Bassem Youssef
The doctor, comedian, and podcaster is now a middle-grade author
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Brandon Hobson,
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FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK

Living in the Covid Moment

BY TOM BEER

It was nearly one year ago that the world as we know it transformed. In early March, I was still working at Kirkus’ office in midtown Manhattan when we began to discuss if it made sense for all employees to come in every day—thus riding the subway and potentially being exposed to the coronavirus. The first New York City cases of Covid-19 had just been reported. No sooner had the staff agreed on a staggered schedule than everything in the city shut down and we began this yearlong stretch of working from home.

We’ve all weathered enormous changes in the past year—it sometimes felt like living in slow motion and at warp speed simultaneously. Historians of the future will tell the story of this period, but in the meantime, we have the raw and immediate reports of poets, artists, and essayists living in the moment.

Poetry, perhaps better than any other medium, has captured our current state of suspension. Together in a Sudden Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic, edited by Alice Quinn and published by Knopf in November, is a volume I’ve turned to again and again in recent weeks. The poems collected here—by Jericho Brown, Stephanie Burt, Fanny Howe, Ada Limón, Claudia Rankine, Vijay Seshadri, and others—are varied, each one a snapshot, whether blurry or in sharp focus. I love Jill Bialosky’s “Ode” to Tylenol—as mundane a subject as you could imagine, except that the pain reliever was in short supply early in the pandemic. Grace Schuman’s “Gone” finds the poet looking out at Washington Square Park from her apartment (“Camille Pissarro would have lingered here / He painted the Paris gardens from a window”), reminding us that all great art is framed by circumstance.

Some of the most moving writing about the pandemic has been the most personal, as lockdown cast new light on the contours of our lives. Zadie Smith’s slender essay collection, Intimations, published by Penguin in June, showcased this nimble writer musing on creativity, suffering, privilege, and inheritance; it was one of my favorite books of 2020. In Bill Hayes’ How We Live Now: Scenes From the Pandemic, published by Bloomsbury in August, the partner of From the Pandemic, the text is accompanied by stark photographs of New York City the late Oliver Sacks reflected on how the lingering grief of losing a loved one (Sacks died in 2015) was honed by the loneliness of quarantine; the text is accompanied by stark photographs of New York City and the people he found on its empty streets in March and April. In A World Out of Reach: Dispatches From Life Under Lockdown, published by Yale University Press in November, editor Meghan O’Rourke collected the Yale Review’s “Pandemic Files” from the spring—stories, poems, and essays by such writers as Katie Kitamura, Nell Freudenberger, Rowan Ricardo Phillips, Victoria Chang, and Emily Greenwood.

This month sees the publication of COVID Chronicles: A Comics Anthology (Graphic Mundi, Feb. 15), presenting work made in response to a call issued in April of last year. As editors Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson explained to me in an interview on page 56 of this issue, comics have a long tradition, contra expectation, of taking on serious subjects, from Art Spiegelman’s Maus to Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home. “Comics are so good at expressing the ineffable, what you just can’t put down in words,” Boileau told me. The work in this volume, like the ones discussed above, delivers an immediate gut punch—the artists’ unfiltered visions of life in the midst of a global pandemic. In years to come we’ll have more sophisticated analyses and deeper understandings. But I’m grateful that these first responders captured the singular experience of what we’ve been through these last 12 months.
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

**Martin Duberman**, who had exclusive archival access, adapts his groundbreaking biography of the legendary human rights activist and performer for teen readers. Read the review on p. 139.

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WHILE JUSTICE SLEEPS
Abrams, Stacey
Doubleday (384 pp.)
$23.95 | May 11, 2021
978-0-385-54657-7

A progressive superstar pens her first political thriller.
Anyone who follows the news knows Abrams as a politician and voting rights activist. She’s less well known as a novelist. Using the pseudonym Selena Montgomery, Abrams has published several works of romantic suspense. Her new novel begins when Supreme Court Justice Howard Wynn falls into a coma. His clerk Avery Keene is shocked to discover that her boss has made her his legal guardian and granted her power of attorney. The fate of one of the most powerful men in the world is in her hands—and her life is in danger. Abrams gives us nefarious doings in the world of biotech, a president with autocratic tendencies and questionable ethics, and a young woman struggling to unravel a conspiracy while staying one step ahead of the people who want her out of the way. Unfortunately, the author doesn’t weave these intriguing elements into an enjoyable whole. Abrams makes some odd word choices, such as this: “The intricate knot she had twisted into her hair that morning bobbed cunningly as she neared her office.” The adverb cunningly is mystifying, and Abrams uses it in a similar way later on. There are disorienting shifts in point of view. And Abrams lavishes a great deal of attention on details that simply don’t matter, which makes the pace painfully slow. This is a fatal flaw in a suspense novel, but it may not be the most frustrating aspect of this book. For a protagonist who has gotten where she is by being smart, Avery makes some stunningly poor decisions. For example, the fact that she has a photographic memory is an important plot point and is clearly a factor in Justice Wynn’s decision to enlist her help. When she finds a piece of paper upon which is printed a long string of characters and the words “BURN UPON REVIEW,” Avery memorizes the lines of numbers and letters—and then, even though she knows she’s being surveilled, she snaps a shot of the paper with her phone, thereby making the whole business of setting it on fire quite pointless.

More of a curiosity for political junkies than a satisfying story of international intrigue.
A Novel of the Next World War
Ackerman, Elliot & Stavridis, James
Penguin Press (320 pp.)
$27.00  |  Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-984881-25-0

A frightening look at how a major-power showdown might race out of control.

It’s 2034, and the Chinese are sick and tired of the U.S. Navy violating their territorial waters with “freedom of navigation patrols.” Near the Spratly Islands and Mischief Reef, a Navy ship stops to aid the incapacitated trawler Wen Rui. But there’s something fishy about the boat (hint: electronics), so the Navy holds it. Thousands of miles away, an unknown force takes control of the F-35 piloted by Maj. Chris “Wedge” Mitchell over the Strait of Hormuz, and he becomes a prisoner in Iran. China will arrange for the F-35’s return in exchange for the trawler, but what they really want is a confrontation and uncontested control of the South China Sea. They put a cyber stranglehold on the U.S., cause a nationwide blackout, and sink several American naval vessels, believing the conflict will be limited and China’s victory will be total. But murder a few thousand people here and a few thousand there, and pretty soon you have a “needless war” in which the dead number in the millions. And this is only with tactical nukes. This novel starts out like a Tom Clancy thriller, but whether Wedge Mitchell is more like Jack Ryan or Dr. Strangelove is for the reader to decide. Maybe Wedge just wants to live up to the military legacy of his Pop and Pop-Pop and then go light up a celebratory Marlboro. Better than lighting up the Chinese coast. Among the colorful cast of characters are a Chinese admiral with an American mother, an American security official with family in India, and a female U.S. president who, despite a fair number of references, is never named. Finally, an elegiac coda describes an aftermath wished for by no one. Unlike with the never-ending Clancy series, it’s hard to imagine a sequel to this dark warning about human folly and miscalculation. This compelling thriller should be required reading for our national leaders and translated into Mandarin.

