the dull, static illustrations. Everyone depicted, named or otherwise, has one of two skin tones: unvaried peach for White people (including Nicola) or a cadaverous taupe for people of color. While Varni’s writing lovingly evokes this European capital, the visual accompaniment fails to do justice to this heart-stoppingly beautiful city. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

It’s a good thing *ciao* can mean hello—or goodbye. (Picture book. 5-8)

**DANCING IN THATHA’S FOOTSTEPS**
Venkat, Srividhya
Illus. by Ramchandran, Kavita
Yali Books (36 pp.)
$19.99 | Jun. 30, 2021
978-1-949528-90-9

On Sundays, Varun’s grandfather takes Varun’s sister, Varsha, to dance lessons where she learns bharatanatyam, a South Asian dance style estimated to be 2,000 years old.

When Thatha invites Varun to come and watch the lesson, he doesn’t think that he’ll be interested. To Varun’s surprise, though, he finds the rhythm impossible to resist. Before long, he leaps to his feet and joins in with the other dancers. Dancing makes Varun feel wonderful—that is, until his sister tells him he has to stop because dancing is not for boys. Although Thatha objects, revealing that he used to be an accomplished dancer in India, Varun still feels uncomfortable. After all, if he did join his sister’s dance class, he would be the only boy. With a little help from Thatha, Varun musters up the courage to follow his dreams—and to prove that gender stereotypes are no match for the power of performance. This book’s charming protagonist and believable plot provide a wonderful opening for conversations about the dangers of strict gender constructs. The vibrant paintings take readers to a diverse U.S. city, cleverly incorporating details such as a Pride flag and a Black Lives Matter sign that establish a clear political tone. In this context, the author’s note disappoints, focusing on discrimination male dancers face instead of challenging the kind of toxic masculinity Varun overcomes in the story.

A culturally responsive picture-book critique of gender roles. (Picture book. 4-8)

**TRUE COLORS**
Viana, Gonçalo
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Negra, Orfeu
Princeton Architectural Press (38 pp.)
$18.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-64896-009-3

In a double-layered metafictive mystery imported from Portugal, readers face at least one puzzle—but are there any answers?

The most overt mystery’s a cheerful meta-media classic: Some things in this picture book are the wrong color. “Once upon a time, there were two friends, an orange dog, a red kite, and a white...tree?” The tree’s trunk is brown, but its big, puffy canopy is cloudy white. Rebooting—“Let’s start over. Once upon a time, there were two friends, an orange dog, and a green...cloud?”—doesn’t help: “This illustrator is terrible!” Meanwhile, Viana’s illustrations offer a stew that’s stranger and more intriguing than the simple textual arc about incorrect colors. Disembodied eyeballs, mechanical wired arms, laboratories of weird science (pumps, conveyor belts, bubbling beakers, dials, umbrellas), and scientists (one pink-skinned, one brown-skinned) with Muppet-like noses populate scenes whose meaning never solidifies. Checkerboard patterns of faces might represent observers or more scientists; multicolored circles might mean never solidifies. Checkerboard patterns of faces might represent observers or more scientists; multicolored circles might mean more scientists; multicolored circles might mean more scientists; multicolored circles might mean more scientists; multicolored circles might mean more scientists; multicolored circles might mean more scientists; multicolored circles might mean more scientists; multicolored circles might mean more scientists; multicolored circles might mean...—walls of eyes, the sun as a lime-green eyeball, and all the weird science—will attract readers with a taste for the surreal.

Full of peculiar buzz. (Picture book. 4-7)
TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH
Vrabel, Beth
Atheneum (272 pp.) $17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021 978-1-5344-7859-6

Stories, whether they are sad or happy—or both—reveal truths that make a difference and that can heal.

Nothing illustrates this better than the stories about her childhood that Gran whispered into Trixy's ears, right up until her tragic death. Trixy feels better as she shares Gran's stories at school, but no one, not even her mother, believes they are true. Mama resents that Gran didn't talk about her past with her and struggles with her grief. Determined Trixy sets out to uncover the truth. She stows away on a road trip that her friend Raymond Crickett and his sister are taking with their dad's band. As it happens, many of the stops are places in Tennessee that Gran had outlined as tour stops for Mr. Crickett years before. Trixy narrates with spirit and insight, describing the present-day events and interspersing them with Gran's colorful stories about the past.

Sure enough, Gran's tales provide a path to reunion and reconciliation. As the richly drawn characters, past and present, are introduced, their storylines and their lives become interwoven. Themes of love, abandonment, hardship, and triumph are explored. Difficult topics and dramatic revelations are softened by the leisurely pace and the humorous interactions between headstrong Trixy and sensible, sensitive Raymond. Most satisfying of all is that Gran's tales prepare Trixy for her own future. Main characters default to White.

Poignant and uplifting. (Fiction. 8-12)

Q & U CALL IT QUITS
Wade, Stef
Illus. by Martin, Jorge

In the world of the alphabet, letters work together as partners to make sounds and words.

“Q and U [are] quick friends. Just like T and H, who [are] thick as thieves.” More and more words are created by the Q-U team as they quilt together, play games (involving quests and conquest), and even go on field trips (encountering quacking ducks and squealing pigs on a farm). But though they are good friends, U sometimes feels a bit bothered and would like some time alone or with another letter. “Q needed her more than she needed him.” It is, of course, easy for the letter U to team up and be a part of words that do not include the letter Q, but that does not quite work for Q. As their separation continues, the other letters of the alphabet also begin to detach from their partners until a loud argument results in an overall inability to make words. “With S ignoring H, there was no way to SHHHH! or HUSH the crowd.” This prompts Q and U to reconcile in order to shout the word “QUIET!!!!!!!” Shocked, the other letters reunite and begin to create their cooperative words again. The witty text incorporates lots of pertinent examples with blends and digraphs highlighted in red. Martin illustrates the fun with colorful individual letter characters who all have eyes, mouths, legs, and arms.

An amusing and applicable story to enhance a reading lesson’s significance of letter pairs. (Picture book. 5-8)

OLD PEARL
Wahman, Wendy
Illus. by the author
Caitlyn Dlouhy/Atheneum (40 pp.) $17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021 978-1-5344-6269-4

A child befriends a bird then copes with losing it.

Theo, a brown-skinned boy with curly, brown hair, likes to feed the birds at the park. “He tried his hardest to aim his seeds toward the bird with the raggedy wing,” notes the text. When this bird is nearly attacked by a dog, Theo rescues it and brings it home to his grandmother Pearl, after whom he's named the bird (and who shares his coloring but with gray hair). Grandma Pearl helps him care for the bird, and they even bring it to a veterinarian. After learning the bird doesn’t have anything wrong with it (it’s just old), Grandma Pearl is persuaded to keep it at their home to convalesce. The softly edged cartoons show cozy scenes of Theo caring for Old Pearl, and then they depict his sadness when the bird dies. Grandma Pearl helps Theo mourn this loss. A closing scene shows him carrying an origami bird he’s made in tribute to Old Pearl to the park, where he sees a one-legged bird who seems to need extra care, too. While a closing author’s note cautions readers not to touch wild animals, even in attempts to help them, the story and tender illustrations send a starkly different message, which may prove confusing. Also odd is the choice to color these urban birds a uniform yellow rather than representing them as something recognizable, such as pigeons. (This book was reviewed digitally.)
Sweet but sadly bewildering. (Picture book. 3-6)

SCAREDY SQUIRREL IN A NUTSHELL
Watt, Mélanie
Illus. by the author

Always be prepared...to be underprepared.

Scaredy Squirrel is perfectly happy to stay in his nut tree, away from the myriad dangers plaguing the outside world, like
An impressive collection of fears and cameos, including the struggles of a tween forced by a parent's mental health issues to grow up too quickly. The author also seamlessly weaves in typical school dramas rather than solely making this about Meg's and Riley's challenges. Both girls read as White.

Though their paths continue to cross, the girls are slow to warm about Meg's and Riley's challenges. Both girls read as White.

But the best-laid plans of squirrels and men oft go awry, leading Scaredy to discover that sometimes, a risk can yield a mighty (and tasty) reward. With this outing, Watt gives her award-winning Scaredy Squirrel picture-book series, published over a decade ago, a graphic-novel upgrade for a contemporary audience. Fortunately, no familiarity with the series is required to quickly get a grasp of this quirky, querulous, and ultimately rather adorable character. The simple story is enlivened by bold, expressive artwork and stylistic embellishments; Scaredy, an overthinker top to tail, is especially fond of lists and charts.

An impressive collection of fears and cameos, including the insidiously ubiquitous Gary the Germ, promises plenty of nutty adventures to come (confirmed in the concluding FAQ).

**In a nutshell: short and sweet.** *(Graphic fiction. 6-9)*

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**IT ALL BEGINS WITH JELLY BEANS**

*Weetman, Nova*  
McElderry (256 pp.)  
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021  
978-1-5344-9431-2

Two 12-year-olds from different worlds find themselves needing each other.

Meg Kieran and Riley Jackson meet in the nurse's office of their Australian elementary school—and each is curious about why the other is there. Since her father's death, Meg has been anxious and having panic attacks; her severely depressed mother can't work, and money is tight. Now, when life gets overwhelming, Meg escapes to the nurse's office, where she can have a snack and read her favorite book, *Anne of Green Gables*. Riley, on the other hand, craves freedom and autonomy in managing her Type 1 diabetes. Struggling to fit in at her new school—especially since her overprotective mother doesn't allow her many social activities—she's uncomfortable discussing her diabetes.

Though their paths continue to cross, the girls are slow to warm to one another. But if they can get past their preconceived notions, maybe they'll find they have more in common than the emergency jelly beans Riley shares with Meg. Told in alternating first-person chapters, this narrative sensitively portrays a young person learning to manage a chronic health condition as well as the struggles of a tween forced by a parent's mental health issues to grow up too quickly. The author also seamlessly weaves in typical school dramas rather than solely making this about Meg's and Riley's challenges. Both girls read as White.

An emotionally honest portrayal that is empowering to those seen as different. *(Fiction. 8-12)*

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**STINGERS**  
*White, Randy Wayne*  
Roaring Brook (320 pp.)  
$16.99 | May 11, 2021  
978-1-250-24463-5

A visit to a small Bahamian island pitches young shark taggers into a whirl of encounters with natural hazards, pirates past and present, and more than one kind of hidden treasure.

Following on their adventures with shark poachers in the series opener, *Fins* (2020), 13-year-old Maribel; her younger sister, Sabina (both Cuban refugees); and White ex-farm boy Luke teamed up as Sharks Incorporated. They have barely arrived on idyllic, cave-riddled Katt Island to help their secretive biologist employer investigate the invasive lionfish that are devastating the local reef ecology before one is sucked into a tidal whirlpool, another falls into a pit and finds a golden doubloon and all three save an elderly author from sharks. Folding in real-life issues such as the pressures poverty puts on the racially diverse local residents as well as info-dumps on natural and island history as he goes, White puts his trio, who are joined by the writer and a young islander, on the trail of a century-old mystery featuring descendants of Anne Bonny and other pirates and also up against a bumbling but scary pair of treasure hunters on the way to climactic revelations, a glittering hoard, and the pursuit of poachers who are hunting hitching sea turtles. Anything else? Well, there may or may not be a ghost or two in the mix, too.

Something for everyone but especially fans of fast-paced eco-fiction. *(Adventure. 9-12)*

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**THE AWESOME 50 STATES**  
*Williams, Dinah*  
Shelter Harbor Press (216 pp.)  
$19.99 | May 18, 2021  
978-1-62795-167-8

A plethora of facts about the U.S. states and territories for young information browsers and trivia surfers.

The highly visual, energetic layout of this guide keeps a dense mix of photos, graphics, and typefaces clear and accessible and packs in plenty of information about curious state-specific phenomena. Each state's four-page section spotlights, among other things, a map silhouette, a dessert, a state food, a ride (most often in an amusement park), and some state facts (including bird, nickname, and date of statehood). Flags are not included. Also included are facts labeled the "Oldest in America" (mostly European settlements and structures) and "Spookiest Spot." "Horrifying History" features natural disasters, accidents, war, and violent human tragedies. Mostly missing are scientific inventions and discoveries—other than geological or paleontological—as well as celebration of racial
“The unlikely duo of Shark and Bot inhabits large, colorful panels full of fourth-wall-breaking humor and wombat facts.”

SLEEPAWAY CHAMPS

“Funniest Town Name”—or worse. Slaughter Beach, Delaware, Roadside Attraction.” Duke Kahanamoku in Waikiki is given as Hawaii’s “Weirdest First Crush—maintains a sense of forward progress while Ottilie Narroway. The split focus—further divided between her friend danger (such as once-solitary kinds banding together and operating in coordinated ways). When dredretches start slipping into the fort itself, the other girls—menial workers called sculkies—grapple with just how vulnerable they are, being unarmed and untrained. Challenging the male-privileging status quo poses its own set of dangers, though—namely risking setting a literal witch hunt. The leadership has become aware of the hooded figure from the first installment and believes that someone must have let it in. When Ottilie isn’t trying to figure a way to get the other girls trained to protect themselves or scoring points to improve her huntsman ranking, she teams with Alba and Skip to try to sneak off with books that might unlock the truth about the hex and why the dredretches are plaguing the Narroway. The split focus—further divided between her friend Scoot’s feeling like she’s ditching him and Ottilie’s getting a first crush—maintains a sense of forward progress while Ottilie uncovers answers for questions posed in the first book and allows complex characterization to shine. Most characters read as White.

Exceptionally fun; readers will clamor for the trilogy’s conclusion. (Fantasy. 10-15)
help). They get care packages from home that include the newest Glo-Nuts book. They even come up with a killer (nothing deadly) act for the talent show. Summer camp turns out to be more fun than they expected...despite all the rainbow sparkles and uber-happy song breaks. Yanish’s second graphic novel for new-to–chapter-books readers is even more fun than the series opener. The unlikely duo of Shark and Bot (with Batty the wombat in tow) inhabits large, colorful panels full of fourth-wall-breaking humor and wombat facts. Facts about wombats and instructions on how to draw Batty appear at the close.

**Age-appropriate, deadpan shark—er, snark at its best.** (Graphic fiction. 6-9)

**PRIDE PICTURE BOOKS**

**DADDY & DADA**
Brockington, Ryan & Webster, Isaac
Illus. by May, Lauren
Little, Brown (32 pp.)
$16.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-316-42702-9

Rumi wants you to meet her family.

Rumi is 4, and she has two dads (the Daddy and Dada of the title), a little brother named Xander, and a dog named Betty. Daddy sings with her. Dada reads to her. (Xander likes to pull her hair.) Her friends have families of different types—some with a mom and a dad and others with just one parent. One boy in her neighborhood lives with just his grandmother and her cat. Rumi sees families of all sizes and makeup when she walks down the street with hers. She has two sets of grandparents (both seem to be heterosexual pairings). Her family also includes Uncle TyTy and Uncle RyRy (she danced at their wedding) and Aunt Katie and Uncle Jeremy and their kids. One of her friends calls Rumi her sister, and Rumi’s dads think that is great because friends can be family too. Now Rumi wants to hear about your family. Brockington and Webster, who head a two-dad family themselves, have laid out a beautifully kid-friendly introduction to an entire menagerie of dancers just down the road. Inspired by these like-minded animals—not just llamas, but bears, penguins, giraffes, and more—Larry develops the courage to be honest with his friends. This bravery leads to the sharing of some other secrets, and the foursome celebrates living authentically. The energetic story is supported by colorful illustrations that read equally well from a lap or from the back of a storytime group. The occasional witty aside will make caregivers and educators chuckle as they read the story again and again. The title will be on heavy rotation during Pride month, but it sets a catchy beat for all other times of the year as well.

**Will dance off the shelves.** (Picture book. 6-10)

**LLAMA GLAMARAMA**
Green, Simon James
Illus. by Parsons, Garry
Orchard/Scholastic (32 pp.)
$14.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-338-73618-2

A toe-tapping book about being true to yourself.

Larry has a secret. Sure, he’s a polite rule-follower by day, but by night this barn dweller’s inner superstar comes to life: as a ‘toe-tappin’, hand-clappin’, dizzlin’ dancin’ llama!” But although Larry loves to cut a rug in private, when three llama friends barge in on him one night, Larry makes the responsible choice...and runs away, avoiding any sort of confrontation. OK, that may not be the best decision, but it’s one that leads Larry to explore life outside the barn, and it allows him to discover an entire menagerie of dancers just down the road. Inspired by these like-minded animals—not just llamas, but bears, penguins, giraffes, and more—Larry develops the courage to be honest with his friends. This bravery leads to the sharing of some other secrets, and the foursome celebrates living authentically. The energetic story is supported by colorful illustrations that read equally well from a lap or from the back of a storytime group. The occasional witty aside will make caregivers and educators chuckle as they read the story again and again. The title will be on heavy rotation during Pride month, but it sets a catchy beat for all other times of the year as well.

**A heartfelt celebration of family love.**

A young pigtailed protagonist and their two fathers are the stars of this picture-book adventure. In the illustrations, the dads, one White and one Black, share bedtime duty as they wrangle their child through a few stories and tub time, then finally to bed. And in the narration, the child, who is depicted with tan skin and brown hair, explains why they love their dads. The child’s remarks include a glimpse into their adopted scene with Orientalist tropes, including a turban on the White dad (the Black dad is dressed as a medieval European...
monarch). The story is simple and treads familiar ground, but it does so in such a tender way that readers will enjoy returning to it again and again. Those with pajama storytime programs and families looking for their next great bedtime read will find this book particularly useful.

A sweet adventure. (Picture book. 4-8) (This review was first published in our April 1, 2021, issue. We reprint it here for our readers’ convenience.)

TWO GROOMS ON A CAKE
The Story of America’s First Gay Wedding
Sanders, Rob
Illus. by Cathro, Robbie
Little Bee (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-4998-0956-5

The first legal gay marriage in the U.S. was held in...1971.

The two groom figurines on the top of the cake at the first legal same-sex wedding celebration narrate the story of Jack and Michael, who met in 1966. The cake-topping grooms compare the creation of the cake they will stand on to the growing relationship of the couple and then to their struggle to get a marriage license, which includes law school, a name change (from Jack to the gender-neutral Pat), and a solo visit to City Hall for the license (for Michael). The cake is finished; the license is granted. Michael and Jack celebrate their wedding...but the battle for equality is far from over. Fifty years on, the couple is even more in love, and finally LGBTQ+ couples can marry in all 50 states. Sanders tells the tale in easy-to-understand language, sweet as the frosting on the cake, and leaves the bulk of the details for the comprehensive backmatter: author’s note, marriage equality timeline, photographs of Jack and Michael as young and older men, and a well-rounded bibliography. Cathro’s whimsical, retro-feeling illustrations on cream-colored paper show the cake toppers assisting in the creation of the cake as their human counterparts work for the right to marry. Both cake toppers and human grooms present White. (This book was reviewed digitally).