Where are all the Extraterrestrials?
Evidently UFO/ET CONTACT has been happening for years

UFOs and their ET passengers are no longer thought of as possibilities, but rather as true events awaiting discloser. This secret cannot survive much longer.

In this engaging story, we are propelled through the high-tech world of aerospace. But high-altitude testing attracts unseen UFO/ET surveillance.

Hans-Peter’s college friend Ruthiebell, a UFO expert, renews her friendship knowing that his test flights will lead to UFO CONTACT.

Ruthiebell gets a lot more than she bargained for. The unexpected conclusion lingers, and the reader is left wondering how much is actually true.

For All Inquiries, Please Email Foglighter47@aol.com
Bette Howland was the single mother of two young boys, making a living as a librarian and editor, when she took an overdose of sleeping pills in 1968. She quickly had a change of heart and called her doctor, leaving a message with his answering service; fortunately, when the doctor couldn’t reach her, he called the police, and Howland woke up three days later in intensive care. There was one unusual detail: Howland was in Saul Bellow’s apartment when she took those pills. They’d met at a writers conference and become friends and sometime lovers, and she was housesitting for him while he was traveling. In *W-3* (reissued by A Public Space Books, Jan. 12), her memoir of the year she spent on the psychiatric ward of a Chicago hospital, she focuses less on herself than on the people around her, carefully cataloging the quirks, habits, clothes, and obsessions of the other patients—but not the doctors or staff, who she quickly realized weren’t the most important part of their community.

*W-3* was originally published in 1974 and was followed fairly quickly by two more books, *Blue in Chicago* in 1978 and *Things To Come and Go* in 1983. Howland won a MacArthur Fellowship in 1984, and it seems that she might have developed some kind of impostor syndrome, feeling like anything she wrote after that would reveal she wasn’t worthy of it. She didn’t publish any more books. Then, a few years ago, Brigid Hughes, the editor of the literary journal *A Public Space*, bought a copy of *W-3* from the $1 cart at Housing Works Bookshop and set off a revival of Howland’s career. Putting together a selection of Howland’s short fiction, Hughes produced *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, which made a splash in 2019. Our starred review called Howland “a remarkable literary voice” and said that “her words and observations shine like buried treasure, each story a glinty, multifaceted gem that, despite the passage of time, has lost none of its luster or clarity.”

I recently read *W-3* and *Calm Sea* one after the other, and it struck me that if they weren’t labeled it would be impossible to tell which is supposed to be fact and which fiction. The only time the name Bette appears, it’s being addressed to the narrator of one of the short stories, almost all of which are written in the same distinctive first-person voice. As in her memoir, Howland’s fiction is directed outward, with a bemused narrator observing the people around her—the patrons in the library where she works; the denizens of a Chicago criminal court where she’s sitting with the spectators; the residents of a nursing home where she’s visiting a friend’s mother; her own parents, her Uncle Rudy and aunts Sylvia, Yetta, and Hodl (as in *Fiddler on the Roof*). We don’t learn the details of Howland’s (or her narrator’s) life as much as we learn her jagged thought process, her nimble associations.

As in Grace Paley’s work, somehow the very rhythm of Howland’s voice is Jewish. “Even my grandmother is all dolled up,” she writes in the story “Blue in Chicago.” “She’s 83 and she’s even more obstinate. Her children beg her to come and live with them, get out of that wretched neighborhood. Now their own children are marrying, they all have room—they’d love to have her. But she knows better. At her age, it’s bad enough being mortal, without having to make apologies for it too.” Whether you call it fiction or memoir, essay or reportage, Howland’s work manages to feel both rooted in its 20th-century milieu and absolutely at home among today’s genre-agnostic writing.

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
THE SECRETS OF US

Berry, Lucinda

Thomas & Mercer (291 pp.)

$15.95 paper | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-5420-2796-0

Foster sisters grown to adulthood share unspeakable secrets that bind them together even as they tear them apart.

Krystal Benson and Nichole Fischer have always been close, and not just because their birthdays are only two weeks apart. At the foster home where stern farm widow Mrs. Wheeler reared them with her own daughter, Veronica, after their families abandoned them, they were inseparable until the day they ran away. Even now, years later, they live in the same Texas town and talk constantly, holding back no secrets from each other. So Krystal is shocked when Nichole, brought to Riverside East Hospital from a house fire that seriously injured her husband, Aiden, acts so aggressively that she's sedated, dosed with antipsychotics, and tied down. She's beyond shocked when Detective Dean Sparks tells her that the evidence indicates that Nichole set the fire herself and deliberately kept her husband from escaping. Why would Nichole have possibly done such a thing? Krystal wonders, even though she's so keenly aware that the foster sisters’ escape from Mrs. Wheeler’s farm is bound up in a secret that’s haunted Nichole ever since. As Krystal watches Aiden’s wealthy family close ranks against her sister and prepare to file a criminal complaint against her, Berry unreels a series of flashbacks to those fatal last days at the farm that unleash a perfect storm of terrors past and present.

Though the answers aren't as powerful as the questions, you'll be relieved just to wake up from this nightmare.

MARY JANE

Blau, Jessica Anya

Custom House/Morrow (320 pp.)

$27.99 | May 11, 2021

978-0-06-305229-1

An adolescent girl comes of age in this nostalgic novel of 1970s Baltimore.

In the summer of 1975, nothing has stopped earnest 14-year-old Mary Jane Dillard from loyally accepting her strict Presbyterian mother’s beliefs about what it means to be a well-behaved young woman. Her familiar world turns upside down, however, when she begins nannying for the CONES, an unconventional family made up of Dr. Cone, a psychiatrist, Mrs. Cone, a housewife who—scandalously—doesn’t cook or clean, and Izzy, their winsome daughter. Mary Jane quickly becomes an integral component of the Cone household, not only taking care of Izzy, but also cooking and cleaning for the family. When Dr. Cone welcomes two top-secret guests—a rock star recovering from drug addiction and his movie-star wife—to the household, Mary Jane finds herself getting an unexpected but thrilling crash course in music, fame, sex, and the adult world...one that she's inevitably forced to hide from her conservative parents. Blau paints an overly rosy picture of Mary Jane’s coming-of-age: Though the book nominally engages with weighty topics including addiction, adultery, and racism, it fails to seriously reckon with them or with the complex and often ugly history of America in the 1970s. The novel’s countercultural setting is, regrettably, mere window dressing. Though Mary Jane’s desire to escape her parents’ oppressive home is understandable, Blau never critically interrogates the CONES’ extreme openness, particularly about sex, which is also inappropriate given the fact that Mary Jane is only 14. With the exception of some clunky dialogue, Blau’s novel is readable and modestly entertaining, and readers nostalgic for the rock-and-roll scene of the ‘70s will likely enjoy its depiction of a wayward star, but it never dares to ask difficult questions.

A frustratingly sentimental depiction of adolescence and American counterculture.
Accreting through cumulative and sometimes contradictory accounts of a crumbling São Paulo dynasty, this philosophical novel examines what people present and what they conceal, even from themselves.

On the cusp of becoming the father of a baby boy to be named Antonio, Benjamim, a graphic designer from Rio de Janeiro, has traveled to his own father’s hometown of São Paulo. Although we have neither dialogue from nor, for the vast majority of the book, even a glimpse of this central character, we gradually glean through the single-sided conversations directed at him by his three interlocutors—his father’s friend Raul, his grandparents’ friend Haroldo, and his paternal grandmother, Isabel, who is dying alone in a hospital room—that he is seeking answers about his father, Teodoro. To what purpose, precisely, is never revealed, but as the youngest and most promising child of a prominent and once-affluent family, Teo fled São Paulo for the countryside, not just “to come into contact with the earth of our land,” Haroldo theorizes. “He wanted to become it.” Here he suffered from a long, untreated mental illness and eventual breakdown that led to his death when Benjamim was still a boy. The tale of his father’s self-exile from the city of his birth unfolds as Benjamim learns who Teo was as a son and a man apart from the parent he knew. In gradually accumulating details, he is told of the death of his grandfather Xavier’s first child and Benjamim’s namesake, Xavier’s subsequent collapse and commitment to a “rest home,” and how the pseudo-Oedipal story of his own existence evolved from this tragedy. By chapters, the book cycles among Raul’s, Haroldo’s, and Isabel’s recollections on the major events in Teo’s and Xavier’s lives and the broader family history, a careful study of the unreliability of witness filtered through memory, time, and one’s own perception.
“Brown was among a cadre of Black writers in the 1970s doing in print what Richard Pryor was doing on stage.”

TRAGIC MAGIC
Brown, Wesley
McSweeney’s (176 pp.)
$24.00 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-944211-98-1

First published in 1978, this jazz-inflected novel reappears decades later as a prescient ancestor to today’s insurgent, boundary-breaching African American fiction.

Brown’s first and most celebrated novel comes across as a kind of compacted day-in-the-life spin of James Joyce’s Ulysses, only with one point of view at its center. It belongs to Melvin Ellington, who as the novel begins has just been paroled from prison, where he spent two years after refusing military induction to protest the Vietnam War. As he heads back to his family’s home in Queens, Melvin begins flashing back to various points in life, beginning with his days and weeks in stir, keeping at bay all manner of threats and assaults, especially from the rapacious con Chilly, while keeping his nose clean long enough to get out. Once back in his old neighborhood, Melvin’s reveries wander afield, as far back as school days with his childhood buddies, the swaggering Otis, demure Alice, and brash Pauline, and the collegiate years when he was swept up in political activism with its rallies, demonstrations, interracial parties called “freedom highs,” and even an act of “revolutionary suicide” by one of the activists. Things are no less volatile in Melvin’s post-parole life as he reunites with Otis, who, unlike Melvin, went into the Army and lost his right hand in Vietnam. The long day’s journey ends with Melvin, Otis, Alice, and Pauline party-hopping throughout New York and Otis’ bitterness at Melvin and life in general slow-boiling toward a violent climax. Brown’s coming-of-age novel, drawn from his own real-life experiences, explores a young Black man’s difficulties with negotiating his way to maturity during the tumultuous years of the civil rights era and its immediate aftermath. But the novel gets its energy and, ultimately, its staying power less from its plot or theme than from its style: discursive, scatological, ribald, and acerbic. It deserves rediscovery by a new generation of readers curious about where an earlier generation of Black protest came from and how they came through its challenges.

Brown was among a cadre of Black writers in the 1970s doing in print what Richard Pryor was doing on stage.

MY RIDE OR DIE
Cohen, Leslie
Morrow/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Apr. 20, 2021
978-0-06-296678-0

Can two friends have all the benefits of marriage—lifelong companionship, reliability, someone to make sure you don’t choke on your snacks—without any of the cons?

It will come as no surprise that Sophie, a free-spirited aspiring artist who compares her bachelorette party to a “funeral,” ends up leaving her fiancé at the altar. What is surprising is the arrangement that she proposes to her best friend, dissatisfied corporate lawyer Amanda: “What if we formed some sort of alliance? ... What if we eliminated the task of vetting every guy we dated for marriage? What if we could just live life together?” This lifelong commitment involves a few ground rules: They will buy an apartment together, they are still...
allowed to date and even fall in love with men, but no moving in with anyone else, and definitely no marriage. Cohen seems to gloss over some of the finer points of this arrangement, and after Amanda eagerly and immediately agrees, the women's initial hurdles involve little more than apartment hunting and convincing skeptical friends. But when Amanda reconnects with a man from her past and Sophie starts actively pursuing a career in the arts, the friends begin negotiating their conflicting feelings of loyalty to each other and a desire to pursue their own paths. Cohen's writing is strongest as she depicts this downward spiral, when the boundaries of Amanda and Sophie's love for each other, as well as their differing needs in companionship, get exposed.