As beautiful as it is informative about this little-known battle in the fight for equality. (Picture book. 4-6)

PRIDE PUPPY!
Stevenson, Robin
Illus. by McLaughlin, Julie
Orca (32 pp.)
$19.95 | May 11, 2021
978-1-4598-2484-3

LGBTQIA+ ABC + dog = fun!
This queer-centric alphabet book follows a young light-brown-skinned protagonist of ambiguous gender, their moms (an interracial couple), baby sibling, and rambunctious dog as they get ready to head off to a Pride parade. Disaster looms, however, when a tumble leads to a loose dog and a chase through the parade to reunite the four-legged member of the family with its bipedal owners. Each page introduces the next letter of the alphabet, advancing the story and along the way offering a plethora of vocabulary words (sometimes in print, sometimes in illustrations—a concluding search-and-find word list will send readers back through the book). While the story is sweet, the illustrations are the real stars of the show, depicting realistic characters and a crowd that is diverse in age, skin tone, racial presentation, size and shape, ability, and body modification. The cartoon illustrations are highly detailed, which may make the book challenging for large-group storytimes, but it will keep lap-readers invested as they pore over the characters, designs, and background actions. The only thing missing is a flag identification guide to help caregivers identify the variety of identities found and supported within the book. That quibble aside, the book is sheer delight and will be a welcome addition to shelves everywhere.

Highly—and proudly—recommended. (Picture book. 4-6)
A teen girl navigates a world that is new to her—and that she is tasked to save.

Sixteen-year-old Ebba is now an official Citizen of Table Island and one of the richest people there, more powerful than she ever could have imagined. Many are eager to take advantage of her naivety. Her biggest challenges are figuring out how to leverage her wealth and power and make her farm more profitable in order to provide for more people than she anticipated—all while trying to find the four missing amulets that will prevent the coming of the second Calamity. But all Ebba really wants is to be happy and carefree with her first love, Micah, and the friends she grew up with. Plagued by secrets and a new source of insecurity in the form of a perceived rival in love, it’s uncertain whether Ebba will figure out to whom she can turn to help save herself and those she cares about. Set in a fantasy version of South Africa and featuring a multiethnic cast, Brain’s follow-up to The Thousand Steps (2019) is a weaker effort than its predecessor: Ebba is an underdeveloped protagonist whose recklessly impulsive and indecisive behavior may frustrate readers. Clunky transitions made it difficult to invest in the story, resulting in confusing, anticlimactic scenes.

A tepid sequel filled with angst, power grabs, and politics. (maps, family tree) (Fantasy. 14-adult)
Read a Book, Change Your Mind

Sometimes we read purely for entertainment, or we need the comfort of being affirmed by a book. But at other times reading is about actively engaging with and digesting provocative new ideas that can change our minds and transform how we act in the world.

This kind of reading can be uncomfortable, especially if we are not used to recognizing that the things we assume, observe, and experience are not universal. Common responses are doubt and dismissal: I think that situation is implausible, I think this book was written with an agenda in mind. These objections fail to recognize that a scenario unfamiliar to one reader may spark joyful recognition in many others and that we frequently fail to regard as agendas viewpoints that align with our own beliefs.

Case in point: A scene in a middle-grade novel involving a gay wedding and a homophobic relative was labeled excessively dramatic and unrealistic by some straight members of my book club. Later, a lesbian children’s librarian friend posted about the same book on social media, saying that scene was her favorite because it got to the heart of how messy and muddled real life is when one is dealing with bias in loved ones.

Here are some recent releases that are great jumping-off points for learning and growing. Of course, some will serve as reassuring mirrors, depending on who you are, but there will be something new here for anyone interested in exploring.

Nonfiction is an obvious place to start, and we could not be luckier with the appealing YA nonfiction offerings available these days.

#MeToo and You: Everything You Need To Know About Consent, Boundaries, and More by Halley Bondy and illustrated by Timothy Corbett (Zest Books, Feb. 2) is a gender-inclusive guide both to a powerful movement and to understanding and applying its principles in real life.

The Disability Experience: Working Toward Belonging by Hannalora Leavitt and illustrated by Belle Wuthrich (Orca, April 13) offers a valuable overview of a complex and important subject area that is far too often overlooked, misunderstood, and misrepresented.

Everything You Wanted To Know About Indians but Were Afraid To Ask (Young Readers Edition) by Anton Treuer (Levine Querido, April 6) is a thorough, clearly organized, and expertly informed introduction to present-day Native American topics and their historical contexts. (Treuer is interviewed on Page 152.)

From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial That Galvanized the Asian American Movement by Paula Yoo (Norton Young Readers, April 20) elucidates the controversy and long-lasting impact of the tragic death of a Chinese American man. (See our interview with the author on Page 146.)

For readers who enjoy fiction, there are plenty of great choices as well.

Indivisible by Daniel Aleman (Little, Brown, May 4) vividly shows readers the psychological trauma experienced by a Mexican American teen after both his parents are taken away by immigration authorities.

Zara Hossain Is Here by Sabina Khan (Scholastic, April 6) is a powerful story about a bisexual Pakistani American girl whose immigrant family is grappling with stress around their visa status as well as Islamophobia.

In The Cost of Knowing by Brittnsey Morris (Simon & Schuster, April 6), a touch of fantasy adds to the emotion of a story that explores the full humanity of Black boys and the burdens they face from society.

All Kinds of Other by James Sie (Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins, May 4) is an uplifting, nuanced story with complex, well-rounded protagonists: two boys in love, one Jewish and White, the other multiracial and trans.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
Mom goes to visit Gran, who relocated to Florida, in order to Ezra blossoms. But things get complicated when Ezra turns out to be a member of the Blumstein clan, rival beekeepers with whom the Hazeldines have had a long-standing feud. The stress of keeping their relationship from her mother and hiding the fact that she turned down a college offer while also trying to earn respect for her beekeeping skills causes Josie's anxieties to increase. Faced with complicated choices, Josie learns to acknowledge her true strengths and, ultimately, to follow her heart. The authentic descriptions of beekeeping, gleaned from the author's personal experiences, and the sensitive depiction of teen anxiety elevate this story. Josie's sympathetic personality and determination to overcome her challenges make for a satisfying read. Main characters present White.

*A sweet romance with deep undercurrents.* (Romance. 14-18)

Joe Biden
46th US President
Currie, Stephen
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)
$30.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-67820-084-8

An experienced nonfiction writer ably summarizes the life of the 46th president.

Long political and personal preparation led to Joe Biden's inauguration as U.S. president in 2021. Currie neatly fits the details of Biden's public and private lives into the publisher's format, dividing his information into five chapters covering the Scranton, Pennsylvania, native's early years; his Delaware political experience and the deaths of his first wife and daughter; his years in the Senate; his years as vice president; and the successful 2020 presidential campaign. An introduction describes the four-day wait for results after Nov. 3, 2020, and offers an overview of Biden's path to the presidency. The opening chapter stresses his modest origins compared to most of his predecessors. The author gives examples of Biden's ability to work across political differences and of some actions which, looking back, caused controversy. He mentions the accusations of plagiarism that derailed his first presidential run in 1988 and the long but unsuccessful primary struggle in 2007-8 before he was offered the position of vice president on Barack Obama's winning team. The final chapter focuses on the winning campaign of 2020. The writing is clear and evenhanded, documented with primary sources including Biden's own memoir and a range of news sources. Occasional photographs, with family members as well as political opponents, support the generally positive tone.

Fittingly solid, if not exciting. (source notes, timeline, further research, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

Castle of Refuge
Dickerson, Melanie
Thomas Nelson (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-7852-3404-3
Series: Dericott Tale

Audrey thinks Edwin, the young squire her father’s chosen for her future husband, is attractive—but she has to contend with her evil older sister, Maris. Maris, who is filled with jealousy and rage, deliberately trips Audrey, pitching her into the fire and leaving her with disfiguring facial scars, thus ending the possibility of a high-status marriage. Maris is sent away to a convent, but four years later, the convent makes her leave, and she returns home angry and filled with resentment. Her father betroths Audrey to a much older man, and, still dreaming of a love match and unable to cope with the double threats of dangerously vindictive Maris and a marriage prospect she despises, she flees. Luckily—and most conveniently—she falls desperately ill just outside Edwin’s castle. Sadly, he’s lost an arm in a battle, so he’s no longer the highly desirable bachelor he once was—except to Audrey. After he discovers her true identity, each gradually reveals their admirable and gentle characters and their shared faith in God. Although sometimes overinclined to tell rather than show, Dickerson does a nice job of evoking late-14th-century England and has succeeded in crafting a pair of engaging—if sugary-sweet—characters that romance readers will enjoy following. The Christian flavor of the story feels natural and appropriate to the time period. The cast defaults to White.

A charming period romance. (Historical romance. 12-18)
to each other. Evans paints a world that is rich with strange magic but is unconcerned with the hows and whys of dryads and vanishing bus stops. Above all, this is a story of queer teens developing vibrant confidence in their own selves and, refreshingly, joy instead of heartache. Although the characterization is slight, some elements are twee, and the plot meanders, the book’s message remains necessary and important. Most characters default to White; the boy is Arab Australian.

A gentle meditation on finding your people and coming into your own magic. (Fabulism. 13-18)

**WE ARE INEVITABLE**
Forman, Gayle
Viking (288 pp.)

Nineteen-year-old Aaron Stein lives with his father, Ira, and works in their used bookstore. When a shelf suddenly collapses, it triggers a domino effect: They can’t afford a replacement, and Aaron discovers they’re in dire financial straits and that his father’s been relying on credit cards to cover expenses. Aaron has been struggling since his older brother’s overdose death and his mother’s subsequent departure. His brother’s years of addiction and final hospitalization wiped the family out; transferring the bookstore’s ownership to Aaron was supposed to offer a clean slate. Aaron can’t bring himself to tell his father that he’s sold the shop to a local business owner. Then party bro Chad, an old friend of his brother’s who uses a wheelchair, shows up in their small town in the Cascade Mountains of Washington state and insists on helping build an accessibility ramp for the store. Soon more townspeople appear, eager to help renovate. Aaron tries to renge on the sale, but the buyer demands $13,000, delivered in two weeks. While he’s running out of time, he’s drawn to a charismatic girl, the perfect distraction. As the community brings the store back to life, Aaron flees until he realizes he can’t hide any longer. Aaron’s reckoning with grief is slow-burning and real, and the cycle of addiction is rendered with care and precision. Most characters are assumed White.

A love letter to bookstores and a deftly drawn portrait of the ripples of addiction. (Fiction. 14-18)
natural disasters—and only Clara can save the world. A budding romance with magical mentor/visiting botany student 18-year-old Sang Park from California helps Clara bloom. Redheaded, blue-eyed Clara is cued as White, and Sang is Korean American—but race, class, and other identity-related concerns are rarely a factor in this world. Debut author Griffin unfortunately fails to breathe new life into chosen one fantasy tropes—the obligatory villain, the unavoidable romance, the overly dramatic sacrifice—but excels at lush and lovely descriptions of nature and the weather and delivers a stern, if heavy-handed, message about environmental consequences of modern living.

A slow-motion environmental disaster story. (Fantasy. 14-18)

KIND OF SORT OF FINE
Hall, Spencer
Atheneum (288 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-5344-8298-2

A pair of seniors attempt to reinvent themselves after being partnered for a TV production class. Following a very public breakdown in front of the high school near the end of 11th grade, overachiever Hayley Mills begins her senior year with an ultimatum from the school administration: either drop her extracurricular load or her accelerated track classes in order to manage the pressure she puts on herself. Swapping an intense tennis schedule for a TV production elective, Hayley finds herself paired with senior producer Lewis, an '80s-movie–obsessed classmate who is determined to lose weight in hopes of becoming a leading man rather than the guy perpetually behind the scenes. Determined to resurrect her image, Hayley devises a plan for the pair to film documentaries about their classmates, highlighting hidden talents that show different sides to these students that no one is aware of. In chapters presenting their alternating perspectives, the two document their humorous misadventures and successes in a narrative that ultimately feels underbaked. Despite the protagonists’ aim to dig beneath the surface, their own characterizations barely scratch the surface level, and the events of the final act are rushed. Hayley and Lewis are White; there is some racial diversity in the supporting cast.

A reasonably entertaining, if uneven, high school romp. (Fiction. 14-18)
From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin and the Trial That Galvanized the Asian American Movement (Norton Young Readers, April 20) is Paula Yoo’s gripping account of the tragic 1982 death of a young Chinese American man who was beaten to death by a White auto worker in Detroit at a time when tensions over Japanese car imports were running high. Chin’s killer, Ronald Ebens, served no time, receiving only a nominal fine and parole for manslaughter. Following a grand jury indictment, Ebens was found guilty of having violated Chin’s civil rights but was acquitted upon appeal. The case led to nationwide protests, heightened awareness of racism faced by Asian Americans, and the growth of a pan-Asian American identity and community, yet it’s a story that has lapsed into obscurity. The escalation in anti-Asian hate crimes in recent years makes this an especially critical read.

Yoo is a former journalist (at the Detroit News and other publications) as well as a screenwriter and producer (she worked on TV shows such as The West Wing and Supergirl). She brings her considerable experience to the book, which balances a dynamic narrative with exemplary research, including interviews with many of the people directly involved. Yoo spoke with us over Zoom from her home in Los Angeles, California; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

As you worked on the book, did your impressions of the problem of anti-Asian racism change?

We have always been excluded and erased from the dialogue about racism in this country. Vincent Chin’s case was the first federal civil rights trial for an Asian American, and this was the 1980s. My friends and I joke occasionally about [how] being Asian American is like dying by a thousand cuts, a thousand microaggressions. But I’m realizing now that’s also part of the conversation: Unfortunately, most Americans think of racism in very broad strokes, as wearing a KKK hood or [going] up to someone, [punching] them in the face, and [calling] them a racist slur. Obviously, there’s a higher priority for violent physical crime, but that does not erase the importance and complexities of microaggressions. Trauma happens, whether it’s one shocking, horrifying event or a lifetime of tiny microaggressions that add up. What I am happy about, though, is that we’re finally having this conversation and finally addressing all forms and varying degrees of racism. You cannot have one conversation about racist mass shootings and not have an equally important conversation about microaggressions. For the Asian American and Pacific Islander experience, that is what we know, and the rest of the world is now finally finding out. So I would say my one surprise is that it took me this long to have this conversation.

Like many Asian Americans, I have long held the impression that there was unambiguous, incontrovert-
ible evidence that this was a hate crime and that the lax sentencing reflected the ongoing struggles we’ve had as a community to get society to take anti-Asian racism seriously. I finished reading your book surprised at all the complex, complicating factors at play: conflicting eyewitness testimony, other forms of bias that affected the course of the police investigation, problems with how manslaughter cases were routinely handled in Michigan, issues with the prosecution’s gathering of evidence, and more. I emerged with a greater understanding of how the aftermath unfolded the way it did as well as feeling like I had a full enough picture of events to draw my own conclusions. I was a little frustrated at first because I wanted it to be cut and dried: There is an evil villain and then you’ve got your superhero. But that wasn’t the case at all—both men had flaws, there was toxic masculinity on both sides, everyone had been drinking too much. Legally speaking, it was also complicated because at the end of the day, Ronald Ebens was found not guilty of violating Vincent Chin’s civil rights. Is he guilty of manslaughter? Yes, he pled guilty. He knew what he did was wrong. To this day he still expresses remorse. He still insists that he is not racist. Because Ebens was ultimately found not guilty in the 1987 second trial for violating Vincent Chin’s civil rights, he and his legal team believe this also means his actions were not the result of racism but of a bar brawl that turned tragic—and fatal. The complication is, what exactly is your definition of racist? The complexity at first daunted me. I thought, what can I really say about racism? He was found not guilty.

But then, the more I delved into it, the more I realized that it’s a complicated case because racism is a complicated topic. If it was good versus evil, if it was simply him wearing something obvious like white Ku Klux Klan [robes] and if there was an actual smartphone back in 1982 that recorded him saying [racist] words, sure, that would be an easy story to tell. But would it be as effective? I think it is important and vital that the case was as complicated as it was because that shows the difficulty of how racism is perceived in this country. The rise in anti-Asian racism because of the pandemic [has] been bringing up difficult conversations as well about anti-Blackness and other types of prejudices within our own communities. There are things we have to address right now about our own flaws, but I hope this book also reminds people that there also have been many bridges that were built, decades ago, that are very strong, and we’re walking across those bridges.

What do you hope readers will take away from your book?
I hope my book has a positive impact on young readers in terms of showing them that they have a voice, that their lives, their history, and their heritage matter. I hope my book has a positive impact on young readers who may not be Asian, [that] it will inspire them to learn more about the contributions we’ve made in this country and to form not just allyships with other communities, but friendships. Because one of the most important things about this book is that the activists were not just Asian, they were White, there were Jewish organizations, Black organizations, the Latino community, Pacific Islanders—everybody joined in together. I hope that people walk away from this not only feeling anger and wanting to do something, but also proud of how people of many different backgrounds can actually get together and work toward a common good. We have to fight hate with love. We can also fight with anger, but our anger is fueled by that love. My heart breaks thinking about what kids are going through right now because of this traumatic pandemic, and I hope that this book gives them hope—to know that no matter how dark things get, you can always find the light.

From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry received a starred review in the March 15, 2021, issue.
Kole has her own fan-fiction blog on Stumblr, a blackout poem to techniques for sparking imagination and creativity (such as using photos of your childhood self for inspiration). Heller’s encouraging and engaging style of writing and her original voice make this work effective for use by and with young people who are grappling with varied life issues. Student poems are included with each prompt. More than a simple how-to manual, this volume is invaluable for use within and beyond the classroom.

Writing advice both practical and inspirational. (Nonfiction. 12-adult)

DOWN WITH THIS SHIP
Kingman, Katie
Flux (352 pp.)
$9.99 paper | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-63583-067-5

Kole Miller’s one true pairing is not up for debate; unfortunately, not everyone else in the fandom agrees. High school junior Kole, like the rest of Crystal Lake Prep, is obsessed with the television show The Space Game and which characters should be in a relationship, or ship. But only Kole has her own fan-fiction blog on Stumblr, Spacer. Kole loves sharing her favorite ship in regular posts with her dedicated readers, but, fearing the social fallout if her uncool pastime were revealed, her identity remains a secret except to her family and best friend, Michaela. When Spacer wins a Stumblr contest for Best Ship, it becomes instantly famous among the fandom—and at school. When Kole’s classmate Damian discovers her secret and blackmails her, she is forced to give up control of her blogworthiness and get involved in a plagiarism scheme. Kole, who deals with anxiety, has to navigate her way out of the mess. She gets caught up in her own blogworthy love triangle with cute barker Noah and nerdy kid Colin. The light narrative, told from Kole’s point of view, contains a lot of unnecessary, if entertaining, drama. Unfortunately, character motivations are often lacking in believability and depth. Main characters default to White; Michaela is Black and bisexual.

A lukewarm story of a teenage fangirl navigating both real and fictional shipping wars. (Romance. 14-17)

THE LUCKY LIST
Lippincott, Rachael
Simon & Schuster (224 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5344-6853-5

A bucket list leads to a summer of self-discovery.

After an accident at junior prom leads to a breakup with her on-again, off-again boyfriend, Emily is having the worst summer ever. Her best friend’s away at camp, none of her other friends are talking to her, and since her dad’s selling their house to downsize, she’s afraid of losing memories of her mom, who died of cancer three years ago. But things turn around as she strikes up an easy friendship with Blake, the daughter of her dad’s best friend who recently moved back to town. While Blake, whose own mother died when she was a newborn, is helping her pack up her mom’s closet, Emily comes across the bucket list her mom made when she was Emily’s age—and she decides to complete the items in hopes it will help her feel closer to her mom. As the two take on adventures around town, Emily starts questioning her feelings of attraction to Blake. A countdown to finishing the list before a class trip keeps the pacing solid, and an entertaining unraveling of connections to her parents’ pasts adds nice depth. Told in Emily’s first-person narration, the breezy tale explores the theme of learning to live life without holding back, as Emily both questions her sexuality and learns to heal from her grief. Most characters default to White; Blake has a White dad, and her mom was Japanese.

A truly charming summer romp. (Fiction. 12-18)

HEARTBREAKERS AND FAKERS
Lund, Cameron
Razorbill/Penguin (352 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-593-11494-0

Enemies fake-date to get back into their friends’ good graces.

The morning after a party, Penny Harris wakes up on a lawn chair outside her boyfriend Jordan Parker’s house. When she goes inside and confronts her friends, she is shocked to discover that they had caught her in a drunken make-out session with Kai Tanaka, her sworn enemy and best friend Olivia Anderson’s boyfriend. Used to the benefits of her popularity, Penny feels lost as her friends express their disappointment. But since they are also gleeful that she and Kai are apparently together—as they all predicted would happen one day—the pair devise a plan to get their exes back and restore their reputations: They will pretend to be in love long enough to make Jordan and Olivia (who have actually started dating) jealous, and then stage a breakup during the senior class trip to Disneyland.

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as Penny begrudgingly spends more time with Kai, she comes to better understand him and his identity as a transplant from Hawaii, and their dynamic shifts from a mutual arrangement of convenience to something more. As Penny reflects on the various complex relationships in her life—with Jordan, Olivia, her emotionally absent mother, and her former friend Sarah—she learns to recognize the unhealthy attachments she clings to and how they affect her self-esteem and personal growth. Main characters are White; Kai is Japanese American.

A lighthearted and perceptive fauxmance. (Romance. 13-17)
gods help her, but she will do whatever it takes to not let the ruthless, lying Kasta win—even if she must become the villain of her own story. In this charming, well-rounded follow-up to *The Kinder Poison* (2020), Zahru’s entertaining, funny narrative voice continues to engage and balance out the otherwise heavier tone of a story that deals with power dynamics, dark magic, horrific betrayals, and social injustice and that offers a thoughtful examination of just what a ruler should be willing to sacrifice for the greater good. The cast is diverse in skin tone and sexuality.

A fantastically rewarding sequel. (glossary) (Fantasy. 14-18)

**INDESTRUCTIBLE OBJECT**
McCoy, Mary
Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5344-8505-1

Through making a podcast, a Memphis teen ponders the point of love while examining her own and her parents’ relationships.

High school has ended, and Vincent, 18-year-old Lee Swan’s boyfriend of the past two years, has just broken up with her. She tries to play it maturely while they make a final episode of their podcast, *Artists in Love*, but between their breakup and her parents’ fresh separation, Lee is a mess. When she discovers evidence that leads her to question the beginning of her parents’ relationship, Lee starts to work on a new podcast as she uncovers the truth. She’s assisted by her friends Max and Risa, both queer, and through them, Lee begins to open up about her bisexuality. As she grapples with how to live authentically, she embraces a more expansive view of romance and relationships. In addition to navigating sexuality, this character-driven story also provides insight into how race and gender shape how one moves through the world. It showcases the different lived experiences of realistic side characters, including biracial (Black/White) Vincent, Filipino Max, and Max’s nonbinary parent. These characters are juxtaposed with Lee, a White woman who often reads as straight. The characters are enriched by their passions: The book is populated with artists of varying types, and Lee loves being a sound engineer. Additionally, the Memphis setting is vividly portrayed, including all its lovely weirdness and challenges.

A thoughtful exploration of love and identity. (Fiction. 14-18)

**OF PRINCES AND PROMISES**
Menon, Sandhya
Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)
$19.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5344-1757-1
Series: Rosetta Academy, 2

Caterina LaValle seeks to reclaim her social status by turning an awkward frog into a prince.

Caterina, Italian daughter of a millionaire, is the reigning queen of Rosetta Academy, an elite international boarding school. After a messy breakup, she is determined to prove she still has power over everything and everyone. When her ex-boyfriend brags that he’s bringing a supermodel to an upcoming gala, she knows she has to do better. Cue the sweet, socially inept Rahul Chopra, a boy from India who wants nothing more than to fit in and spend time with Caterina. When she proposes he be her escort to the gala, Rahul immediately says yes. With the help of a makeover, coaching in social interactions, and magical hair gel, Rahul transforms into RC, a smooth-talking, likable, supposed crown prince fit to be seen with someone of his date’s standing. As his two personas begin to collide, Rahul loses sight of what’s important—including his relationship with Caterina. This modern twist on “The Frog Prince,” told from the alternating third-person perspectives of Caterina and Rahul, has the classic appeal of a makeover story, focusing as it does on having confidence in your true self and being honest and vulnerable. Readers who enjoyed the first series entry, *Of Curses and Kisses* (2020), will enjoy this sequel, which features cameo appearances by characters they’ve met before.

A fun read for fans of modern fairy-tale retellings. (Romance. 12-16)

**CURSE OF THE SPECKER QUEEN**
Moke, Jenny Elder
Disney-Hyperion (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-368-06398-2
Series: Samantha Knox, 1

Set in the Roaring ’20s, this is the first entry in a series starring puzzle-solving aspiring archaeologist Samantha Knox.

Sam, whose father was killed during the Great War, has remained in her rural Illinois town to work in an antiquarian bookshop owned by the father of her childhood friends, siblings Joana and Bennett Steeleing. One day, a package from Ireland with a mysterious book containing a coded letter is delivered. Before Sam can properly examine it, two Irishmen try to steal it, in the process setting fire to the shop. Sam, wise-cracking sidekick Joana, and love interest Bennett learn that a centuries-old club is trying to enact an ancient curse to call
forth Morrigan, the Celtic goddess of war and death. Traveling by train and steamship, the trio make their way to Dublin, encountering an array of additional characters along the way. With each chapter ending in a cliffhanger, the plot unfolds quickly. Classic elements include hidden clues, narrow escapes, a magical ritual object, and a fearsome mythical creature. Sam is an appealing heroine: smart, well-read, gutsy, and introspective. While solving the mystery (and discerning friend from foe), Sam comes to terms with the lingering effects of her grief, a plot element that provides unexpected emotional depth. However, repetitive bickering among the main characters proves tedious. All characters appear White.

A fast pace, compelling supernatural mystery, and intriguing historical setting add up to broad appeal. (Adventure. 13-18)

SISTERS OF THE SNAKE
Nanua, Sarena & Nanua, Sasha
HarperTeen (512 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-298559-0

As their country moves inexorably toward war, a thief and a princess swap places.

Dodging conscription is a crime punishable by death in the Raja's Snake Pit, but 18-year-old Ria is willing to do anything to leave Abai—even stealing jewels from the royal palace. Governed by a ruthless king whose bloodline grants him and his heirs the ability to control snakes, Abai is about to reach the end of a centurylong peace treaty with its neighbor, Kaama, and all signs point to the bloody continuation of a feud that began after the ancient battle of the six Great Masters of Magic. When Ria is caught in the palace by the princess Rani, both are shocked to discover that they are identical twins. Rani,
A professor of Ojibwe fields questions about Indigenous peoples in a new book for young adults, both Native and non-Native

BY BLUE TARPALECHEE

In the new young readers’ edition of Everything You Wanted To Know About Indians but Were Afraid To Ask (Levine Querido, April 6), Anton Treuer tackles the questions that pop up like perennials wherever Indians are involved. Living and working in Bemidji, Minnesota, as a professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University, Treuer is no stranger to such queries. With subjects ranging from history and tribal sovereignty to casinos, cuisine, and everything in between, this accessible volume does a lot of work in bridging the gap between Native cultures and the rest of the world. It’s work that the author shouldered with a smile as he spoke with Kirkus over Zoom; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Have you seen young people—both Native and non-Native—engaging with the ideas in this book? You know, a lot of our kids, they’re hungry. They want to know their history; they want to know their culture, and they want to marry that with their own lived experience as Indigenous people. They don’t want to be blamed or shamed for something that they didn’t get to learn through no fault of their own. I really believe that this work provides accessible information for Indigenous people who want to learn about themselves and explore their own identity and the deeper meaning of what it means to be Indigenous. I think we do a little bit of a disservice to our youth if we tell them to be proud to be Native [and] don’t also tell them what it means to be Native. I know I had a lot of misunderstandings and erroneous assumptions about what that meant, like if I didn’t struggle enough in poverty, does that mean I’m less authentic? I think having a good toolbox for them is healthy and helpful.

For the rest of the world, the first line of the book—“Indians are so often imagined, but so infrequently well understood”—you know, there is a real danger to the imaginings that people have. Like we’re all rich from casinos or we’re all living in squalor on reservations. How can both be everything you need to know? And the truth is, it’s complex. I think the rest of the world is hungry to know more, too. America is on the verge of another attempted racial reckoning, and those attempts often fall short of our loftiest expectations and goals, but things do change. Some people are paying attention, and they’re leaning in, and that gives me hope.

So much has happened since you published the first iteration of this book in 2012; it feels very timely and necessary right now. Native Americans are thousands of years of documented human history still in the making. Even in the past 10 years, we’ve been making a lot of history—the Dakota Access pipeline protest, the confrontation at the Lin-
coln Memorial, so many things have been happening. I think the social activism universe has really shifted and changed. Back in the civil rights era, you had strong, highly visible individual leaders like King and Malcolm X, and their assassinations did tremendous damage to broad movements.

When you think of who led the Dakota Access pipeline protest, it’s not one person who comes to mind, although I can think of many brave leaders there, and I would say the same thing about Black Lives Matter and many other social activist movements. In addition to that, I think we’re realizing that competing victimization in the oppression olympics keeps everybody oppressed, and so there’s been a lot of bridge-building between different disenfranchised groups. Social justice movements are becoming more effective, and there are a lot more White people who are trying to figure out how to lean in.

Of course, there’s pushback and resistance. We’ve got 253 voter suppression initiatives proposed in 43 different states right now, some of those very focused on Indigenous communities—requiring a physical address, not a P.O. Box when almost all of the Natives in North Dakota have P.O. Boxes—things like that. But at the same time that there is this pushback and resistance, there is bridge-building and momentum. I believe we’re on the verge of a new progressive era in America, in part in response to the regressive stuff we’ve been seeing the past several years.

You talk about being an ambassador in the borderlands—it’s like there’s an expectation that Native people are walking Indigenous encyclopedias. Why do you think that is?

First of all, it is not fair that anybody should have to speak for everybody. Of course, within Indigenous communities, we have a diversity of opinions—and emotionally charged opinions—on a whole range of topics, and we don’t all think the same way, act the same way, vote the same way. We’re diverse, too, so nobody can really speak for everybody. But we do get put on the spot and asked to do that. Unfair though it is, it’s important that we try to find ways to provide meaningful answers and shape the narrative rather than chase everybody away from some erroneous misunderstanding, from even getting an answer to their question. As a result, we have developed a certain musculature. We’ve gone to the gym, where we get stronger and we’ve got some musculature for dealing with things. That means when it’s time to be on the spot as an ambassador, we’ve got an experience that most people don’t.

It sounds like you wear many hats. Is that what it’s going to take to improve our communities, both Native and non-Native?

For me, it’s not disjointed or strange that I do wear so many hats. I speak Ojibwe, I live in my Native community, I officiate traditional funerals and life ceremonies, and I am at the service of my people. At the same time, I’m a university professor. I’ve got one foot in a wigwam and one in the ivory tower. I’m somebody who’s working on multiple levels to revitalize our language. They all fit together and they all make perfect sense to me, how those are different dimensions of the same kind of work. So if we want to decenter oppression, you know, and begin indigenizing, learning our language, learning our culture, it’s a really powerful set of tools for centering ourselves in a healthy code of being, in ways of belonging. As Indigenous people, we have more than vestigial remnants of some different ways of looking at the world and some different ways of solving problems. We should indeed be pollinating the garden that everyone’s trying to harvest from. I mean we have a right to this stuff on our own and for our own well-being. But we do have something to teach and show the rest of the world, too. It’s an essential piece of how we move forward.

Blue Tarpechee is a writer and enrolled citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Everything You Wanted To Know About Indians but Were Afraid To Ask received a starred review in the March 15, 2021, issue.
who lives in sheltered confinement, seizes the opportunity to prove herself to her father. She convinces Ria to temporarily stay in the palace, where she may find the answers to the twins’ separation, so that Rani can sneak out and locate the legendary Bloodstone, a powerful gem that could change the course of history. Themes of fate, identity, and sisterhood intertwine in this lush fantasy that incorporates Indian cultural elements into its worldbuilding. Chapters alternate between two distinct storylines that progress incrementally, following the sisters as they decide how they will shape the future of their kingdom.

A fresh take on a classic tale. (authors’ note) (Fantasy. 12-17)

WHEN YOU AND I COLLIDE
Norris, Kate
Philomel (448 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-593-20303-3

An exploration of the multiverse and mourning.
Sixteen-year-old Winnie Schulde knows that her life could be different, for she can see splinters, or divergences from her current timeline. Winnie is able to see what could happen, and wonders if she could change what did happen, since her curse manifested upon—or maybe caused—her mother’s death 8 years ago. Exploited and experimented upon by her abrasive, emotionally abusive father and afraid to confide in her only friend, rich girl Dora, or her dad’s handsome lab assistant, Scott, Winnie worries that her powers could be misused or misunderstood. Being a German immigrant amid the tensions of World War II and openly interested in science and especially physics, Winnie fears attracting unwanted scrutiny. Soon, she’s swept up in a mystery, entangled in the not-so-secret Manhattan Project, and confronted with the existence of another universe. Given the chance to be popular, pretty, and loved, Winnie must decide if her happiness is worth world-shaking, physics-bending side effects. Lacking the levity that often accompanies time-travel tales and heavy on the theoretical science and historical stakes, Winnie’s story grapples with deep personal and philosophical dilemmas. Interpersonal dynamics prove just as explosive as interdimensional ones in Norris’ debut novel. All characters read as White.

A serious tale of attempting reinvention at the cost of rending reality. (Science fiction. 12-18)

YOU’RE SO DEAD
Parsons, Ash
Philomel (400 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-593-20512-9

A fake festival puts social media influencers in very real danger.
Billed as a “luxury music and art festival,” the Pyre Festival (clearly a nod to the real-life Fyre Festival) promises three days and two nights of unforgettable fun. This is why Alabama high school senior Plum Winter steals her influencer sister Peach’s invitation. Plum convinces Sofia Torres and Marlowe Blake, her two best friends, to tag along. Instead of a posh retreat packed with celebrities, though, the trio lands among a small group of lower-tier influencers on the Caribbean island of Little Esau only to find there is no water, no Wi-Fi, and only franks and beans for sustenance. What initially seems like just poor event planning turns into deliberate mockery as the festivalgoers realize they’re being played. The joke, however, is deadly: Someone in the group is killing the others off one by one. But who? Parsons effectively mixes social media commentary and thrilling murder mystery with a dash of ridiculous humor. Plenty of red herrings help conceal the killer’s identity and keep readers guessing. Marlowe’s deep knowledge of old murder-mystery movies exposes some of the killer’s inspirations. Though much of the plot is focused on solving the mystery and staying alive, romantic tension between Plum (who is bisexual) and Marlowe adds some cuteness to the terror. Most characters are White; Sofia is White and Puerto Rican.

A #trendy and #entertaining whodunit. (Thriller. 14-18)

THE LADY OR THE LION
Qureshi, Aamna
CamCat Books (384 pp.)
$24.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-7443-0344-5

A reimagining of the classic 1882 Frank R. Stockton short story “The Lady, or the Tiger?” set in a Pakistan-inspired world.
In the kingdom of Marghazar, 17-year-old crown princess Durkhanai Miangul is loved by her people and her grandparents, whom she would do anything to protect. So when neighboring kingdoms accuse her grandfather, the ruler, of plotting a deadly attack that left many dead during a summit to discuss a unification treaty, Durkhanai is determined to prove his innocence. She decides her best chance of clearing the king’s name is by forming an alliance with Asfandyar, the frustrating but handsome ambassador from Jardum. As time passes and secrets are revealed, Durkhanai finds acknowledging her feelings for Asfandyar to be just as difficult as facing the truth of who was really behind that violent explosion with its loss of life. She is left with a choice between
pursuing a forbidden romance or serving her people. Qureshi sets up a world in which readers can easily lose themselves. Urdu, Punjabi, and Islamic words and phrases are sprinkled throughout the text, adding to the feeling of immersion. The plot and characters are well fleshed out, authentic, and captivating. Although the political structure of this world can at times be confusing, this is a notable debut with an original point of view and a riveting plot.

Dramatic and engrossing: a tale of royal intrigue and romance. (Historical fiction. 14-18)
complex and well drawn, especially the wise and irresistible Farfar, Oscar’s Swedish paternal grandfather. Swedish-born Oscar has lived with Farfar since the age of 4, arriving in America after his father died; his mother had already left the family by then. Reck handles a grandfather-grandson conversation about condoms and consent with a deft hand, although the book contains mainly just PG-rated kissing scenes. He also addresses contemporary social justice activism, substance abuse, and Farfar’s coming-out story. Told in Oscar’s first-person voice, the plot drags a little, but a romance resolved and a moving show of support from friends-turned-family compensate. The inclusion of Swedish cultural elements is refreshing and adds interest. Most of the cast is presumed White.

Likable, well-rounded characters keep readers turning pages. (Fiction. 14-17)

FIERCE AS THE WIND
Redd, Tara Wilson
Wendy Lamb/Random (304 pp.)
978-1-5247-6691-7
978-1-5247-6692-4 PLB

Heartbreak drives a teenager to do a triathlon.