An exploration of the expansiveness and constraints of female friendship.

**THE MARRIAGE PASS**

Coyle, Briana  
Dafina/Kensington (240 pp.)  
$15.95 paper | Feb. 23, 2021  
978-1-4967-2955-2

A couple makes an unorthodox bargain on their first anniversary.

Dorian is a young and successful cosmetic surgeon in Atlanta. He's been in an on-again, off-again relationship with Shantae for 10 tumultuous years. They've suffered their share of problems—his infidelity, her miscarriage, and their struggles with family pressures and expectations—but they finally got married a year ago. Now, Dorian is shocked when Shantae suggests an unusual gift for their first anniversary: a marriage pass, a night where they can each go do whatever they want, no questions, no recriminations, no guilt. He senses a trap but can't resist the idea. Dorian spends his night with Reagan, a bold, beautiful woman who's always...
been off-limits because she happens to be Shantae's younger sister. Although he pledges to keep to the “one night” bargain, he continues his affair with Reagan over the next few months. Dorian feels torn between the two women but can’t commit to ending his marriage. Reagan’s escalating emotional blackmail and increasingly erratic behavior start to frighten him, turning him into the worst version of himself. Cole tries to thread the needle of appealing to multiple genre readers, for the book is a mishmash of erotic romance, suspense, and thriller; however, Dorian is not a strong or interesting enough character to hold it all together. He’s a man caught in a melodrama borne of his own selfish, dumb decisions rather than a man caught in a compelling, interesting trap. The late-stage plot twist isn’t enough to salvage the wreckage.

A novel meant to explore trust asks readers to empathize with characters making terrible decisions.

**DOUBLE DOWN**

Collins, Max Allan

Hard Case Crime (352 pp.)

$12.95 paper | Apr. 20, 2021

978-1-78909-141-0

Hard Case celebrates the publication of *Skim Deep*, the first new novel since 1999 about the never-quite-reformed thief Nolan, by reprinting the third and fourth of Nolan’s adventures, originally published in the early ’80s.

The first of the two, *Fly Paper*, pulls Nolan and his friend and son figure, Jon, away from a comic-book convention long enough to avenge the Comfort family’s double-cross of their latest partner in crime, the compulsive gambler Breen, by leaving one Comfort dead and grabbing $200,000 from another. So far, so lucrative, until the successful thieves discover that the passenger list of the airplane carrying them from Detroit back home to Iowa includes a skyjacker whose luggage contains a bomb he threatens to detonate unless he’s paid—wait for it—a ransom of $200,000. The more ambitious but less satisfying *Hush Money*, set only a week later, is kicked off by the shooting of golfer Joey DiPreta just as newly appointed state highway commissioner Carl H. Reed has turned down his gentle request to ignore the about-to-be-discovered graft of Reed’s predecessor. Since Joey is a member in good standing of the DiPretas, his execution by Vietnam-trained sniper Steven Bruce McCracken sets shock waves of violence radiating out from the family in all possible directions. Nolan, who’s recently returned to the good graces of the family after a 16-year exile, is assigned the tricky task of locating and defanging the sniper without making any waves that might be traced back to the DiPretas.

Honest pulp marred only by the odd moments in which the hero explains things or shows his sensitive side.
of paintings by an artist she calls L that spoke of “absolute freedom” to “a young mother on the brink of rebellion.” Now, years later, divorced from her hypercritical first husband and a subsequent period of misery behind her, she is happily married to quiet, nurturing T ony and lives with him in “a place of great but subtle beauty” remote from the urban centers of whatever country this is. (Details are deliberately vague, but bravura descriptions of marshes and brambles evoke a fairy-tale landscape rather than New Mexico.) M clearly feels some dissatisfaction with this idyllic retreat since she writes to L through a mutual friend and invites him to stay in their “second place,” a ruined cottage they rebuilt as a long-term refuge for guests. After some coy back and forth, L turns up on short notice with an unannounced young girlfriend in tow, forcing M to move her 21-year-old daughter, Justine, and her boyfriend, Kurt, to the main house. L clearly knows that M wants something from him (Cusk elliptically suggests a desire to be welcomed into an imaginative life M feels inadequate to enter on her own) and is determined not to provide it. Increasingly tense interactions among the three couples form the seething undercurrent to M’s ongoing musings on art, truth, and reality. The inevitable big blowup is followed by reconciliations and relocations, capped by one of Cusk’s characteristically abrupt conclusions with a bitter letter from L.

**Brilliant prose and piercing insights convey a dark but compelling view of human nature.**

**VERNON SUBUTEX 3**

Despentes, Virginie

Trans. by Wynne, Frank

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (416 pp.)

$17.00 paper | May 11, 2021

978-0-374-28326-1

The long, wild ride of France’s most unlikely lothario reaches its lurid climax. For this third and concluding chapter in the series about the titular vagabond, it seems fitting that Despentes completes the cycle of grief by finally giving her eccentric ensemble a kind of acceptance and maybe even a little peace. As before, this is a sprawling cast of human pinballs, with dozens of characters careening in and out of each other’s lives, cataloged via a roster recounting each character’s current events. Perpetual sad sack Vernon is returning from exile as a changed man facing a very different Paris than he left: “Paris has become hard. Vernon is immediately aware of the pent-up aggression—people are furious, pressed up against each other, ready to come to blows.” In that respect, this entry is very much of its time, visiting its characters’ feverish day-to-day dramas but punctuated by real-life shockwaves, among them the Charlie Hebdo attack, the coordinated terrorist attacks that ended in the Bataclan massacre, and more personal losses like David Bowie. Vernon, meanwhile, has become the somewhat unreliable sage to a group of disciples as well as a popular DJ, dubbed the “shaman of the turntable.”

Returning from the relatively safe commune where he and his friends were building a capitalism-free life, Vernon is faced with a dilemma when his old drinking buddy Charles dies, leaving him a fortune but no clue as to how to spend it. The meandering story is characteristically prolonged, but there’s something comforting in visiting each singular arc, be it coke addict Kiko searching for spiritual equilibrium, friends Aïcha and Céleste going underground after avenging the death of Aïcha’s mother, or Laurent Dopalet, the Harvey Weinstein doppelgänger, licking his wounds and plotting revenge. Perhaps it’s because no one here changes much, yet none are immune to the inevitable march of time. Life, in all its chaotic glory, goes on.