When Miho's boyfriend of two years breaks up with her out of the blue, she is furious and heartbroken. It's senior year, and she didn't apply for college like her friends, so the only distraction she has is her job delivering pizzas on her bike. Following a moment of inspiration, Miho decides to do an Ironman race, believing that swimming, biking, and running 140.6 miles will be enough to feel better and (figuratively) leave her ex behind. But the Ironman fee is too expensive, so her friends create a triathlon-length race for her, the Miho-man. Together they help her train, but it isn't easy, especially for a girl who hasn't even run a mile in PE. With the support of her best friends, her dad, and others in her community, Miho fights against barriers and self-doubt to finish the race. Miho's journey is a powerful coming-of-age story full of grit. Through Miho and other characters, the novel dives into the intersections of race, class, and sexual orientation. Although the book is set in Hawaii, Miho only moved there from California during middle school; the story is told from her first-person perspective, presenting Hawaii through the lens of an outsider who does not entirely understand her new home. Miho is multiracial, with Japanese, Black, and other, unspecified, ancestry. Secondary characters are diverse across multiple dimensions.

A powerful story full of determination. (Fiction. 12-18)

THE SUMMER OF LOST LETTERS
Reynolds, Hannah
Razorbill/Penguin (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-593-34972-4

Take one box of letters referencing a secret love affair, add a fizzy summer romance, season with inordinate wealth, and throw in a soupçon of environmental concern.

When a package of letters arrives from her recently deceased grandmother's nursing home, 17-year-old Ashkenazi Jewish Abby discovers O’ma hid a long romance that took place in the period between her rarely discussed escape from the Nazis and her adulthood as mother and grandmother. So Abby finds herself a summer job in Nantucket, home of the mystery letter writer, and begins her investigations. Almost immediately she has a meet-cute with letter writer E’s attractive, preppy, 18-year-old grandson, a Sephardic Jew who would rather study botany than enter the family business, and sparks fly. Zesty, genuine dialogue (with a few mildly dated pop-culture references), adventures with a diverse group of new friends, genealogical research, and the mystery of O’ma's past—which includes a missing necklace—make for a full summer. Judaism provides a central point of identity, with Shabbat dinners and a helpful rabbi, and within that context, a range of experiences are represented. The ending is emotionally satisfying if mildly credulity-stretching. This is a confection that will leave readers eager for a summer in Nantucket and their own perfect romance.

Charming, with historical depth to balance the froth. (author’s note) (Romance. 12-18)

KAMALA HARRIS
Roland, James
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)
$30.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-67820-086-2

A daughter of immigrants follows a path of social and political activism to become the first female, Black, and Asian American vice president of the United States.

Kamala Harris’ story is outlined here, from her childhood years to her rise in California politics and election as vice president. Her mother, who came from India, and her father, who is from Jamaica, met as graduate students in Berkeley. They were both interested in social justice, and some of Harris’ earliest memories are of attending protests. Her parents divorced when she was young, and her mother raised her daughters to identify with both sides of her family while recognizing that they would be perceived as Black. Harris attended the historically
“A beautiful picture of resistance in the face of harrowing despair.”

Determined to Stay

Through the personal stories of Palestinians, Sokolower lays bare daily realities of segregation and displacement. Sokolower, a Jewish social studies teacher from California, never intended to make multiple visits over the course of 7 years to Silwan, near Jerusalem, documenting the injustices Palestinian youth face under Israel’s military occupation. But after learning about U.S. military funding to Israel and the many parallels between the lives of Palestinians and the experiences of Black Americans facing police brutality, she couldn’t remain silent. An introduction by professor Nick Estes (Lower Brule Sioux) draws a powerful parallel between settler colonialism and the plights of Palestinians and Native Americans. Each chapter in this clear, evocative, moving work follows despite some criticism, such as when she refused to seek the death penalty following the killing of a police officer. Her qualifications led to her selection as running mate for 2020 presidential candidate Joe Biden. This brief, easy-to-read biography, enhanced with quotes and photographs, offers a solid introduction. Sidebars provide important background context, and the work as a whole provides a useful snapshot of the life of an important woman.

A concise depiction of the journey that broke many barriers for a driven woman of color. (source notes, timeline, further research, index) (Nonfiction. 12-16)

Determined to Stay
Palestinian Youth Fight for Their Village
Sokolower, Jody
Olive Branch/Interlink (208 pp.)
$20.00 paper | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-62371-888-6

FIRE WITH FIRE
Soria, Destiny
HMH Books (432 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-358-32973-2

Coming from a long line of dragon slayers doesn’t mean that sisters Dani and Eden Rivera are on the same path: Are they destined to be enemies for eternity?

Dani had a normal life. Mostly. She had a summer job lined up working a zip line in the Smoky Mountains and an end-of-school-year party to attend. Of course there’s the little secret of her family’s being legendary dragon slayers—and some superfanx sorcerers coming to dinner. But when Dani has her first encounter with a real dragon, Nox, she ends up soul bonded to him. Being friendly with dragons is a bad look for a dragon slayer, so how will she explain her way out of this one? After learning about her sister’s new dragon friend, Eden, who believes dragons are a scourge on humanity, decides she has to do something to save Dani. With their parents out of town, Eden calls high sorcerer Calla Thorn for help, leading her into danger and pitting sister against sister. This exciting, inclusive fantasy with a dash of romance brings lots of sassy dragon slayers and some superfancy sorcerers to the table. The action sequences are fast-paced, the magic is entertaining, and the narcissistic sorcerers are delightfully smug, evil—and fabulously dressed. Point-of-view shifts between the siblings render both equally sympathetic. The girls are fourth-generation Mexican American on their mother’s side; their father is a White Scottish immigrant.

Hits all the marks for an absorbing and high-spirited read. (Fantasy. 14-18)

The Tragedy of Dane Riley
Spears, Kat
Wednesday Books (320 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-250-12480-7

In this contemporary twist on Hamlet, 17-year-old Dane Riley struggles with depression after his father’s death.

After seeing a coyote wandering in his upscale suburb of McLean, Virginia, Dane starts to imagine it’s the reincarnation of his father, who died from cancer less than a year ago. He occasionally still texts his dad—and receives kind messages back from whomever now has that phone number. He’s angry and resentful of his mother for moving on too quickly and dating his father’s best friend and business partner, Chuck. An unmotivated student who’s not planning on going to college, Dane ponders what there is to live for. He lacks support from his mother but has positive influences in his life in the form of his therapist and one of his teachers. A crush on Ophelia, the girl next door, is one of the only things that fuels him, but

Kirkus.com  Young Adult 1 May 2021 157
she's warned him that any relationship she enters will have a pre-planned end date so no one can get hurt. Dane's emotional ups and downs are conveyed realistically and present a moving depiction of grief and mental health. While the book starts off slowly and the plot never quite comes together, the ultimately hopeful ending may satisfy readers. Dane is presumed White; Ophelia has a Black dad and a White mom, and there is diversity among secondary characters.

A modern tale of an existential crisis that will resonate with many teens. (Fiction. 14-18)

LOVE & OTHER NATURAL DISASTERS
Sugiura, Misa
HarperTeen (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-06-299123-2

Can you fake your way into the heart of the person you want? Hopeless romantic Nozomi Nagai is a queer, Japanese American 17-year-old from Glenview, Illinois. Over the summer, she and her older brother, Max, are interning at their gay uncle Stephen's museum in San Francisco and spending quality time with Baba, their aging grandmother who has dementia. Riddled with insecurity from a humiliating rejection by her back-at-home crush, Nozomi is determined to have a transformational summer romance. She instantly crushes on gorgeous Willow—"like a teenage Gemma Chan"—who works in the museum's gift shop. Trouble is, Willow is heartbroken: She was just dumped by Arden, an equally gorgeous Black girl who has moved on to be with Dela, a teenage White/Japanese artist with an installation at the museum. When ambiguous comments between Nozomi and Willow leave their social media followers speculating, Nozomi instigates a fake romance in hopes that it will eventually become real. What ensues are hilarious and often cringeworthy situations that Sugiura imbues with depth. By giving voice to Nozomi's internal struggles with her parents' pending divorce, strained relationship with her mom, and fear of rejection by homophobic Baba, she layers a complex rom-com plot with deep insights about honest and patient love. That Nozomi's racial and sexual identities aren't treated as issues but simply parts of who she is also refreshing.

A laugh-out-loud, tender, and wholly satisfying read. (Fiction. 13-18)

ALONE IN SPACE
A Collection
Walden, Tillie
Illus. by the author
Avery Hill Publishing (324 pp.)
$32.95 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-910395-58-5

In this dreamlike collection of previously published material, cartoonist Walden presents a series of thoughtful tales about home, belonging, and powerful emotion.

Jumping easily from genre to genre, this volume features the self-contained stories of a chronically ill boy and his family in their mansion during a yearslong winter, two closeted girls negotiating first love, and a young woman's experience of giving up her supernatural life in the sky for a relationship on Earth. The collection also includes a number of shorter pieces created during Walden's young adult years. Exhibiting a style that references Studio Ghibli and Winsor McCay, Walden displays an encyclopedic knowledge of the genre that gives depth to the not-quite-our-reality in which her characters find themselves. Each story plays skillfully with ideas of space and atmosphere, and the most fully realized relationships throughout the collection are those between the protagonists and their often surreal and fantastic environments. The visual vocabulary provides wonder while reflecting widely relatable feelings about changing, growing up, and being in the world. Serving as a wonderful entry point for teens new to graphic novels, this collection is a gemlike encapsulation of coming-of-age narratives in gorgeous settings touched with magic. What it sometimes lacks in nuance it makes up for in beauty and immediacy. Readers will be drawn into Walden's surreal, empathetic universe. Most characters read as White.

A seamless integration of art and feeling. (gallery) (Graphic fiction. 14-adult)

SMOKE
Woods, Darcy
Crown (384 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-593-30590-4
978-0-593-30591-1 PLB

A teen in a small Michigan town hatches a secret plot to grow and sell marijuana in order to pay off her family's debts.

Straight-laced, earnest Honor Augustine lives with her beloved dad, who struggles with PTSD following his military service in Iraq, and her goofy but supportive brother, Knox. She loves the greenhouse business that her grandparents owned and that is now managed by her aunt—so when she discovers that they are in danger of losing it due to financial losses, she desperately searches for a way to help. This results in her somewhat implausible decision to start a
weed-growing operation, clandestinely situated in the greenhouse basement. In a character-driven, first-person narrative that is at turns anguished and funny, Honor stumbles through the consequences of this scenario, with various subplots that include a romance with a guy she’s not sure she can trust; interpersonal conflict with her best friend, Zareen Kapoor, a D.C. transplant; the stress of a shadowy figure who seems to be stalking them; and the challenge of her dad’s untreated mental health condition. With all of these threads woven throughout, the novel can feel a little unfocused at times, but this is largely an original, engaging novel that fans of contemporary teen fiction will enjoy. All of the main characters are White; Zareen’s name cues her as South Asian.

A dramatic story layered with relationship dynamics and flares of humor. (Fiction. 14-18)
In the surreal swirl of a pandemic year, Leah Johnson became a bestselling author.

Her debut novel, *You Should See Me in a Crown*, featuring ingenious would-be prom queen Liz Lightly, turned out to be the kind of book that draws a crowd: “The queer prom romance you didn’t know you needed,” as Kirkus called it in a starred review, became the inaugural YA pick for Reese’s Book Club in August 2020. Seven months later, the novel earned Johnson her first Lambda Literary Award nomination for excellence in LGBTQ+ YA fiction. The announcement was made the same day her seven-figure two-book deal with Disney/Hyperion, for a middle-grade series based on a “superhero origin story in the tone of the Baby-Sitters Club,” was named Deal of the Week by *Publishers Weekly*.

“It feels very fresh—I’m not convinced it’s real,” says Johnson, 27, who spoke with me by phone the next day from her family’s home in Indiana, where she returned to ride out the pandemic. “I mean, it’s in *Publishers Weekly*, so I’m gonna take their word for it. But.”

Take our word for it: Johnson is a superstar with staying power. Her sophomore novel, *Rise to the Sun* (Scholastic, July 6), is the vibrant story of Olivia Brooks and Toni Foster, two teenage girls with very different approaches to life and love who meet at a summer music festival in northern Georgia.

“*Rise to the Sun* is a book about communal joy and about finding lightness through grief,” says Johnson, a lover of live music, who wrote the entirety of *Rise to the Sun* during a year in which all the major festivals—Bonnaroo, Coachella, SXSW—were cancelled. “It was written, drafted, revised, copy edited...in the context of a world I had not anticipated living in when we sold the book. And so it became a way for me to reach back to these communities, these environments that have given me so much” while representing a microcosm of America, Johnson says. “Music festivals struggle with diversi-
ty, and they also have to reckon with this uniquely American threat of [gun] violence. All of that was bound up in this exploration of love in this space.”

Perpetual crush machine Olivia arrives at the Farmland Music and Arts Festival in heart-shaped sunglasses, intending to push her latest breakup out of her mind and focus on quality time with her best friend, Imani. Gorgeous, stoic, college-bound musician Toni Foster arrives grieving an incalculable loss.

“I don’t know if I believe in a higher power, or life after death, or any of the stuff the minister said at my dad’s funeral,” Toni says in the novel. “But countless summers spent at the greatest music festival in the world, on a former farm in Rattle Tail, Georgia along with sixty-thousand other music fans, watching sets from the top of his sunburnt shoulders taught me one inalienable truth: that somewhere in the light-years of space between the spiritual and the scientific, between the known and the ineffable, there’s live music.”

The two girls meet at Olivia’s tangled tent, and sparks fly.

“The thing that I love about Olivia is she’s so hopelessly hopeful,” Johnson says. “She’s willing to throw herself headfirst into a situation because it contains the possibility of love.”

But Rise to the Sun isn’t a typical rom-com. It’s a complex drama with heart and heft, laced with laughter and adventure. And it’s as much about friendship, family, and identity as it is about love.

“Toni’s emotional arc in the book is maybe my favorite,” Johnson says, “because it requires her to be vulnerable. That vulnerability is so rare for Black girls, in the world and on the page. Writing that, putting that out into the world is really important to me.”

Johnson, who says that cultivating community is the principal goal of her work, dedicates Rise to the Sun “to the Black girls who have been told they’re too much and to the ones who don’t believe they’re enough: You are the world’s most beautiful song.”

“As intentional as it was to make the joy completely unavoidable in You Should See Me in a Crown,” she says, “it was deeply intentional to me to write a book in which joy and sadness had to be held in the same hand in Rise to the Sun.

“I think it’s important to think about those two things not as separate entities,” Johnson says, “but [as] emotions that often exist together, especially when you’re a marginalized person. So it’s not a rom-com, but I do hope there are enough moments of lightness and levity in this book [to] remind people that the heart of the story is the same: that Black girls deserve happy endings and deserve to be held with care.”

Editor at large Megan Labrise hosts Kirkus’ Fully Booked podcast.
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

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**GUARDIAN OF THE GROCERIES**  
Albanese, Michael  
Illus. by Kirkland, Laura  
Weight of Ink (42 pp.)  
$17.99 | $10.99 paper | Nov. 11, 2020  
978-1-73289-872-1

A little boy learns the power of his imagination in this picture book.

Freckled, red-haired Henry doesn’t agree when his mom tells him, “It’s okay to be bored sometimes.” Her idea of adventures is...a trip to the grocery store. There, she leaves Henry to guard the cart while she tracks down items. With a metal colander to serve as helmet, Captain Henry imagines that his cart is a spaceship. He pilots it daringly around the aisles, eliminating enemies like Breakfastus Maximus—“a villain made of giant, family-sized cereal boxes!” or the dreaded Broccolisaurus, which he defeats utterly at the dinner table. At bedtime, Henry realizes his mother was right: “Anything can be an adventure if you just use your imagination.” In his second book for children, Albanese entertainingly helps encourage kids to find opportunity for imagination in the midst of tedium. Henry's vivid battles are humorous and exciting and make great use of the grocery-store setting for maximum fun. Kirkland, illustrating her first children’s book, provides comiclike pictures that resemble children's drawings and energetically convey the fun of Henry's adventures.

An appealingly comic approach to helping kids transform life's mundane moments.

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**MALL GIRL MEETS THE SHADOW VANDAL**  
Baer, Kimberly  
Wild Rose Press (202 pp.)  
Mar. 22, 2021  
978-1-5092-3512-4

In this middle-grade novel, a tween becomes entangled in a mystery when an unknown vandal targets the West Virginia shopping mall where she resides.

Twelve-year-old Chloe Lamont lives in a modest house with her mother—right in the middle of the Oasis Mall. Shoppers treat the family home like a novelty, often tossing coins into the chimney from the mall’s upper level. But
living there has some advantages; Chloe's mom, Ursula, runs one of the shops, and they're minutes away from such conveniences as groceries and hair salons. But now, someone is damaging mall property, first egging a storefront. Subsequent vandalism shows a pattern, as it occurs in the early-morning hours inside the locked mall. Authorities naturally look at the Lamonts, who have opportunity though no apparent motive. But it only gets worse for Chloe and her mom, who notice items missing or disturbed in their home—things the vandal probably used, like eggs. It's not just a question of who is doing the misdeeds, but also how someone stealthily bypasses their bolted doors. Meanwhile, Chloe starts a new school year in the seventh grade. She doesn't make friends easily and dreads being stuck in a new teacher-formed group in English class. As it turns out, the other members of the “Mystery Group” are a lively bunch and enjoy a good mystery as well. When they learn Chloe is living in the midst of one, the students realize that there's an entire mall and a tiny home filled with potential clues.

Baer delivers a brisk, entertaining tale. The story's young protagonist is appealing and sympathetic. Years ago, she lost her firefighter dad, who died heroically, and not long after, her grandfather as well; he had stopped a real estate developer from tearing down the Lamont home. Readers will surely embrace Chloe even with her flaws, such as moroseness being her temperament of choice. As it turns out, the group's focus is on mysteries, Chloe's favorite genre. As it turns out, the other members of the “Mystery Group” are a lively bunch and enjoy a good mystery as well. When they learn Chloe is living in the midst of one, the students realize that there's an entire mall and a tiny home filled with potential clues.

In Bilen's novel, two teens, each suffering from trauma from past tragedies, pursue a relationship as a serial killer roams free.

When 17-year-olds Jacob and Olivia meet, she's just been to the funeral of a friend she knew in sixth grade—the latest victim of a murderer in the area called the Sweet Dreams Strangler. Jacob used to live in Michigan with his father, but now, after being involved in a drunken driving accident, he's been sent to live with his FBI agent mother in Olivia's Pennsylvania hometown. The teens feel an immediate attraction, and after they start regularly walking home from school together, their feelings only grow stronger. Olivia has a secret: When she was 7, her dad, who suffered from schizophrenia, tried to kill himself—and her—in a fire. Olivia survived, but she's recently started hearing voices, including that of her dead friend. Jacob has a secret, too: He suffers from headaches and sometimes from apparent blackouts. He also sketches faces that he sees in a recurring nightmare, which turn out to be the victims of the Sweet Dreams Strangler. Is Olivia slipping into mental illness like her father? Do Jacob's dreams hide a darker truth? And will the killer ever be caught? Bilen writes in a polished, efficient style in the first person, present tense, alternating between Olivia's and Jacob's perspectives. The dialogue is mostly naturalistic, although it edges toward TV-style banter when Jacob and Olivia converse. Despite the story's dark themes, the overall tone remains surprisingly upbeat. The chapters sometimes feel a bit too short, giving the work a choppy feel; still, this gives it a constant sense of forward motion that carries the reader along. Olivia and Jacob are both relatable characters, and their romance has a pleasant, high school–sweetheart tone. For much of the book, Bilen succeeds in obfuscating the significance of the story's supernatural elements; the denouement arrives in a breathless rush that removes any ambiguity but takes away some of the mystique.

A surprisingly buoyant supernatural YA thriller.
In his debut novel, Bobain explores the life, ideals, and struggles of real-life 19th-century Italian revolutionary Cristina Trivulzio di Belgiojoso.

By the First Italian War for Independence in 1848, socialist republican noblewoman Cristina is already an enemy of the Austrian Empire. She’s a native of Austrian-controlled Milan and had witnessed the arrest of her stepfather, a democratic advocate, thus igniting her lifelong goal of Italian independence. After a failed marriage and political exile to Paris, she becomes a financier of revolutionaries abroad, using her charm and connections to fund the cause. During this time, she gives birth to her daughter, Maria, who grows up longing for a life of stability and privilege. Eventually, Cristina and Maria settle briefly in Turkey before embarking on a dangerous pilgrimage to Jerusalem and back. Along the way, mother and daughter struggle to understand each other.

Bobain offers an engaging and informative glimpse into the life of a little-celebrated architect of Italian unification, told in a nonchronological series of recollections by Cristina and Maria. His thoughtful prose is at its best during moments when his narrators’ ideologies, flaws, and disappointments are on full display, as when Cristina notes that “the kings and the popes can contend with violence and aggression. But empathy, that terrifies them.” The writing can sometimes feel repetitive, though, especially during the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, during which the characters retell identical events in a manner that lacks the tension of earlier chapters. Bobain also presupposes a familiarity with Italian history that may leave many readers wishing that the book had provided more context. However, the work truly shines when conveying the brutality that Italy faced, as when a wounded soldier dies: “I had read to him from Dickens…. Yet he would die without having heard how the story ends, neither the one penned by Dickens nor the one written, in part, with his own blood.”

A historical tale that sheds light on a compelling revolutionary woman from Italian history.
"Campbell’s full-color images of prehistoric birds and pink, T. Rex–like Tulip are charmingly cartoonish."

**THE ENIGMA THREAT**  
*Breakfield, Charles V. & Burkey, Roxanne E.*  
Icabod Press (340 pp.)  
$17.95 paper | $3.99 e-book | Jan. 8, 2021  
978-1-946858-48-1

In the 12th installment of this techno-thriller series, a fiendish organization policing online activities targets members of R-Group, a cybersecurity team. The Special Artificial Intelligence Task Force raids the R-Group’s Zurich operations center. As supercomputers are illegal, the team annihilates the group’s resident AI, ICABOD, and arrests hacker Quip. Once other members of the family-owned R-Group initiate a prison break, they’re fugitives. That doesn’t stop them from stymying the nefarious MAG group, which is spearheading the hits against AI–enhanced supercomputers. They thwart MAG’s attempt to destroy one particular AI, which the R-Group can then secretly utilize to “reassemble” ICABOD. As MAG is already fearful of R-Group’s building another artificial intelligence, they send an anatomic biped programmed to assassinate any remaining members if necessary. They moreover set their sights on Gracie Rodreguiz in New York, suspecting (rightly so) that she’s part of the cybersecurity family. R-Group adamantly avoids detection using ancient devices from last century—pagers. With luck and resolve, the family might be able to revive ICABOD, which they can use in their inevitable confrontation against MAG. Like Breakfield and Burkey’s preceding installment, *The Enigma Beyond* (2020), their latest novel brims with cool technology. In one instance, the R-Group covertly bounces signals off of still-orbiting, seemingly abandoned zombie satellites. There’s also up-to-date tech that some readers may recognize, including deepfakes. The authors masterfully handle a sizable cast while maintaining momentum. These players, many of whom are recurring, land in various engrossing circumstances; Gracie, for example, finds both peril and romance. Despite returning enemies, this novel could be a stand-alone. But myriad delightful characters mean endless story possibilities for additional sequels or spinoffs.

Another clever, energetic addition to an appealing series.

**DREAM COUNTRY**  
*Brown, Ashaye*  
Onwe Press (336 pp.)  
978-1-916042-98-8

The killing of a goddess tears the world—and her three children—apart in this YA fantasy. Theodore, Fanta, and Tores are the triplet Major gods of Sleep, Dream, and Nightmares, respectively. They once lived together in Zion. But after the murder of their goddess mother, the All-Mother, when Night disappeared from the skies, they decided to reside in domains separated by the gates of Ivory, the material of Dreams and Horn, and the material of Nightmares in order to prevent a civil war. Ever since, the siblings have been filled with mistrust and remain suspicious of one another—after all, who else but a Major could kill the Night? The creatures and Minor gods who inhabit their domains harbor the same apprehensions. Now, it is time for a new Majoracle, the festival that takes place on the siblings’ birthday, when the gates are closed to mortals and the Major and Minor gods can rest for a few days. But just before the Majoracle begins, a mysterious child enters Theo’s domain, a youngster who may spark explosive, life-altering consequences for everyone. If Tores gets his hands on the child, perhaps the god can finally achieve what he wants the most: access to Dream Country, his sister’s domain, and a way to be rid of the Nightmares once and for all. Peppered with Brazilian and Kenyan cultural references, Brown’s beautifully written novel delivers an inventive, dreamlike tale about a dysfunctional family whose love-hate dynamics are infused with wariness, envy, and yearning. The book rewards patient readers who enjoy slow revelations and striking stories with thought-provoking elements of theology and mythology. The chapters deftly alternate between peaceful, unassuming Theo and bitter, assertive Tores. This leaves Fanta still a delectable mystery to readers, with a promise of more to come by the time the bracing narrative reaches its explosive twist ending.

**TULIP**  
*Campbell, Robbie*  
Illus. by the author  
Self (32 pp.)  
$9.94 paper | Dec. 9, 2020  
978-1-77744-751-9

A dinosaur starts life among a group of birds in author/illustrator Campbell’s debut picture book. A volcano erupts, sending an egg hurtling from a dinosaur’s nest into that of a kindly bird. She’s initially confused about the situation, but after all three eggs hatch, she does her best to raise the wingless dino, whom the narrator calls Tulip. Despite
some early missteps—including a literal one, which dumps Tulip in the mud—the bird comes up with a life strategy for the reptilian creature: “You don’t have any wings, but from right here on the ground / you can do so many things.” Tulip grows into a huge theropod while her bird siblings stay small, she becomes their protector and a renowned, joyful dancer. Campbell twists typical ugly-duckling tropes by having Tulip’s adoptive family immediately accept her and help her to see her own value. Campbell’s full-color images of prehistoric birds and pink, T. Rex-like Tulip are charmingly cartoonish. However, savvy readers may question why a T. Rex oddly builds a nest on a cliff or why a wooly mammoth appears during the Cretaceous period. The message that one may find an identity by embracing skills comes through clearly, and Campbell’s rhyming stanzas make for a smooth read-aloud.

A story that celebrates differences and will please many dinosaur-loving youngsters.

THE DEBUTANTE (AND THE BOMB FACTORY)
Canter, Jonathan
Debutante Press (354 pp.)
$7.99 paper | $5.99 e-book
Dec. 23, 2020
978-1-73636-271-6

A hapless informant-turned-professor dives into the past in search of a woman he once loved in Canter’s comic novel.

Lincoln “Linc” Cox was a freshman in college when he met high school senior Samantha Victor at a debutante cotillion. Samantha was one of the debs—the daughter of a wealthy banker and a prominent socialite, and hardly the sort of girl he’d expect to get caught up in the radical politics of the late 1960s. Their relationship was brief and ended before Samantha joined the militant Weather Underground, though Linc covered the 1969 Days of Rage demonstration in Chicago as a reporter and witnessed Samantha’s participation in it from a distance. Forty years later, Linc is a divorced college professor writing a book on the Weathermen and hunting down old members, partially in the hope of reconnecting with Samantha. One major complication: Linc became a state informant on the Weathermen not long after the Days of Rage—and has remained one for the past four decades. Only recently did he learn, during an attempt to interview an ex-member of the group, that he has a reputation for being a rat. As he attempts to locate Samantha, fallout from events of the past—including the famous Greenwich Village townhouse explosion—reemerge to threaten to upend his present. Canter’s prose is smooth and often funny, presenting Linc’s self-deprecating account of his hapless adventures in a nebulous world of espionage and terrorism. Here, for instance, he describes his time confined in an American safe house in England in the 1970s: “They trained spies, and from time to time I was used as a guinea pig by female spies in training. Their job was to make me think they liked me….They didn’t tell me that.” Although the premise seems a bit contrived at first, the plot grows increasingly intricate and surprising, and readers will quickly find themselves caught up in the intrigue of it all. Canter hews fairly closely to historical fact, up to a point, and manages to turn this peculiar piece of 1960s lore into a witty, immersive read.

A short and insightful novel of an aging hippie generation.

BLINK ONCE TO SPREAD SNOW
Christie, James
Gracehill Press (410 pp.)
$15.95 paper | $4.95 e-book | Jul. 13, 2020
978-0-9862898-6-6

Debut author Christie offers a haunting narrative of innocence lost and sacrifices made in order to preserve a family.

In 2002, Cal Brenneman is dying after suffering a massive stroke. He was once a towering and robust man, but now he’s a mere shadow of his former self and only able to communicate by blinking his eyes. He’s tethered to life only by his family’s visits and his own memories of love, loss, and tragedy. After the drowning death of his youngest sister, for which he blamed himself, and abandonment by his depressed, guilt-ridden father, Cal channeled his pain into a commitment to work and a determination to love others. He also believes that the Devil is largely responsible for injustice in the world—and he witnesses much injustice in his own life, including the racism of those around him, the horrors of war when he was an ambulance driver during World War II, and the untimely deaths of loved ones. Cal is a stoic hero in the eyes of his family, and when Connor, his troubled brother’s child, appears after Cal’s stroke, the dying man takes the opportunity to reconcile aspects of his own bitter past. Christie offers a gripping narrative about the difficult choices people make for those they love. By juxtaposing present and past events, the author allows readers to understand Cal in ways that even his family doesn’t—specifically, his horror and outrage at a world that allows atrocities to befall the innocent and his guilt and grief regarding those he was unable to protect. Although the story comes to a hopeful resolution, Christie’s work is often heart-breaking. It’s worth noting, however, that the text contains several moments of graphic, realistic, and haunting violence, which may not be appropriate for all audiences.

A brutal but often beautiful novel.
“An indispensable study of the challenges of the new work world.”

BEATING BURNOUT AT WORK

Why Teams Hold the Secret to Well-Being and Resilience

Davis, Paula

Wharton School Press (140 pp.)


Mar. 16, 2021

978-1-61363-112-6

A business-world book that outlines keys to overcoming work-related stress.

Davis, the founder and CEO of the Stress & Resilience Institute consultancy, opens her debut book by citing several things that have contributed to “burnout” in 2021, which many readers will find familiar. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, unemployment spiked and, due to many workers working remotely, “boundaries blurred, and always being at home made it nearly impossible to fully detach from work.” In addition, she notes, “underrepresented groups have exhausted themselves trying to fit into organizations that continue to undersupport them.” Factors such as these—and she could easily have listed half a dozen more in today’s work environment—have combined to create a “tsunami of stress,” and this book presents a number of insights and strategies designed to help one understand and combat the burnout that can result from it. Readers will nod in agreement as they read this searching, empathetic, and timely work. In it, Davis describes the burnout process as more complicated than simply being tired from working too hard; she views it as a manifestation of chronic workplace stress and as a “gateway process” to more serious health problems, such as depression and panic attacks. She asserts that the key to getting through burnout is to avoid trying to do so alone. The silver bullet, she says, is teamwork: “Resilient teams,” she writes, “anticipate challenges, are aware of each other’s capacity level, provide ongoing status updates to team members during a crisis, know when to go outside the team for help, debrief regularly, and communicate appreciation.” Davis grounds her contentions with copious, well-documented research, all presented in crisp, clear prose. She also bolsters her central notion of fostering “belonging and motivation” with graphs and other well-designed visuals that help to put forward a holistic vision.

An indispensable study of the challenges of the new work world.

NO LIFE BUT THIS

A Novel of Emily Warren Roebling

Ferri, Diane Vogel

ATBOSHI Media (415 pp.)


Dec. 10, 2020

978-1-62613-300-6

Poet Ferri offers a historical novel about the life of real-life Victorian engineer and women’s rights activist Emily Warren Roebling.

After the sudden death of chief engineer John A. Roebling in the summer of 1869, the ambitious construction of the Brooklyn Bridge fell to his son, Washington. However, only a year later, the younger man would be incapacitated by caisson disease, leaving him physically unable to oversee the project in person. As a result, Washington’s wife, Emily, rose to fame as a devoted defender of the bridge and a skilled engineer in her own right, acting as liaison for her husband and handling daily supervision of the project. In this decade-spanning novel the author delves into a tumultuous period of American history as well as the mind and heart of her narrator. Ferri focuses on Emily’s internal life as she navigates the expectations placed on her as a wife and mother as well as intense public scrutiny over the bridge. She also bears witness to the inequities of women
throughout American society, observing abuses as well as the disproportionate favor that’s placed on those in positions of privilege. Throughout the novel, Emily is beset by bitter discontent over legal and social constraints, but she persistently reinvents herself and becomes a vocal advocate for women’s rights. Some sections involving invented characters or events can feel saccharine or overly convenient, but Ferri’s prose does a marvelous job of highlighting her protagonist’s exceptional mind and the restrictions she faced. Emily is shown to be loving, compassionate, insensitive, and bullish, by turns, resulting in a well-rounded and empathetic portrait of a woman whose ambition was greater than any single life could hold.

A sensitive and comprehensive exploration of an exceptional historical figure.

THE LONELIEST BAND IN FRANCE
Fisher, Dylan
Texas Review Press (70 pp.)
$19.95 paper | $18.95 e-book
Mar. 2, 2020
978-1-68003-212-3

A Sri Lankan exchange student joins an unusual French band in this debut literary novella.

Migara de Silva is just trying to sell his blood. But the Sri Lankan law student has only been in France for six weeks and barely understands the language. When he shows up at the address mentioned in the ad, he discovers it’s actually an audition for a rock group called The Loneliest Band in France. The members—Noël, Guy, Lucien, and Michel—quickly ask Migara to join despite his total lack of musical experience or ability. Not only join, in fact, but play with them that very night at a contest at the Café Bovary, where they plan to unveil a deadly song that will change the music landscape forever. The song “caused its listeners to lose their skin, their flesh peeling away from their bones in the language. When he shows up at the address mentioned in the ad, he discovers it’s actually an audition for a rock group called The Loneliest Band in France. The members—Noël, Guy, Lucien, and Michel—quickly ask Migara to join despite his total lack of musical experience or ability. Not only join, in fact, but play with them that very night at a contest at the Café Bovary, where they plan to unveil a deadly song that will change the music landscape forever. The song "caused its listeners to lose their skin, their flesh peeling away from their bones in long, unwieldy strips, go mad, and ultimately die, or in any case this is what they believed would occur, never having played it in public." Migara—or Paul, as he introduces himself to the band members—decides to take them up on their offer. It’s just the thing to break him out of his malaise: the expectations of his father, the alienation he feels abroad, the smallness of the life waiting for him back home. But does he really want to participate in violence? And what will come after it? The vast majority of Fisher’s novella is made up of three run-on sentences, which gives the prose a frenetic, breathless, tumbling quality: “And I wondered if this was still them, if this was the song for, yes, I heard a harmonica playing, a trumpet, drums, vocals, guitar, all the right component pieces, but it was not what I expected, was not the tone I thought I would hear.” The author offers a surreal setting in which the birds have learned to talk (though they, like the narrator, are often caught between languages) and the exterior world is so fused to Migara’s interiority that it’s difficult to know just what is real and what isn’t. Yet beneath the structural and absurdist conceits, there is an impressive and fairly universal story about a son, his father, and the weight of discovering what to do with one’s life.

A memorable, cerebral tale with a frenzied mind and a big heart.

WISCONSIN POST OFFICE MURALS
Gates Jr, David W.
Post Office Fans (178 pp.)
$55.00 paper | $24.99 e-book
Aug. 1, 2019
978-1-970088-00-7

This colorful, illustrated catalog showcases scenes from Wisconsin history and daily life that grace Depression-era post offices.

Gates surveys 35 murals commissioned for Wisconsin post offices in the 1930s and ’40s by an unlikely New Deal bureaucracy known as the Treasury Department’s Section of Fine Arts. They are mainly large-scale paintings, in the range of 10 to 15 feet wide by 4 to 6 feet high, depicting local historical lore and economic mainstays in the small towns where they are displayed. (The author also includes gossamer aluminum reliefs of ducks by sculptor Boris Gilbertson, housed in Janesville.) The murals teem with muscular men harvesting cranberries, threshing grain, pitching hay, hauling nets, making cheese, and, above all, felling trees and sawing logs. There are also a few youths sledding and skating and a rare feminine subject in Frances Foy’s enchanting scenes of women and girls picking wildflowers in forest glades, housed at a Milwaukee branch. Historical subjects include French missionaries and explorers, trading meetings between White settlers and Native Americans, and a legendary mass brawl among—naturally—lumberjacks in Park Falls. The purpose of the pieces is staid civic uplift, but the aesthetics and mood are often dramatic: Peter Rotier’s West Bend painting The Rural Mail Carrier, featuring a mailman in a buggy visiting a farmstead, has lowering skies, stark light and shadow, and haunting figures with expressions of grim determination. Gates’ entries include biographical sketches of the artist, a brief profile of the town, and an involved account of the work’s creation and reception. (Most garnered praise from the citizenry, but some faced opposition; one postmaster grumbled that the lobby looked fine the way it was and that “there is nothing of any historical significance” and “no particular industry in the town for a mural to portray.”) The full-color illustrations are sumptuous, and Gates’ lucid, workmanlike prose is studded with intriguing details and commentary by Treasury’s discerning critics that shed light on the processes of art by committee. (“The Section felt that the Indians and horses were drawn in an interesting manner but that the landscapes and the ground on which they stood were not convincing.”) The result is a captivating look at Wisconsin culture that may tempt readers into art tours in out-of-the-way places.

An informative and visually striking guide to public art at its most democratic.
“A child-savvy message about limiting screen time delivered with humor and charm.”