The inevitable finale to a messy, often absorbing saga about the evolution of the dispossessed.
THE MEMORY OF AN ELEPHANT
BY ALEX LASKER

An aged African elephant bull travels from Zambia to his homeland in Kenya’s Tsavo West National Park to say his final goodbyes in a debut novel that melds reality and fantasy.

“A vivid and timely depiction of the sentience of elephants and the cruelty of ivory poaching.”

—Kirkus Reviews

For information on publishing and film rights, email a.lasker@yahoo.com
What happens to a family when one of its members is killed by the police? In his dazzling new novel, *The Removed* (Ecco, Feb. 2), Brandon Hobson explores that question through the story of the Echotas, a Cherokee family in Oklahoma whose middle child, Ray-Ray, was shot by a White policeman 15 years ago. Now Maria, a retired social worker, is preparing for the annual bonfire they hold in Ray-Ray’s memory, and she’s also agreed to take in a foster child for a few days. Wyatt’s father is in jail and his mother has vanished, and he needs a Cherokee placement while his grandparents try to arrange custody. Maria’s husband, Ernest, is in the early stages of Alzheimer’s, but as he spends time with Wyatt, he finds himself remembering more and more of his life. Could Wyatt contain some element of Ray-Ray? The Echotas’ daughter, Sonja, seems taken up with romantic travails, and their younger son, Edgar, finds himself in a mysterious place called The Darkening Land following a drug overdose. Interspersed with their stories are chapters told from the perspective of Tsala, an ancestor who experienced the Trail of Tears. Hobson’s previous novel, *Where the Dead Sit Talking*, was a finalist for the 2018 National Book Award. He spoke to us over Zoom from his home in New Mexico; our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

In the past few years, we’ve been starting to have a reckoning with police violence against Black Americans, but we haven’t begun to have that reckoning about violence against Native Americans—the trauma that has been inflicted and how that is affecting people. It’s a significant problem in the Native community. I wrote a short story that was in *American Short Fiction* last fall, about missing Native women, and that’s sort of the same thing. Native women in the states of New Mexico, Oklahoma, Colorado, all through the Pacific Northwest—the numbers of murdered Indigenous women are astronomical. And yet we see this in Native news and Native communities but not often in the national news—so we have to do whatever we can to raise awareness. My hope is that more Native writers will get published. And certainly, it seems to be headed in that direction, which is a good thing. I’m not in any way trying to take away from the Black community and the struggles there, of course, but there are also many Natives who’ve been mistreated. I wanted to focus on the police shooting there because it does happen—just trying to get it out so we can have conversations about it.

In addition to being a contemporary family story, this book is also very much concerned with history, particularly with the Trail of Tears. How do these things fit together?

I began this book with the theme of removal, and I began it, as I generally do with my fiction, with questions.
One of the questions I explored in my last book and in this one is, What do we consider home? And the bigger question in this book is, How do we grieve? And how do we begin to heal after grieving? We have a racist police shooting, and after 15 years, is the family still grieving over this? So that’s where I began, addressing those questions and taking each character’s thread, Sonja’s thread, Edgar’s thread, Maria’s thread, and then to get back to your original question, there’s Tsala’s thread. Tsala is an ancestor, and I wanted to look at the history of removal and struggle that he dealt with and how that parallels the suffering that this family is going through and trying to heal.

Where did Tsala come from?

So Tsala is actually based on a real man named Tsali, but in my book it’s Tsala, which is taken from Tsalagi, the word for Cherokee. If you ever go to Oklahoma, to Cherokee Nation, you’ll see Tsalagi everywhere. Anyway, he was a real figure who was killed for refusing to leave the land. Andrew Jackson ordered the soldiers in, and some people hid in the mountains, and those who didn’t were forced to migrate and leave. But this is a man who just refused. He fought against the soldiers, and he ended up dying with his son. In the book, he’s telling us, Here’s how we struggled. I also wanted to incorporate some of the traditional stories in this book, and I thought I could use the lens of Tsala to do that. He can not only talk about his removal and death, but he can incorporate some of these traditional old Cherokee stories.

Storytelling is a big theme in the book. Aside from Tsala’s stories, Sonja works in the library and Wyatt tells stories to other children.

Yes, even the minor characters are storytellers. If you think of Edgar’s journey into the mythical Darkening Land—which is really a term used in Cherokee mythology—in that surreal, mystical place that he finds himself in, even the minor characters will come up and launch into a story. So storytelling is definitely a theme, good and bad, and hopefully it’s connected to the Trail. And storytelling is a big part of Native culture, anyway. How stories heal—but not all stories heal. There are harmful stories—like Trump, right? He’s a storyteller in a certain way, but not a good one.

Your last two books both feature teenagers in foster care. You spent some time as a social worker, right? I’ve done a few different jobs in social work, though it’s been a while. I did it before I went on to do a Ph.D. But before that, I ended up in social work because my mom was a social worker, and it was the only job I could find that had benefits. I worked with deprived kids and also delinquent kids—and I use that term because it’s a social work term, meaning kids who had juvenile records and were in need of services. I did that for seven years, and I also worked with the parents of teenagers who are on probation. And I do find something intriguing about unwanted children, or children who have been through the system. They all have such remarkable stories to tell, and I want to give light to that in some way through my fiction.

The book is dedicated to your uncles, who you said spirit-walked across water to visit you during the writing of the book. Can you tell me about that?

It happened at the Miami Book Festival a couple of years ago. I flew to Miami, and one morning there, I had a very—and I don’t want to sound too weird or New Age-y or anything, but I had an experience there. It was a very spiritual experience. They came to me right across this sort of body of water and told me that they were proud of me. And that was an important moment in my life.

The Removed received a starred review in the Dec. 15, 2020, issue.
MAGGIE FINDS HER MUSE
Ernst, Dee
St. Martin's Griffin (304 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-2507-6833-9

What happens when a romance writer’s life becomes a romance novel?