THE GIRL AND HER TV
Gimba, Arran
Illus. by Olsen, Jenn
Self (65 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Jan. 10, 2019
978-1-79346-098-1

Glued to her TV screen, a little girl misses fantastical events happening around her in this picture book. Wild and silly things occur right outside a girl’s window, but she is oblivious. Lounging on her couch, she is “so consumed” by her favorite TV show that she’s not aware of Cupid’s unfortunate, painful encounter with a tree in February; a preleapchaun chase in March; and skateboarding grannies in September. Month after month, the girl chooses her TV show over family and friends, ignoring Mother’s Day and Father’s Day; missing the Easter Bunny, fireworks in July; and Santa’s emergency sleigh repair; and even disappearing from her own birthday bash. (“The little girl didn’t mean to flake / But got distracted by the TV when she came in / for a bathroom break.”) Some young readers may question why Mom and Dad don’t pull the plug, but comical exaggeration with a light touch gets the point across about the downside of passive screen watching as the world outside passes by. This work is the third installment of a picture-book series by prolific SF and short story author Gimba. Illustrator Olsen depicts the tale’s characters as round, big-eyed, and diverse (the biracial protagonist has a Black mom and White dad) and tickles funny bones with whimsical details complementing Gimba’s rhyming text.

A child-savvy message about limiting screen time delivered with humor and charm.

THE END OF THE WORLD
NOTWITHSTANDING
Stories I Lived To Tell
Goodwin, Janna L.
Travelers’ Tales (210 pp.)
$18.95 paper | $12.99 e-book
Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-953447-99-9

This slim collection, a tour de force of circumbendibus, blends memoir, reflective essay, and even travelogue. Goodwin, a professor of communication at Regis University in Denver, has had a very interesting life. Besides being an academic, she is also an actor and a playwright (some of these anecdotes were written for her stage monologues). Here she covers rural getaways (heightened by wildfires), the perils of house-sitting with a borderline feral cat, getting by on the razor edge of flat broke, the Paris catacombs, really strange dreams, neighborhood weirdos, looming tornadoes, panic attacks, the mysteries of the inner ear, sexual misadventures, epiphanies at the Grand Canyon, and much more, all accompanied by often snarky footnotes and small (understated) illustrations. Goodwin isn’t just humorous, but witty. At one point, she tries to enlarge a map in an old book by stretching her fingers out over it, adding, “the page must have been broken.” One long essay, “The Wolf and Me,” deals with those sexual misadventures, and it is where the word circumbendibus is found wonderfully illustrated. The account of a snowmobile ride behind a cute boy is interrupted, time and again, by many painful memories, including early gropings, an attempted rape by “Shmed Smenedy,” and, before that, an actual rape while drugged. This woman, Lord knows, is a survivor, and a tough one. It’s hard to explain, but somehow Goodwin finally gets us back to her ride on that snowmobile with that cute boy who did not try to assault her. The contrast is so stark, the leap from the predatory back to the innocent (he stopped in the woods just to sneak a cigarette) so stark, we are stunned. And relieved, even if the awfulness cannot be wholly exorcised. Goodwin has David Sedaris’ talent of turning on a dime from the truly hilarious to the thoughtful and poignant, helping us to learn new truths. Wonderfully detailed, every word the right word, this book is a genuine keeper.

DREAMING WITH MARIPOSAS
Gutiérrez, Sonia
Flowersong Press (210 pp.)
$18.95 paper | Dec. 14, 2020
978-1-953447-99-9

In these collected short fictional pieces, multiple narrators tell the story of a Mexican American family.

Sisters Paloma and Sofía “Chofi” Martínez are first-generation Americans; their parents, Francisco Martínez Castillo and Maria Helena Ramirez de Avila, were born in Michoacán, Mexico. In the United States, Francisco and Helena work hard at jobs available to illiterate migrants, as a seamstress or a construction laborer, for example. They move to the Los Angeles area, achieving home ownership and urging their daughters to attend college. Growing up, the girls make a practice of telling their dreams every morning. As their mother says, “Share them out loud with your eyes wide open, so your dreams can guide you through the world of the living.” Usually narrated by Chofi, the short chapters present vignettes following the sisters’ coming-of-age and the family fortunes. They attend school, gain a baby brother, learn to mambo, enjoy feasts and holidays, visit Mexico, deal with maturing bodies and feelings, spread their wings in college, and plan careers—Paloma as an accountant, Chofi as a journalist. Over time, they witness the sad decline of their father into alcoholism and rage. In her second book, Gutiérrez poetically conveys the Chicano/Chicana experience, often through vivid sensory details. A Tijuana marketplace, for example, presents a bright mosaic of “molcajetes, loterias, pinto beans, Peruvian beans, and tamarindo.” While experience rests on sensations and solid actions (making a living, a meal, clothing), the power of stories and dreams
forges links to the sacred. Choﬂ’s troubled cousin Beto, for example, has tattoos she doesn’t ﬁnd threatening because they connect with “the crosses, the thorns, paintings, and statues at churches. Like a church, he decorates his body with memories of pain.”

Vignettes that poignantly evoke heritage and growth.

LEE LAWRIE’S PRAIRIE DECO
History in Stone at the Nebraska State Capitol
Harm, Gregory Paul
Leelawriedotcom (280 pp.)
$56.95 | $40.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
Feb. 28, 2018
978-0-9839030-9-3
978-0-9839030-6-2 paper

An art history book focuses on the man who shaped the prairie deco architectural style.

This fourth edition of Harm’s homage to Lee Lawrie, who sculpted the renowned Atlas statue at Rockefeller Center in Manhattan and others notable pieces, explores additional works by the artist. The book covers a lot of ground, opening with Lawrie’s ancestry and the significant events in his youth that led to his fascination with sculpture and his early development as an artist. He immigrated to the United States from Germany as a child and began studying sculpture at the age of 14, when Henry Richard Park, a “prominent Chicago sculptor,” hired him as an errand boy. Lawrie worked his way up, eventually getting assignments to create minor sculptures. The author, who has been researching Lawrie for 20 years, zeroes in on the artist’s works at the Nebraska State Capitol. Harm laments that the Capitol sits in relative obscurity despite ranking among the ﬁve most signiﬁcant buildings of the art deco era. Lawrie and a collaborator “crafted the scheme of the building to be a sort of giant textbook.” The volume traces the development of the prairie deco style, inspired by Lawrie’s marriage of art deco and prairie architecture, which was intended to reﬂect and honor the Midwest’s environs and history. Chapter 17 concentrates entirely on the Sower, his statue that symbolizes the relationship between farmers and agriculture in Nebraska. It depicts a man casting seeds in hopes of growing crops to feed his family. Several of Lawrie’s other striking sculptures at the Capitol honor Native Americans, the state’s ﬁrst settlers. Written in easily understandable and ﬂowing language, the text will especially appeal to historians and academics interested in art deco, architecture, Great Plains history, Native American culture, and the United States government, law, and politics. Stunning photographs of Lawrie’s designs and period images of the artist, many of them occupying full pages, make the book pop. Heavily illustrated (more than 50 photos in the ﬁrst 50 pages, a balance that continues throughout the work), the volume will engage casual readers who may get bogged down in the long, scholarly passages. The book goes a step beyond most art histories, deftly bringing readers into Lawrie’s creative process and philosophy through his articles, speeches, letters, and never-completed autobiography.

A rich, beautifully illustrated historical account for art lovers and prairie deco devotees.

SUN WOLF
Jeffrey, David C.
JeffreyJazz Publishing (403 pp.)
Oct. 25, 2020
978-0-9986742-2-3

In Jeffrey’s SF sequel, an earthling must thwart a shadowy conspiracy that could lead to the end of the universe.

It’s 2217, and humanity can travel from an environmentally devastated Earth to distant stars via “voidoids”—invisible space gates of an unknown nature. But even with thousands of planets to explore, only one Earth-like world, Silvanus, has been found. Navigator Aidan Macallan contacted and explored it in Through a Forest of Stars (2017), and it turned out to be off-limits to colonists due to a sentient entity there called the Rete; it’s not hostile, but it’s wary of the destructive potential of Homo sapiens. Now, on Earth, radical environmentalists and a reactionary, anti-science political buffoon named Houda Thunkit are at the forefront of a movement against space exploration. At the same time, voidoids are becoming unstable and closing down, potentially grounding outposts, ships, and colonies across the cosmos forever. Aiden now commands his own state-of-the-art starship, the Sun Wolf, and he and his crew form an uneasy alliance with Earth’s military to determine who’s disrupting the voidoids. The stakes rise considerably when scientists reveal that the voids are key to keeping all matter in balance; without them, the universe will dissipate into nothingness. Jeffrey’s yarn is a dandy cosmic mystery conceived on the vast scale of an Arthur C. Clarke or Olaf Stapledon epic. Some moments have a New Age-y tone, and it’s a bit odd when jazz music, a real-life pursuit of the author, is revealed to be particularly important to the plot. But there’s a gallery of well-drawn, diverse characters that may pleasantly remind readers of Star Trek; a memorably sinister cabal of villains; and even a smattering of romance. There’s also no shortage of imaginative perils along the way.

A fine spacefaring adventure story on a macroscopic scale.
THE SILENCE THAT BINDS
Jessup, Paul
Vernacular Books (268 pp.)
Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-952283-09-3

In a post-apocalyptic world swept by a plague, two young women search for their missing mentor, lost in an infected landscape.

Fantasy/SF author Jessup conjures up a fever-dream, chaotic, dystopian environment that might be future Earth, distant-past Earth, or maybe another colonized planet in this novel; it is difficult to judge. Humans seem to have forgotten most of their history, terrorized and diminished as they are by the “curse,” the tag given to a grotesque plague of unknown nature that affects not only flesh, but also inorganic objects (entire buildings, in fact) and, possibly, reality itself. Animals and people tend to transform painfully into monstrous, destructive, multiheaded chimeras (many others seem to become zombies—though that genre buzzword is never used). Defending against the horror is a sisterhood of “seers,” female orphans who dwell in a labyrinth of bones and train in combat archery, dancing rites, and curious healing arts, communing with the world’s “ghosts.” The seers can forestall, if not completely cure, the curse, a principal method being the forcible insertion of a precious “ghost heart” (and, sometimes, a few butterflies) into a victim’s tortured body.

Mazi and Talia, two young temple acolytes, have left the labyrinth in search of Naomi, a missing older seer whom they regard as a mother figure. The quest grows more desperate when Mazi, wounded, realizes she is infected by the dreaded curse. Jessup’s prose sometimes recalls Harlan Ellison at his most extravagant, invoking a lurid, elastic environment steeped in ritual yet with delirious magic as well as weird science. A space-based artificial intelligence called the Dzall figures into the equation, and some characters and entities may be robots, androids, or nanotechnology creations. Expect no firm answers or solid exposition by the time the narrative arc (a rather simple one, when all is said and done) reaches its cathartic conclusion. Just go with the vivid flow of descriptions of entropic desolation and phantasmagoric filigree: “The hollow stones were a mess of geometry on the side of the hill. Trees seemed to back away from them, and the air smelled like pine and earth and fungal things spreading out underground.”

A striking tale of violence and redemption with an abundance of mysterious dream/nightmare imagery.

THE HOCKENFUR TANGENT
Kingery, Linda
Capricious Codex Publishing (168 pp.)
979-8-59-003566-3

Two New Yorkers dive into a tempestuous love affair in Kingery’s debut novel.

One winter day in 2000, 22-year-old Leah Manis and a man named Jareth crash into each other’s lives—literally—when she collides with him on an icy Manhattan sidewalk and they land in a heap. They quickly strike up an unlikely rapport after Jareth, with a twisted ankle and covered in Leah’s takeout, admits to playfully pocketing her wallet, noting that city folk are “tricksters and opportunists.” They soon agree to meet at a diner for lunch the next day. The discussion is fast and light: Leah loves Jackie Chan movies and sometimes spray-paints graffiti in the shape of a teacup in tribute to the actor (who collects teacups); Jareth reveals that he’s a phone-sex operator and comments that he’s never had a bad gyro. They meet again and again, and after Leah brings Jareth back to her apartment, the two spiral into a fast-moving, logorrheic, and self-referential intimacy. Three of Leah’s secrets come out: She suffers from a mitochondrial disorder that causes her to sleep for 18 hours each day; she’s the wealthy orphaned child of two famous doctors; and she’s a virgin. As the kinetic relationship races along, will the pair save each other from their respective dissatisfactions with life? The book is mostly dialogue, which proves to be a weakness and a strength. Kingery writes urgent, unexpected sentences, and readers will feel swept up in the conversation—almost as much as Leah and Jareth are. However, it’s not without imperfections, as both parties speak in such an odd and oblique manner that the frequent lack of dialogue tags can leave one lost as to who’s speaking: “‘What if you had a kajillion hockenfurs?’ ‘A whatity-what now?’ ‘Exactly one kajillion hockenfurs. Hockenfurs are defined as the energy you need to live.’”

The plot, such as it is, is surprisingly engrossing, as Kingery is happy to push her couple into increasingly strange, unexpected, and existential territory. Readers will likely walk away excited to see what Kingery delivers in the future.

A slim, cerebral, and often compelling novel about an offbeat relationship.
EVERYTHING TOGETHER
A Second Dad Wedding
Klas, Benjamin
Illus. by Arroyo, Fian
One Elm Books (282 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-947159-65-5

A teenager spends an unforgettable season in Minneapolis in this middle-grade sequel.

Thirteen-year-old Jeremiah is looking forward to another summer with his father—though this year will be different in many ways. First, beloved neighbor Mr. Keeler has died, and Jeremiah vows to care for the older man’s garden and make it even better. Second, Jeremiah’s father, who is bisexual, will be marrying his boyfriend, Michael, who is obsessing over Pinterest-esque homemade decorations in “teal and chocolate” (as opposed to green and brown). Finally, and most unexpectedly, the teen’s best friend, Sage—who has queer parents—has seemingly replaced Jeremiah with Asha, the new girl in town. Soon, Jeremiah grows tired of tagging along with the two girls and looks elsewhere for fulfillment: helping his dad and Michael prepare for the wedding, volunteering in English classes for refugees with one of Sage’s moms, and forming a friendship with Asha’s twin brother, Asad, along with his annual fishing ritual with his father and riding his brand new bicycle. As the summer progresses, Jeremiah finds himself learning new things almost daily—but will his friendship with Sage ever be like it once was? Queer author Klas, who lives in the Twin Cities, deftly highlights the area’s diversity, including its LGBTQ+, Hmong, Somali, and refugee populations, through the eyes of Jeremiah, a thoughtful and open-minded teen. The protagonist enjoys gardening as much as bike riding and wears his ALLY baseball cap at Pride. Jeremiah’s reactions and feelings are realistic for his age—he doesn’t always say or do the right thing—but he is quick to learn and adapt to his surroundings and situations. Bisexuality is still underrepresented in pop culture, and a scene between Jeremiah and his dad addressing this topic is particularly poignant. In many ways, this tale, with distinct black-and-white illustrations by Arroyo, is a typical coming-of-age story. Yet readers will find themselves learning alongside Jeremiah, who tries spiced lamb at a food market and dissects the White savior complex in a kid-friendly way.

A lovely and intelligent family tale that emphasizes acceptance and care.

FOX IN A BOX
Klassen, Eva
Illus. by Thiessen, Leanne
Big Mind Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $7.54 e-book | Nov. 17, 2019
978-1-9992448-0-4

A fox presents gifts to his friends in this picture book.

Fox keeps a collection of items, including socks, clocks, and rocks, in a special black box. But when his “pile of things grew into a mountain of stuff” and no longer fits in the box, Fox decides to distribute some of the objects to friends. For example, he gives Sofia, his light-skinned human best friend, a clock because she doesn’t have one; donates building blocks to Bear, who “only had one”; and hopes the squirrels will repurpose his socks into “mittens and...smocks.” Fox’s friends respond positively: They offer Fox “things that filled up his heart but not his black box,” like a smile, a hug, a chat over tea, and a “thank you.” That night, the friends gather for a party. Now, Fox feels “light and at ease.” The critter appreciates his streamlined collection “because that’s what happens when less...becomes more.” Featuring a straightforward plot and kindhearted characters, Klassen’s engaging tale emphasizes important lessons regarding reusing items and creating space while helping friends. Fox is a resourceful and thoughtful protagonist. Thiessen’s illustrations are delightful. Many depict outdoor scenes utilizing autumnal tones, including browns, oranges, greens, and grays. Ornate forest backdrops feature leafy trees, twinkling lights, and adorable woodland creatures. Readers will enjoy the quirky touches, such as an owl wearing a scarf and a cheerful rabbit playing on a tree swing.

A sweet animal story underscoring joy, friendship, and sharing with others.

ANARCHY IN HIGH HEELS
Larson, Denise
She Writes Press (256 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $9.95 e-book | Jul. 27, 2021
978-1-64742-136-6

A debut memoir focuses on a young woman performing, making lifelong friendships, and finding herself during the 1970s.

Larson’s book is a feminist coming-of-age story about breaking free from the conservative ethos of the ‘50s. The author, who grew up in a Los Angeles suburb, believed she would end up as a housewife, secretary, nurse, or teacher. But she had a taste of show business as a child, when she appeared on a daytime variety show, and it left a mark. While studying drama as an undergraduate in San Francisco, Larson began working as a cashier at a “porno theater.” (“Porn is no big deal anymore,” a friend assured her.) The author began performing in an after-hours event at the theater and formed a feminist comedy troupe called Les Nickelettes.
“A vivid and engrossing Western with a strong hero.”

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHASTITY JAMES

Larson wrote the satirical plays as well as directed and produced the shows, which were popular among critics and audiences. Les Nickelettes had a stint in New York City, but their reception was lukewarm, and they returned to California in debt and overwhelmed. Still, their bonds remained strong, and the author returned to New York to continue performing with her friends years later. Larson’s memoir deftly captures the countercultural energy of the ’70s. The bawdy performances included skits of the women “as cowgirls riding stick ponies and singing ‘Deep in My Solar Plexus.’” But the story is also a stark reminder of the sexism that women experienced in that era. “Until Les Nickelettes asked for my opinions, I didn’t think my thoughts mattered,” explained one of the performers. Similarly, while auditioning in New York, Judy, a biracial Nickelette, experienced startling racism: “They’d say: ‘Are you a little Asian? ’ ‘You’re not Spanish looking enough.’ ‘Can you be Black?’ ” Larson recounts key events without glamorizing or dramatizing the highs and lows of this time in American history. Instead, she celebrates the power of friendship and the critical role of art to push boundaries: “Here’s the premise: Would religion and culture change if God were perceived as female instead of male?” In addition, the engrossing book addresses the importance of empowering marginalized individuals, who have so much to say.

A meaningful, feminist joyride that travels back in time.

ONE MUST TELL THE BEES
The Final Education of Sherlock Holmes
Matthews, J. Lawrence
Manuscript

This homage to the Sherlock Holmes saga gives readers both his first case and his last.