Maggie Bliss is stuck. She’s a 48-year-old novelist with crippling writer’s block facing an upcoming deadline—not to mention facing a dead-end relationship with a self-obsessed man. Maggie’s agent, Lee, suggests she leave her New Jersey apartment for his pied-à-terre in Paris and finish the third novel in her romance trilogy surrounded by the inspiration of the City of Lights. Maggie jumps at this chance for adventure, breaks up with her boyfriend, and flies to Paris determined to finish her novel: “I’m there to write.... No distractions. At all.” But distractions are exactly what she’s going to get, whether it’s from her daughter, Nicole, a resident of nearby Rennes who also happens to be in Paris; ex-husband Alan, in Paris visiting Nicole; or Lee’s housekeeper’s handsome (and newly single) son, Max. The novel is smartest when Ernst is at her most self-aware, playing with the tropes of the genre: “Every romance writer worth their salt knows what happens when a man and a woman who have never met before encounter each other in a bathroom when one is in the shower or tub and one is not.” And while Maggie’s story is utterly predictable from the moment she lands in Paris, Ernst nonetheless creates a world with amusing characters, an entertaining plot, and delicious descriptions of Parisian food and landmarks.

A fun escape.

ON TRAINING
Dustin P. Salomon

"...a radical reconsideration of arms training coupled with a discussion of bias in law enforcement."

"...a well-researched introduction to a complex set of issues..."

“A concise and expert primer...”
—Kirkus Reviews

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WWW.BUILDINGSHOOTERS.COM
A lost soul is stuck between the slums and salvation.

DIAMOND HILL

Fan, Kit
World Editions (304 pp.)
$16.99 paper | May 4, 2021
978-1-64286-088-7

A lost soul is stuck between the slums and salvation.

It’s 1987. The narrator is a recovering heroin addict, sent by a dying Thai monk to live in a run-down Hong Kong convent. There, he sleeps in a dark, leaky shed and has sex with a wannabe movie star who calls herself Audrey Hepburn. The world of this novel is a treacherous and liminal place to be. There are still 10 years to go before Britain hands Hong Kong over to China, but the preliminary corruption and squalor are well afoot. Diamond Hill, once a Hong Kong slice of Hollywood (Audrey Hepburn claims to have once dated Bruce Lee), is now a shantytown packed with makeshift dwellings that could scarcely be called homes. The towering cranes and encroaching real estate developers share space with heroin addicts and dealers, the latter including Audrey Hepburn’s teen daughter, who goes simply by Boss. Amid this chaos our down-and-out hero sifts for salvation in a place where mere survival might be a more realistic goal. Fan’s prose is both minimalist and highly descriptive; the darker the spiritual corner, the more light he shines. Here’s the protagonist, fiending for a fix: “I scratched my arms until I drew blood, but seeing my blood only made me crave heroin more. The dried blood smelt like a rare steak. I kept licking the wounds for comfort.” He’s a compelling character with a passive streak; he would seemingly settle for being a keen observer. Instead, like Rick in Casablanca, he can’t help but stick his neck out. Fan deftly mixes the sacred with the profane, often on the same page. Just when you decide there’s no room for holiness amid the wreckage, you realize there may in fact be no other option.

An introduction to a seamy slice of Hong Kong—plus a convent.

ELADATL

A History of the East Los Angeles Dirigible Air Transport Lines

Foster, Sesshu with Romo, Arturo Ernesto
City Lights (268 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-87286-770-3

Testimonies, recordings, letters, and photographs tell the surreal stories of a dirigible network that might have existed in Los Angeles.

Although presented as a novel, this book is made up of stories and photographic exhibits connected by the workers, passengers, and observers of ELADATL, the (fictional) East Los Angeles Dirigible Air Transport Lines, and “the secret history of Los Angeles.” Co-authors Foster and Romo “use imaginary futures to attack the desolated present,” and their project reveals in multiplicity and contradiction. In some stories, ELADATL is an operating concern, in others it might consist of nonfunctional zeppelin props for a proposed movie. In the final story before the lengthy appendices, characters seem to emerge from a post-apocalypse into a modern-day political rally. Despite the book’s unfettered imagination and its admirable commitment to “marginalized and disappeared peoples” lost to contemporary capitalism, much of the book is a chore. The numerous documents and various narrators all sound alike, and there’s an unfortunate tendency toward repetition. Too often, the book feels like a cryptic private joke or an extended exercise in Dadaist uncertainty, as in the chapter consisting solely of nonsense quotes attributed to figures as diverse as Raquel Welch, Smokey the Bear, and King Kong. A recipe attributed to Ulysses S. Grant is also included. There’s real wonder and humor here but also tedium and excess.

Imagination, originality, and idealism can’t keep this book aloft under the weight of its own indulgence.
In Fuller's fourth novel, when one thing is buried, another is unearthed. For those familiar with Fuller's work, it will come as no surprise that a secret lies at the heart of her latest tale. Based in rural England, the novel opens in a dilapidated cottage with the unceremonious death of a woman named Dot. She's found that morning by her grown twin children, Jeanie and Julius, who are 51 years old and have lived with her all their lives. While the death of their mother isn't a shock, it's what follows that unnerves the twins. Apparently, there were debts their mother had accrued, and apparently everyone in town knew except Jeanie and Julius. No sooner do they bury Dot than they receive an eviction notice from the landlord, a man who the twins believe murdered their father. As far as they understood, their mother was given free rent as some sort of twisted reparation for their loss. Now homeless and jobless, the twins scramble to find work and shelter, which isn't easy for "poor people, country people" like them, especially with Jeanie's weak heart. They eventually land on their feet, even finding time to pick their shared love of music back up, but it doesn't take long for the past to catch up to them. Fuller is a master of building suspense. At once unsettling and hopeful, her book checks all the boxes of an engrossing mystery, but it falters in its pacing. And when the book's big dark secret is finally exhumed, the reader feels just as cheated as its protagonists do. Misfortune runs amok in a story that can only be saved by turning the last page.

THE BOOK OF DARRYL
The Goggles & Bate, Matthew
Illus. by Scorpion Dagger
MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux (176 pp.)
$27.00 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-0-3741-1531-9

The high-concept Canadian documentarians behind I Live Here (2008) deploy their unique multimedia style in a whimsical biblical allegory. Advertising is a weird science in its most mundane form, let alone the weird alchemy practiced by Paul Shoebridge and Michael Simons over the past two decades as The Goggles, multimedia wunderkinds most memorable for the award-winning interactive documentary Welcome to Pine Point and the book I Live Here (2008), which documented life for refugees during wartime. Here they're aided by filmmaker Bate and digital artist James Kerr (better known as Scorpion Dagger) for a literary amalgamation that is one part John Hughes, a dash of Douglas Coupland, and augmented with a series of .gif animations (which can be viewed through an app) that are fancifully Python-esque. The infrastructure is complicated since the book is fashioned around 16-year-old Darryl's messy, overstuffed personal diary, which chronicles his adolescent angst and potential triumph thanks to the arrival of a dodgy messiah. Darryl is a bit of a cipher, uncomfortable with expressing his thoughts and feelings except to his friend Wade, who "died peacefully in his sleep while hanging from a rafter with a rope tied around his neck." His rare moments of solace lie in his band, "a bitchin' power duo" propelled by his drummer, Mary, and egged on by their friend Jude. The milieu for this teenage daydream isn't John Hughes' Shermer, Illinois, but the Naz—that's Nazareth, as in "Jesus of," not the Scottish heavy metal band. The book's precipitating event is the arrival of Jay, son of God and the spark Darryl needs to transform his White Stripes-esque duo into a full-fledged band, Iron Messiah, which unites Darryl and Jay with the power of ROCK. It wouldn't be a teenage daydream without some angst-y drama, which erupts when Jay takes over Darryl's band, going so far as to replace him with a doppelgänger, while Jude aims to make some kind of artistic statement by blowing up Darryl's only other confidant, a tree named Rooty. All of these shenanigans are illustrated with
Mistress of Beacon Hill

A Lovely Young Irish Woman Immigrates to Kentucky with her Horses.


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

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

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL leighgentryhea@gmail.com
“Doing what she does best, Johnson shows us why she’s been compared to writers like Henry James, Jane Austen, and Voltaire.”

**LORNA MOTT COMES HOME**

*Johnson, Diane*  
*Knopf* (336 pp.)  
$28.00 | Apr. 20, 2021  
978-0-525-52108-2

A Californian facing her second divorce, this one in France, returns to the bosom of her family.

In her 18th book, Johnson, now 86, returns with undimmed joie de vivre to the delicious Francophile vein she mined so successfully in her National Book Award finalist *Le Divorce* (1997) and other novels.

Everything one looks forward to in Johnson’s books is delivered in abundance here: nimble plotting, witty narration, edifying juxtaposition of French and American cultures. Returning to her hometown of San Francisco just before the financial crisis of the aughts, art historian Lorna Mott “had remembered America differently, without people lying in the street, neighbors being tied up and robbed, junk food, obesity, cars everywhere.” Yet after 20 mostly happy years in the sweet village of Pont-les-Puits, she has had it with her aging playboy husband’s indiscretions and now hopes to be of use to her adult children. They have problems, almost all concerning finances. Divorced Peggy can’t make ends meet selling crafts on the internet; money’s run out for daughter Julie’s college tuition. Tech wonder-boy Curt has disappeared to the Far East after awakening from a coma, leaving a wife and young twins. Old hippie Hams and his pierced and pregnant wife are living in a terrible neighborhood. Their father, Lorna’s ex, has married a young gazillionaire but seems to have little interest in helping the children of his first marriage—until he faces a problem with their 15-year-old half sister that manages to pull almost all the plot elements and cast members into a single focus. Ta da! Johnson’s social and moral insight are condensed into pithy one-liners that begin each chapter: “Hope springs eternal and is sometimes rewarded.” “Pace Freud, does talking about a problem always make us feel better?” She also excels at evoking people’s misconstruals of others’ behavior and various delicate inner states: “Her French troubles with Armand and wifedom had faded to a bearable background hum, a kind of tinnitus.”

Doing what she does best, Johnson shows us why she’s been compared to writers like Henry James, Jane Austen, and Voltaire.

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**THE GIRL WHO DIED**

*Jónasson, Ragnar*  
*Minotaur* (336 pp.)  
$27.99 | May 4, 2021  
978-1-2507-9373-7

Jónasson transports a Reykjavik teacher to a job in faraway Skálar, where she falls under the spell of the place. It’s not a good spell.

“Teacher wanted at the edge of the world” announces the advertisement that lures Una, barely scraping by in her humdrum job, to the Langanes Peninsula at the northeastern tip of Iceland. The town has a population of 10, two of whom need a teacher. Upon her arrival, Una settles into the attic in the house of Salka, whose daughter, Edda, 7, is one of her pupils. The other girl, Kolbrún, is two years older and a good deal harder to reach, maybe because her mother, Inga, is standoffish and her father, the fisherman Kolbeinn, is an indiscriminate flirt. But the girl who gradually comes to overshadow both Una’s pupils is Thrá, who died 60 years ago but who repeatedly, wordlessly appears to Una—and perhaps to other villagers as well, even if they won’t admit it. When one of her two students marks the end of their Christmas concert by collapsing on the church floor and dying of liver failure, Una feels her status in Skálar crumbling, a process that
swiftly accelerates when she calls the Reykjavik police to tell them that she’s recognized the missing Patrekur Kristjánsson as someone who turned up at Salka’s door looking for Hjördís, who owns the local guesthouse. So why won’t Salka back up her identification? Why does fishery owner Guffi, the closest thing to a power broker in town, threaten her over what she’s done? And what does all this have to do with the long-dead Thrá?

An atmospheric, authentically shivery ghost story with criminal trimmings.

**SKYSTORM**

Konkoly, Steven  
Thomas & Mercer (388 pp.)  
$15.95 paper  |  May 11, 2021  
978-1-5420-2264-4

An ex-CIA operative and his family are targeted by a seemingly unstoppable team of killers.

A brief teaser prologue finds action hero Ryan Decker facing down an armed mercenary. Just three days earlier, the scene at the Decker home is idyllic. Ryan banters with his dad, Steven, while his mother, Audrey, is out and about. As Ryan’s partner, Harlow, discusses domestic issues, Ryan’s teenage daughter, Riley, heads off to school with her bodyguard, Brooklyn, an ex-Israeli soldier studying for her PI license. Outside the family circle, turmoil is brewing, and the nefarious group APEX has either been wiped out or is lying low. In a mere 30 pages, Konkoly takes his story to half a dozen

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**THE DIAMOND ROSE**

Daniela Valenti

ISBN: 978-1-77742-730-6

“A young woman suddenly gains potent psychic abilities and grapples with an inappropriate romantic attraction in this debut novel.”

“...engrossing novel...”

“A well-judged and absorbing mix of genres with strong characterizations.”