Matthews’ novel begins with a manuscript that Holmes has sent Dr. John H. Watson detailing his adventures as a very young man in Civil War-era America (who knew?). Not only did Holmes solve his first case (spies stealing gun powder from the Du Pont works in Delaware) there, but he also became invaluable to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, earned the confidence and friendship of President Abraham Lincoln, and was instrumental in the tracking down of the villainous John Wilkes Booth. And all this before Holmes reached his majority. He befriended Abraham, a Black boy who became his partner in sleuthing, showing up that nasty and opportunistic bully Allan Pinkerton. Readers also learn of Holmes’s very humble, Dickensian childhood as a boy named Johnnie Barrow: his brutish father; his mother who died young; and his brother, Mycroft, who essentially raised his sibling. It was Mycroft who decided they would become the Holmes brothers, erasing their past, and it was Lincoln himself who dubbed the detective “Sherlock.” Back to the present day. Watson, retired, receives an urgent message—along with that manuscript—instructing him to take a fast train from London to the south coast of England. There, Holmes, long retired himself, is a very contented beekeeper. On the way, Watson discovers that there has been a murder in one of the train’s compartments. The message proves to have been a lure, and Holmes and Watson face a final test at the hands of—well, no spoilers, but it is, as the doctor might say, deucedly clever.

The tone and the writing certainly ring true in these pages. In Matthews, Holmes has an acolyte to be proud of. (Indeed, it is a bit creepy how Holmes has reached a place in literature where he seems to readers to be a real, historical person—the ultimate compliment to poor Arthur Conan Doyle.) This novel seems intended to be the final word on the life of the esteemed detective. It’s no spoiler to say that the great man dies at the end, peacefully, with the humble and the exalted attending the service in a little country church. For all his famous career achievements in London, Holmes finds rest in picture-postcard rural England. Matthews’ portrayal of the sleuth is one that readers have come to know: Holmes’ affection for Watson, for example, which does not prevent his browbeating of the beleaguered man, and his constant showing off of his powers of observation and deduction. And if there is such a thing as militant patience, that’s the good doctor. In some ways, the book is too detailed—too committed to tying up even imagined loose ends. When told that Holmes’ ambivalent attitude toward women goes back to his having had a twin sister, long lost, that their cruel father forced into debauchery; readers can only roll their eyes (really?). On the other hand, the “American” Holmes is a refreshing creature: willing (and eager) to learn, acting properly deferential, and quite lacking the airs that the audience associates with the Baker Street legend, for all his talents and virtues. And he can even handle a horse.

Holmes fans will enjoy this tale’s admirable verisimilitude and bracing storytelling.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHASTITY JAMES
Morris, Kathleen
Five Star Publishing (289 pp.)
$25.95 | $25.99 paper | Mar. 17, 2021
978-1-4328-7531-2
978-1-4328-7532-9 paper

In this novel, a schoolteacher in the Old West finds herself on the run from the law.

At the age of 22, Chastity James is ready to make her own decisions. She plans to someday run the Massachussets family farm, where her loving father and uncle raised her. But for now, she wants her independence, even if it’s temporary; so she takes a yearlong teaching job in Dodge City, Kansas. It’s an entirely different lifestyle out there. While she smoothly adjusts to potent animal smells and a cramped room, some locals’ attitudes toward her—writing off the educated woman as “uppity”—border on intimidation. When this escalates into a physical assault, Chastity flees off her attacker. As few believe her claim of self-defense, she goes on the lam and ultimately befriends James Beauregard Durant,
another outlaw. The two keep their heads down while a lawman named Deputy Wyatt Earp is hot on Chastity’s heels. But when violent criminals abduct a young girl, Chastity, who’s as formidable with a six-shooter as any cowboy, decides she and Beau can help—and won’t have to concern themselves with following the law. Morris’ tale boasts an exceptional hero. Chastity is skilled with guns but also an intelligent woman who never condescends to others. Dodge City is the site of the book’s most engaging scenes; it’s an endless struggle for Chastity, as people either focus solely on her attractiveness or criticize her for not “listenin’ to men who know best.” Still, not every citizen in town is annoying or vile, and warmhearted moments in the novel’s latter half intermittently interrupt the law-evading suspense. Animated prose brightens the narrative, especially frequently delicious meals: “Eggs, likely from the same source as last evening’s purloined chickens, with bacon and spiced peaches, again likely stolen from some goodwife’s winter store, were in abundance.” The author also aptly incorporates historical figures; in addition to Earp, both Doc Holiday and his lover Kate Haroney make appearances. A vivid and engrossing Western with a strong hero.

A KITE FOR MELIA
Narh, Samuel & Narh, Freda
Illus. by Suria, Valeria
Chasing A Spider Publishing (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 30, 2021
978-1-73478-970-6

A girl’s desire to fly a kite dovetails with her grief over losing a pet in this beautifully illustrated picture book.

When Melia, a girl with light-brown skin and curly hair, asks older children if she can fly one of their kites, they tell her to make her own. She doesn’t know how, so she goes to the library to find out. There, she discovers a book about kites and uses it to make a beautiful triangular creation with a bow and long tail. At first, it won’t fly; and the older children jeer. But Melia keeps trying, and she’s successful and happy—because on it, she taped a letter for her deceased dog, Ginger. She hopes that Ginger will find a way to leave her a note in the stars. Married authors Samuel and Freda Narh reveal the story a bit at a time, interrupting the linear kite-making narrative with Melia’s recollections of Ginger and an expression of the joy she feels when she sees the library. Their language is poetic (“this aged booklet smells like success”) and balances the sometimes-challenging turns of phrase with shorter text and Suria’s large pastel illustrations, which capture the tone perfectly and use details from the apparently East African setting to enhance Melia’s world.

A well-told, offbeat story that blends themes of perseverance and healing.

OPEN ROAD
A Midlife Memoir of Travel Through the National Parks
Neal, TW
Neal Enterprises (396 pp.)
Mar. 7, 2021
978-0-9896883-9-0

In this travelogue, a middle-aged couple takes a road trip through a number of national parks. Having built a successful and happy life on the island of Maui, author Neal and her husband, Mike, were facing life and career milestones, with Neal approaching 50, and Mike about 60. Both were feeling “the gaunt wolf of age…chewing at the backs of our legs.” As Mike, a woodworker and photographer, was beginning his recovery from a major health crisis and Neal teetered on the edge of leaving her rewarding but stressful job as a child/adolescent therapist, the two decided to mark their individual transitions with a monthlong road trip through several national parks. They started close to home with a strenuous backpacking trip into a volcanic crater in Maui’s Haleakalā National Park. From there, they traveled to the more active lava flows of Hawai’i Volcanoes National Park on Hawaii’s Big Island and even further afield to mainland national parks, from the spires and slot canyons of Utah’s Bryce Canyon and Zion to the moss-hung forests and rocky beaches of Washington’s Olympic National Park. Each landscape inspired them while also providing both physical and emotional challenges. As narrator of the adventure, Neal intersperses her account with reflections on her own upbringing, running wild on the beaches of Kauai as the child of hippie parents, and her work as a “kid whisperer,” a therapist for troubled children. The result is a dynamic, engrossing portrait of a woman in midlife on the cusp of a major life decision. The story unfolds neatly as a journey of self-examination, struggles, and joys and leaves the reader with a longing for adventure and an appetite for more of Neal’s writing.

An absorbing travel narrative about defining and facing the limitations and opportunities of midlife.

FREEDOM FARM
Neves, Jennifer
North Country Press (158 pp.)
$15.95 paper | $8.99 e-book | Feb. 5, 2021
978-1-943424-62-7

A creative nonfiction work that mixes memories, family stories, and fanciful thoughts about the future.

Neves was raised on a farm in Freedom, Maine, as the third of four siblings and the only girl. Her early life was one of adventure and tenacious labor, most of which she seems to have enjoyed. Here, she presents a collection of essays divided into two sections, telling tales of life in Freedom, which encompasses
her childhood and adolescence, and accounts of her time on a nonworking farm in Palermo, Maine, where she and her husband live with their four children. Readers soon discover that a simple tale, in Neves' hands, has many parts, including musings about connections—between people and between people and nature. She also includes anecdotes from family lore, including the opening tale about a rebellious act by her father when he was a child in grade school: "Like many of my father's stories," Neves says, "this one has the texture of a well-constructed fable, driven by an undercurrent of vigilante justice, and a message of empowerment." The author displays a similar sense of justice in these pieces, but she also questions, pulls apart, and analyzes actions and reactions of herself and others. She does so with empathy and occasional self-effacing, acerbic humor; for instance, while pondering her parents' encouragement of independent thinking in their children, she notes that she's a "freethinker": "Not in the sense that freethinkers make decisions and form opinions based on reason and fact, but in the way that my thoughts and ideas were generally free from the constraints of reality." In these pages, Neves reveals herself as a wordsmith whose long, twisty sentences are consistently enticing; one highlight is her story of a pig named Priscilla who was truly committed to her task of clearing weeds. Because memories can change over time, Neves says, she writes "in the hope that words have more power than things, that they will last at least as long as I do."

A thoughtful, entertaining exploration of the joys and grittiness of country life.

THE STRANGERS OF BRAAMFONTEIN

Nwelue, Onyeka
Griots Lounge Publishing Canada
(210 pp.)
Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-77727-565-5

People struggle to survive in a South African city teeming with criminals and killers in Nwelue's novel.

Nigerian artist Osas believes a fortune awaits him in Johannesburg. But when all he finds there is a thankless restaurant job, he joins a Nigerian cartel in South Africa. Osas takes part in local cocaine deals and steals from foreigners in order to appease his new boss, a known murderer. Along the way, he unsurprisingly provokes rival drug-dealing gangsters, and getting help from police would effectively sign Osas' death warrant. Meanwhile, Chamai, a Canadian-born Zimbabwean, also hopes for a better life in SA. But although foreigners in order to appease his new boss, a known murderer. The author frequently provides incisive lines, as when a humorless Chamai notes, "You do not laugh at jokes when you feel you are the punchline." There are a few lighter moments, though, which alleviate the intensity. The dialogue, which consists primarily of pidgin English, may confuse readers unfamiliar with the dialect, but the well-established characters all have clear motivations in an easy-to-follow plot.

A perceptive and vigorous tale of people trapped in dire circumstances.

LIFE PROFITABILITY
The New Measure of Entrepreneurial Success

Pienaar, Adii
Lioncrest Publishing (294 pp.)
$18.99 paper | $8.99 e-book
Jan. 18, 2021
978-1-5445-1852-7

A serial entrepreneur encourages readers to measure success beyond financial returns.

In this debut business book, Pienaar recounts founding and selling several companies (WooCommerce and Conversio) and gradually realizing that he wasn't accurately judging his results unless he assessed both his business and his personal life. Pienaar notes how being a “single-minded entrepreneur” can negatively affect one's life and career, and he explains how he came to incorporate family, health, mindfulness, etc., into his overall concept of accomplishment. The book provides specific examples of Pienaar's holistic management strategies and positive results. The final chapters cover setting goals and assessing progress in achieving the book's title profitability. Blank worksheets are included along with sample worksheets filled out by Pienaar, which also serve to summarize the book in concise graphics. The book is well written and thought-provoking, with a solid balance of big-picture conceptual discussion and examples of implementation, making it useful as well as a potential source of inspiration for entrepreneurs. Readers will appreciate Pienaar's insightful take on generally accepted business norms, like his criticism of the cliché that a business can be like a family: "If you're saying this to employees, you're minimizing their families and elevating your importance." The book also effectively deploys business concepts to argue for a happy balance of work and home life; e.g., as a business diversifies to mitigate risk, well-rounded people with multiple interests see similar risk mitigation in their mental health. Pienaar advises reviewing a “life portfolio” as regularly as a financial portfolio. Readers accustomed to viewing the world in business terms will find it easy to adopt Pienaar's parallels and embrace the broader way of assessing overall performance for long-term personal and professional achievement.

An effective guide to rethinking business and personal practices.
OSCAR THE OSPREY AND HIS DIMINUTIVE SISTER
Polansky, Edward Martin
Illus. by Rosow, Jean
AuthorHouse (48 pp.)
Dec. 14, 2020
978-1-66550-832-2

A shy osprey finds her confidence in this third installment of a chapter-book series.

Small and quiet, Opie does not fit in with her fellow ospreys. Hoping for some alone time, she seeks refuge in the mountains, where she is attacked by an eagle. She is rescued by her worried brother, Oscar, who scares the predator away. As Opie convalesces, the other ospreys indulge in gossip. Their aloofness causes Opie to withdraw even more than usual. Concerned, Oscar consults the wise owl Woo, who explains that Opie is an introvert and “all you can do is to support her, not make her decisions.” During the osprey migration, Opie, Oscar, and their brother Otto get separated from the others following a hurricane. Opie skillfully retraces the “migration flight pattern” and instructs her brothers to circle, yelp, and listen until they locate their injured parents. To her brothers’ surprise, Opie takes charge of mom’s and dad’s healing. She even protects them from a hungry coyote. Opie “was developing into something new: a nurturer and caregiver, things she had never been before.” When the birds are strong enough to fly home, Opie leads the way. The other ospreys are surprised the family made it out of the storm alive and are shocked to learn that it was Opie—who now goes by her full name, Oprah—who kept the clan safe. The community’s elders are so impressed that they “thought about bringing Oscar, Otto, and Oprah within their council,” meaning “Oprah would be the first female elder—ever!” Eloquently written and engaging, Polansky’s story depicts the importance of courage in the face of hardships. The tale also emphasizes the need to respect different personality traits, temperaments, and abilities. Readers will root for the kind, empathetic characters here, particularly the three siblings who support one another during difficult times. The book occasionally references events in the author’s previous installments, such as how “Oscar was famous among the ospreys” and once had a fear of heights. Still, the story can easily be enjoyed and understood by new readers. Rosow’s simple but effective black-and-white line drawings depict pivotal scenes, like Opie’s tussle with the coyote.

A relatable and heartfelt avian adventure with an appealing cast.

THE LOST MINE TRAIL
Rusz, J J
Self (264 pp.)
$13.99 paper | $5.99 e-book
Dec. 17, 2020
979-8-58-309725-8

A Texas sheriff copes with murder, attempted murder, and a returning ex-girlfriend in this third mystery series installment.

Clayton Shoot, now sheriff of Brewster County, Texas, isn’t expecting to have to deal with more than the usual rowdy crop of tourists in the area during spring break. That changes when the headliner for an annual cowboy poetry event is murdered, two septuagenarians are attacked on the Lost Mine Trail in Big Bend National Park, and Clayton’s former girlfriend, college professor Claire Harp, is back in town after a book tour and a walk on the red carpet with her 18-year-old, Oscar-winning brother. In this latest book in the enjoyable Big Bend Country Mystery series, Rusz again places fresh characters and inventive, parallel plots in the sprawling and diverse Trans-Pecos region of Texas with the deft touch of someone who knows the area well. Among the author’s returning, lively cast members are newly minted deputy sheriff Alonso Rangel, 24, and his 40-ish wife, police chief Fiona Tusk-Rangel, who was once a thorn in Clayton’s side but is now mellowed by marriage and impending motherhood; attack victims Ella Dan-ton Nixon, who’s an anti-fracking, pro-gun screenwriter, and her dour husband, Barney; Clayton’s matchmaking sister, Beatrice Shoot; chief ranger Velma Furcron at Big Bend National Park; and FBI special agent Lee Perciak. New faces include wealthy businessman Andrew Crane, who’s oddly interested in Ella and Barney’s radical activism in the 1960s. Unexpectedly, the reasons behind Ella’s strange reaction to her own assault and the near-fatal assault on Barney come to light early on; so does a revelation from a surprising source in regard to the event. Unusually for a mystery, Rusz also doesn’t keep the primary culprit, or their motives, secret. A country singer’s fate may be rooted in the past, as well; the author informs readers of that motive for murder with genuine pathos. Meanwhile, Clayton and Claire’s mutual interest in solving the mysteries hints that a spark remains between them—and that a fourth book may be in the offing.

A thoroughly entertaining tale in an authentic setting that’s as colorful as its characters.
In this debut technology treatise, investor and entrepreneur Shwartz argues for more modest expectations for the future of artificial intelligence and a clear-eyed assessment of its potential pitfalls.

The author observes that the general public’s conception of the promise of AI is largely the result of “fear-inducing hype” of the dystopian threat of a machine-led tyranny. Even notable technologists have jumped on the grim-prediction bandwagon, as when legendary physicist Stephen Hawking fretted in 2014 that the rise of intelligent computers “could spell the end of the human race.” The author compellingly argues that such prognostications are empirically indefensible and presuppose a technological sophistication that AI simply can’t claim. In fact, he says, the notion that machines can have humanlike intelligence conflates AI with artificial general intelligence, or AGI. The former is a reality but restricted to the performance of singular, exceedingly narrow tasks, Shwartz notes, while the latter—the emergence of machine-based consciousness—is an outright fiction. With impressive prudence, he asserts that AGI–based technology is unlikely at best: “How long will it be before we know enough about how people think to make real progress toward AGI? At the current rate of progress, it appears we will need hundreds—maybe thousands—of years, and it may never happen.” Throughout, the author astutely considers the very real challenges that AI poses, such as the potential threat to public safety from autonomous vehicles. At the heart of this searching account, however, is his elucidation of the contrast between human and artificial cognition: The former, he notes, is infinitely more complex and nimble and requires a “commonsense reasoning,” and the latter can only superficially mime it. Despite his subject’s forbidding technicality, Shwartz writes with unwavering clarity in a book that will be accessible to a wide audience.

A thoughtfully cautious appraisal of AI and its promise.
An American teen discovers her connection to Celtic myth and Arthurian legend in this YA fantasy adventure, the third installment in the Legends of the Grail series.

Seventeen-year-old Nina Liber lives in Manhattan with her mother, Diana, an expert in Celtic mythology. Before their flight to Britain for the summer, Nina dreams of a woman in green who calls her a “Mage” and tells her, “remember who you are.” Diana’s husband, Felix, has been deceased two years, and she’s eager to see her twin brother, Blaise. Nina is skeptical about enjoying sights like Stonehenge and being away from her boyfriend, Owen Peleas. Once in Hampstead, England, Nina befriends Daphne, her uncle’s occasional flame. Daphne recommends the girl visit Ganieda, a local healer named after Merlin’s sister, to gain peace of mind. Ganieda outlines the relationships between the mythical huntsress Diana; her lover, the Roman god Bacchus; and their daughter, Nimue. When she hears of Nina’s dream, she echoes the woman in green by saying, “Mage, it’s time you remember who you are.” Later, a limo takes Nina to a country home called Imworth, where she meets Morgen, the woman from her dream. She tells Nina, “You were Nimue. Only you can find and awaken Merlin” and restore the balance between light and darkness on Earth. Sullivan might have written a fantasy in which her lead throws punches while hunting for relics. Instead, she’s more faithful to Merlin’s complex mythology than to the genre’s tropes. Readers will be reminded of the ways Romans used Christianity to subdue the Druids, who had their own belief system. And while Nimue and Merlin’s romance is intense—they kissed like “a tsunami crashing onto shore”—it’s just a portion of their lives, not the entirety. After seeing her previous incarnations, Nina comes to realize she’s “the power of the universe operating as a point in time and space” and that it might be possible to usher in Satya Yuga, the Golden Age, by reconnecting with the natural world. Lovely black-and-white illustrations by Crow duCray enliven the journey. A glossary is included.

This exuberant fantasy calls on readers to conceive of a loving, balanced world.

This issue’s contributors

**ADULT**

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**LAST STAR STANDING**

Taylor, Spaulding
Unbound (300 pp.)
$17.49 paper | $0.99 e-book
Feb. 18, 2021
978-1-78965-097-6

A human rebel leads a desperate attempt against alien overlords in Taylor’s debut SF novel.

In 2067, World War III laid waste to Earth’s ecosystem, and in 2084, extraterrestrials called the Xirfell conquered the planet. Now, in 2094, the Xirfell’s King Hebhidh and his minions, including alien creatures gathered from other worlds, impose despotic rule on the surviving earthlings. Despite the aliens’ vast advantage in numbers and assets, a scrappy human resistance movement has organized itself. Thirty-year-old half-Anglo, half-Indigenous Aiden Tenent has been part of the rebellion since his days attending Australasian Academy, where he was recruited for three major roles: “An outstanding brain, a stubborn spirit, and a determination to make a difference,” and also because of—or despite—his reckless confidence and craving for the spotlight. When an unknown source disclosed his affair with Ravene, the seductive woman from her dream, she echoes the woman in green by saying, “Mage, it’s time you remember who you are.” Later, a limo takes Nina to a country home called Imworth, where she meets Morgen, the woman from her dream. She tells Nina, “You were Nimue. Only you can find and awaken Merlin” and restore the balance between light and darkness on Earth. Sullivan might have written a fantasy in which her lead throws punches while hunting for relics. Instead, she’s more faithful to Merlin’s complex mythology than to the genre’s tropes. Readers will be reminded of the ways Romans used Christianity to subdue the Druids, who had their own belief system. And while Nimue and Merlin’s romance is intense—they kissed like “a tsunami crashing onto shore”—it’s just a portion of their lives, not the entirety. After seeing her previous incarnations, Nina comes to realize she’s “the power of the universe operating as a point in time and space” and that it might be possible to usher in Satya Yuga, the Golden Age, by reconnecting with the natural world. Lovely black-and-white illustrations by Crow duCray enliven the journey. A glossary is included.

This exuberant fantasy calls on readers to conceive of a loving, balanced world.
of Leelack, a breathtaking mermaidlike creature who managed to infiltrate the Xirfell's high council. Aiden also escapes and is tapped for a crucial mission in which he must disguise himself as an enormous alien enforcer, get close to the king, and assassinate him. He won't have to do it alone, but the odds are against his little team—and the betrayer in the resistance is still at large.

Over the course of this novel, Taylor tempers his bleak, post-apocalyptic fictional world with Aiden's energetic narration and darkly comic humor, as when Aiden, in his alien disguise, finds himself seduced again by the unwitting Ravene: “But, before you write me off as the feeblest—if possibly the sexiest—operative in rebel history,” he says, “I was also hatching a back-up plan.” The overall tone of the narrative recalls Nick Harkaway's novel *The Gone-Away World* (2008), but it does so without ever feeling derivative. The action scenes are excitingly unpredictable, and they also have an emotional element, as brave, goodhearted characters face mortal danger from truly cruel and evil beings. Similarly, Taylor handles Aiden's growth toward humble self-knowledge in a moving and believable manner; as self-centered as he's been, he's also been taking care to note the examples of others who've found true greatness—“that kernel deep inside, that immortal core” whose recognition “can merge, from all our separate selves, into the person we are meant to be.” His later mission gives him the chance to move past his restless desire for fame and become his truer self. The book is also a standout for its inventive array of alien species; for example, Pavlina Dafina Evangelia, a tiny and fuzzy “gromeline,” is an intelligent and fearless creature who provides essential help for the rebels’ mission.

A thoroughly entertaining adventure with imaginative action and an appealing hero.

PARIS IN RUINS
ToD, M.K.
Heath Street Publishing (370 pp.)
Feb. 28, 2021
978-0-9919670-4-9

In Tod's historical novel, two young couples find love against the backdrop of the 1870 Siege of Paris and the short-lived Commune that followed.

Camille Noisette and Mariele de Crécy both belong to very comfortable upper-class families. Mariele is engaged to Camille’s brother Bertrand, and Camille will soon meet André Laborde, and love will follow. But all four must endure the Prussians’ siege of Paris, which will cause physical destruction, lost lives, and, most important, social upheaval, as the lower classes, reduced to starving or eating rats, become a powder keg that explodes in the Communard uprising. Mariele and her mother try too late to slip away from Paris, are captured by the Prussians, and barely make it back. Camille becomes a sort of spy against the Communard movement, leading a dangerous double life, and, when things heat up, she volunteers at a makeshift hospital while Mariele helps out at a makeshift day care. Tod is a very experienced historical novelist, and it shows: There are no missteps here. Historical novels by their nature provide history and history lessons. Napoleon III does not get off lightly for his adventurism, and the reader will most likely be in sympathy with the Communard cause: The upper classes—the older generation in particular—are portrayed as clueless and arrogant. Bertrand and André survive their military experience, and the couples’ futures seem secure. Tod is not only a good historian, but also an accomplished writer, capturing here the febrile atmosphere of a Paris about to be under siege, the vise tightening, the sense of security eroding: “The city felt different. Darker than usual and for the most part quieter, and yet at times a sense of forced gaiety that became almost manic bubbled up.” It is against this looming dread that Camille and Mariele will struggle and even grow as human beings.

A gripping, well-limed picture of a time and a place that provide universal lessons.

A DAY IN THE WOODS
Walsh, Brian
Archway Publishing (308 pp.)
$19.99 paper | $0.99 e-book
Aug. 27, 2020
978-1-4808-9348-1

A South African man embarks on a backpacking trip across Europe with a French companion, working various menial jobs, in this debut novel.

Brian is in his early 20s and has been dazzled by friends’ stories of adventures while traveling in Europe and wants to give it a try himself. After saving up for a year, he leaves his native Durban and heads to Germany. There, he gets a job schlepping customers to an overpriced clothing store on an American military base. He meets a group of guys and has some fun, but it is not long before the police falsely suspect him and a friend of drug dealing. Unfortunately, Brian’s visa expired and he forgot to renew it. Ordered to leave Germany immediately, he ends up at the home of his father’s business associate in Austria and spends time at the family’s beautiful farmhouse. Traveling again, Brian is short on cash and can only hitchhike, but at a grape-picking job in France, he meets a gorgeous young woman named Monick. There is an instant attraction, and they decide to trek across Europe together. They need to work, but the jobs are always undesirable and difficult. They pass through Portugal, the Netherlands, Italy, and Greece, very much in lust but often struggling through setbacks, grateful for the generous souls who help them along the way. Walsh’s engaging story of a dream trip to Europe is very smoothly written and full of wonder and upheaval. The locations range from the obvious to the obscure and are described with colorful details that show a great knowledge of the places and their oftentimes kindhearted inhabitants. Brian transforms into a spontaneous and industrious character, but the novel never gives up its frantic pace. The lack of an overall plot apart from the traveling makes the ending seem a bit arbitrary.

A fast-paced tale of being young in Europe that is frenetic, detailed, and enjoyable.
LEADING THROUGH CULTURE
How Real Leaders Create Cultures That Motivate People To Achieve Great Things
Wilcox, Ken
Waterside Productions (228 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $9.95 e-book
Aug. 27, 2020
978-1-949003-35-2

A former bank CEO offers forthright advice in this debut business book.

As CEO of Silicon Valley Bank for a decade, Wilcox faced a series of daunting challenges. He writes in this candid work that “tech was in the doldrums and interest rates were among the lowest in the history of the Fed.” The author had no choice but to lead through tough times, and his experience led him to craft a practical “field manual” to guide other executives. In three succinct but informative parts, Wilcox expounds on leadership principles, qualities, building teams, and managing during change, all anchored by a strong emphasis on corporate culture. The book begins with an exploration of leadership motivation; the author asks penetrating questions about readers’ visions, delegation skills, and management styles. Wilcox wisely points out that leaders must not only be authentic and confident, but also vulnerable: “They’re willing to admit to their shortcomings and mistakes. Without this quality, no one can be a true leader.” The author references Gandhi and Lincoln as examples. In the first part of the manual, Wilcox stresses honesty, humility, and collaboration. Part 2 concentrates on leadership fundamentals, including building and steering a team, developing a corporate culture, sharing a vision, executing decisions, and communicating effectively. The author draws liberally on his own experiences, citing numerous examples of what to do and, perhaps more importantly, what not to do. Much of his advice is specific and actionable; for instance, he provides six recommendations for what kind of people to hire, engages in a captivating discussion about “the spectrum of human behavior,” enumerates “The Magic 12” (a list of 12 ways to cultivate trust), and shares “The Four Ds,” a useful process for making decisions.

Part 3 of the book, “Accomplishing Great Things: Revolutionary Leadership,” is a journey into more ambitious, cutting-edge goals. A chapter on managing change demonstrates the author’s deep understanding of organizational behavior. Wilcox writes that employees generally break into three groups when it comes to a company’s direction: those who like it, those who are neutral, and those who object. He wisely suggests that the time many leaders expend trying to convince the unhappy workers to follow the course would be better spent devoted to the happy employees because they’ll help steer the others. A discussion of innovation is insightful; Wilcox supplies eight salient ideas to foster invention, such as “Build a Culture in Which People Will Have the Courage to Speak Out” and “Praise Creativity, Avoid Criticizing Failure.” The appendix focuses on the experience the author had organizing a banking operation in China, delivering a personal, firsthand look at the unique challenges associated with doing business in the country. Wilcox’s perceptive observations about building a “shared culture” should prove invaluable to any leader who has global responsibilities. Throughout the book, he looks back over his senior executive experience with a critical eye, unafraid to reveal his own shortcomings. That, writes the author, is exactly what a great leader should do.

An illuminating bird’s-eye view of leadership.
as a result meets Gian Giorgio Trissino, an influential man who eventually becomes Andrea's benefactor and best friend. Trissino loves Andrea like a son, takes him to Rome, and introduces him to Michelangelo. Trissino even convinces Andrea, as a way to shed his inauspicious beginnings, to change his surname to Palladio, inspired by a saint of the same name. This book is part of the Mentoris Project, which examines eminent Italians and Italian Americans. The author's reconstruction of Palladio's life is sturdy—her research is impeccable. But the work as a whole is poetically mechanical; it often reads like a long Wikipedia entry. Given the novel's lack of style or literary ingenuity, readers will wonder why she didn't simply write this as a nonfiction monograph. Nevertheless, she provides a historically astute account of the work that made Palladio a giant in his field, including his seminal volume, *The Four Books of Architecture*, an endeavor that took him 28 years to complete.

A learned and illuminating tale about Palladio's remarkable artistic accomplishments.

*SELECTED POEMS OF EMANUEL XAVIER*

Xavier, Emanuel
Rebel Satori Press (71 pp.)
978-1-60864-152-9

Gay Nuyorican life is limned and exalted in these scintillating poems.

Xavier, a fixture at Nuyorican Poets Cafe slams in Manhattan and a star of HBO's *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*, gathers 28 poems that infuse searing social and political commentary into achingly personal reflections. Many paint a panorama of New York that is bustling and vibrant: “Ricans and Dominicans drive around / with black-faced virgins and saints on their dashboards / blasting rap and freestyle / down the streets.”

The poet's collection conveys his struggle as a gay man in an often homophobic culture in tones that range from the bruised confessional in “Deliverance” (“Wiping / myself / staring at the blood / shit / scum / from the last trick / that once again / left me bruised / deep inside”) to the prophetic voice of “If Jesus Were Gay.” (“If the crown of thorns were placed on his head / to mock him as the / 'Queen of the Jews' / If he was whipped because fags are considered / sadomasochistic sodomites, / If he was crucified for the brotherhood of man / would you still repent?”)

There's a lot of pain from separation and repudiation in Xavier's verse—from his biological father's abandonment of the family, his mother's rejection of his gay sexuality, and America's disdain for Latino immigrants. The volume is thus full of poetic portraits of outsiders and castoffs that can take strange and hallucinatory forms, as in “Bushwick Bohemia,” in which a slacker is “lying shirtless on the couch blunted out of his mind / staring at the roach on the ceiling / one single roach in a vast desert / or maybe an alien exploring a new world”—a grungy, Kafkaesque yet somehow hopeful and even liberating tableau of arrival and persistence. And the poet's life generates bleak, bracing wisdom in “Beside Myself”: “You are not going to be remembered. / The best thing you ever did was keep a cat / alive for over sixteen years. / All you have is that rent-stabilized apartment / with the cracked paint and broken windows.” Xavier's many fans (and newbies as well) will be entranced by his evocative language, subtle rhythms, and fearless gaze.

A superb poetry collection that renders compelling imagery in a singular voice.
BOOK TO SCREEN

BY DAVID RAPP

ABOVE SUSPICION WILL HAVE U.S. RELEASE THIS MONTH

Above Suspicion, a thriller film based on Joe Sharkey’s 1993 true-crime book about the death of an FBI informant, was released in some overseas markets back in 2019, but it’s finally getting a theatrical and video-on-demand release in the United States on May 14. The movie stars Emilia Clarke and Jack Huston, and it’s directed by Phillip Noyce, who helmed the 1990s movie versions of Tom Clancy’s techno-thrillers Patriot Games and Clear and Present Danger.

In the book, Sharkey tells the story of Pikeville, Kentucky–based FBI agent Mark Putnam and his complicated relationship with Susan Smith, a local informant whose assistance led to the apprehension of a wanted bank robber in the late 1980s. The book details how Smith and the married Putnam eventually carried on a fraught affair; the FBI agent tried to end the relationship, resulting in a 1989 confrontation that ended in murder; the case wasn’t resolved for another year. Kirkus called the book “a true-crime standout,” noting that it was “bristling with vivid characters, knuckle-biting revelations, and psychological wallop.”

Clarke plays Smith in the film; she’s best known for playing the dragon-wrangling Daenerys Targaryen in eight seasons of HBO’s Game of Thrones, based on George R.R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire series. Huston, who plays Putnam, portrayed Richard Harrow in four seasons of the HBO show Boardwalk Empire. The movie also features Jackass’ Johnny Knoxville and Ghost World’s Thora Birch in supporting roles.

GELLAR TO STAR IN WHAT GIRLS ARE MADE OF PILOT

Sarah Michelle Gellar is set to star in the pilot for a potential Amazon Prime Video series loosely based on Elana K. Arnold’s Kirkus-starred 2017 YA novel, What Girls Are Made Of, according to Deadline. Amazon Studios ordered the pilot for the show, which is titled Hot Pink and described as a comedy.

The show’s creator, Elisabeth Holm, previously produced the 2014 film Obvious Child, for which she was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award, and the 2017 movie Landline, both directed by Gillian Robespierre.

Arnold’s novel, a finalist for the National Book Award, focuses on 16-year-old Nina Faye as she deals with a difficult breakup, attends high school, and works at an animal shelter. The story, told through Nina’s first-person observations and her short stories, tells tales of “bodily function, desire, casual cruelty, sex and masturbation, miscarriage and abortion, and, eventually, self-care,” according to Kirkus’ reviewer, who called the book “unflinchingly candid, unapologetically girl, and devastatingly vital.”

No casting news was announced for the role of Nina in the pilot, nor was Gellar’s part specified, though it’s likely she’ll play Nina’s troubled mother.

Gellar is best known for playing the lead in the popular paranormal-adventure TV series Buffy the Vampire Slayer, which aired on The WB from 1997 to 2001 and on UPN from 2001 to 2003. She also memorably co-starred in the 1999 film Cruel Intentions, a loose, modernized adaptation of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’ 1782 novel, Les Liaisons Dangereuses.
Gerald Vizenor came into the world in 1934—came into two worlds, really, his mother was Swedish American, and his father was an Anishinaabe from the White Earth Chippewa (Ojibwe) Reservation in northwestern Minnesota. When Vizenor was 2, his father was murdered, and a grandmother raised him on the rural reservation. Uncles and a sometime stepfather in the big city of Minneapolis stepped in to help. After serving in Japan in the U.S. Army, Vizenor studied at New York University and Harvard, worked as an advocate for urban Indians, logged time as a newspaper reporter, and finally became a professor of literature and American Indian studies, his work heavily influenced by continental philosophy and deconstructionism.

All those things come into play in his second novel, which, in manuscript form, won the New York Fiction Collective Award in 1986 and, two years later, now published, received the American Book Award. Called *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, it took broad swipes at stereotypes of Asian, Native American, and European cultures, mixing them up like rabbits in a magician’s hat, throwing in generous portions of the Coyote trickster folklore of North America and the Monkey trickster folklore of China.

Those cultures are always in collision in the novel. It begins as Griever de Hocus, an oddly named mixed-blood adventurer and committed troublemaker, arrives in the metropolis of Tianjin to teach English at a university. He has scarcely arrived when another fellow of mixed race—his father, the Portuguese inventor of the lobotomy—asks Griever for certain materia medica from the White Earth Reservation: deer antlers, bear paws, and the like, since “such aphrodisiacs are as rare as hen’s teeth here.”

The poor horndog doesn’t know that Griever will turn those substances against him in the end. For his part, determined to undermine the oppressiveness of Chinese Communist society, Griever morphs into the “monkey king” of the title, staging elaborate pranks and playing subtle mind games, from liberating the chickens in an open-air market to misinforming his students, as when he calls one a stool pigeon and then explains, “Yes, it means an alert and intelligent person who listens with great care and interest.”

The locals give as good as they get, as when a prostitute haughtily informs Griever, “Monkey kings are myths for the poor and oppressed.” He replies, enigmatically, “Mind monkeys are immortal.” They’re also liberators of more than chickens, as any fan of the Marx Brothers will tell you. Or, for that matter, any saboteur of the high holyday called Marxmass in Tianjin, “a secular crotch where class wars and solemn communions contend.” Griever barely has time to épater les cadres with wordplay and misdirection—“What does a Buddhist look like?” he asks a woman. “Indifferent,” she replies. “Never mind,” he replies indifferently—before he finally decides to take it on the lam, airborne like W.C. Fields in *International House*, for the freedom of Macao.

It’s as culturally diverse a novel as you’ll find, a playful study in untamed imagination where not a word can be taken at surface value. Thirty-five years on, Griever is a postmodern classic—and a barrel of monkeys besides.

Gregory McNamee is a contributing editor.
Sometimes the Big Bad Wolf doesn’t live in the woods.

“MASTERFULLY DONE.”
— Kirkus Reviews, STARRED REVIEW

“Gives language to an experience of abuse and lets readers in similar circumstances know that they are not alone.”
— Publisher’s Weekly