—Kirkus Reviews

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL daniela.volo006@gmail.com
locations and introduces more than a dozen additional characters without descriptions or identifiable personalities. There's a plane attack, a failed Mission: Impossible–type caper, and much talk of dangerous missions, “housecleaning,” and more destruction planned by the APEX Institute, whose latest deadly plot is named SKYSTORM. Readers new to the series who are enjoying Konkoly's punchy prose and rat-a-tat dialogue should persevere; veterans will recall roots of the backstories in Ryan's three previous adventures. When the sprawling first act ends, the tale settles into a sleek action thriller, long on narrow escapes and authoritative descriptions of weaponry. Pursuit and attack begin at Riley's school, which APEX has infiltrated. Ryan's prickly pal Pam, prominent in previous yarns, joins the good guys just in time to help with the heavy shooting.

Explosive action, a breakneck pace, and zippy dialogue. Next!

**WORLD'S BEST MOTHER**

Labari, Nuria  
Trans. by Whittemore, Katie  
World Editions (224 pp.)  
$16.99 paper  |  Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-64286-072-6

An autobiographical novel about motherhood by a Spanish journalist and fiction writer.

The narrator was in her 30s when she decided she wanted to become a mother. After several years and multiple rounds of IVF treatments, she achieved her goal—and found herself ambivalent about the result. She discovered, for example, that motherhood is time consuming and doesn't leave room for much more, especially when children are very small. She struggled with breastfeeding and baby-wearing. Much of what she describes will be familiar to many mothers, as well as to anyone who has read about motherhood. The narrator doesn't seem to have thought about motherhood until she became a mother herself, and she writes as if she is just discovering motherhood as a social construct. It's possible that this is a matter of cultural difference—this book certainly made a splash in Spain—but American readers interested in critical takes on motherhood are unlikely to find much new here. When Labari is actually inventive, she is often bewildering. The chapter “On Horseback or In Diapers” begins with the narrator imagining a new father going to the store to buy a superhero cape and ends as a riff on Franz Kafka's “Before the Law.” In between, she muses about whether playing with dolls as a child prepared her for being a mother. Labari spends no time developing any of these disparate parts, and there is nothing essential or revealing in their juxtaposition. In another chapter, the narrator quotes Penélope Cruz rhapsodizing about motherhood and goes on to say of the actor that she “has quit weaving her shroud and no longer waits.” Of course this is a reference to the *Odyssey*, but what is it supposed to mean? If there's some connection between Odysseus' wife and the star of *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* besides a shared name, Labari does not reveal it. The most affecting portions of the book are the ones in which the narrator describes how motherhood changed her relationships with her own mother and grandmother. These sections benefit from a simplicity and specificity most of the book lacks.

Labari writes with candor, but she doesn't have much to add to the communal conversation about mothers and mothering.
“A daring reimagining of the life of Yasodhara, wife of the Buddha and mother of the infant Rahula, left by Siddhartha to pursue enlightenment... I finished this novel with a yearning for this story to be true.” — Wendy Egyoku Nakao, Abbot Emeritus of Zen Center of Los Angeles, author of The Book of Householder Kous

“...engaging and inventive, and very enjoyable.” — Phillip Moffitt, author of Dancing with Life: Buddhist Insights for Finding Meaning and Joy in the Face of Suffering

“...I was deeply informed and moved by Barbara McHugh’s brilliant imagining of Yasodhara’s life.” — Elizabeth Cunningham, author of The Passion of Mary Magdalene

“This is an impressive tapestry of history, spiritual philosophy, and literary drama and an edifying look at the patriarchal limitations of Buddhism’s genesis... An intelligently conceived and artistically executed reconsideration of religious history.” — Kirkus Reviews

“Bride of the Buddha is an immersive novel about the founding of Buddhism, told in the voice of a woman who would not be excluded from the spiritual quest, nor from the presence of the man whom she loved.” — ForeWord Magazine

“This engrossing exploration of gender dynamics, identity, and the spiritual quest for meaning will appeal to Buddhists and general readers alike.” — Publishers Weekly

“A remarkable and riveting love story—I literally could not put this book down—Barbara McHugh’s Bride of the Buddha is told in luminous and mindfully crafted prose... Highly recommended for anyone interested in living a more awakened life.” — Mobi Warren, translator of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha

“Crisp, charming, and unforgettable.” — Sam Keen, Author of Fire in the Belly and Your Mythic Journey

This is the story of Yasodhara, the abandoned wife of the Buddha. Facing society’s challenges, she transforms her rage into devotion to the path of liberation.

Barbara McHugh, PhD, is a Buddhist practitioner with a degree in religion and literature from UC Berkeley. She is a published poet and writing coach. Her research for this book includes exhaustive study of Pali texts in translation and extensive travel in India.
WHEREABOUTS

Lahiri, Jhumpa
Knopf (176 pp.)
$24.00  |  Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-7352-8146-2

A year in the inner life of a solitary woman in an unnamed European city.

“Unfortunately my childhood harbors few happy memories. Instead I would tell her about the balcony of my apartment when the sun is shining and I’m having breakfast. And I would tell her how much I liked to sit outside, pick up a warm pen, and write down a sentence or two”: Here the melancholy narrator of Lahiri’s first book of fiction since *The Lowland* (2013) explains how she responded to a therapist’s request to say something positive at every session—perhaps suggesting the genesis of the book in our hands. Its spare, reflective prose and profound interiority recall the work of Rachel Cusk and Sigrid Nunez as much as Lahiri’s earlier fiction, which generally focused on the Indian immigrant experience in the U.S. Lahiri now lives in Italy, wrote this book in Italian, and translated it herself. In 46 brief chapters identified by “whereabouts”—“On the Sidewalk,” “At the Ticket Counter,” “By the Sea,” “In My Head,” etc.—the narrator gives her impressions of the people and places she encounters in her provincial European city, not noticeably Italian until the last chapter, when she watches some tourists on the train practice saying *arrivederci*. Troubled by unresolved feelings about her dead father and elderly mother, the narrator is not much closer to her friends and lovers than to the people she so carefully observes in her meanderings about town. One day, one of the otherwise invisible lovers she refers to butt dials her over and over; when he calls to invite her to dinner that night, she refuses. Though she claims solitude “has become [her] trade,” she admits “it plagues [her].” As time progresses, the view seems to darken. “Disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, severed, turned around....These words are my abode, my only foothold.” Fortunately, she has a plan that may change things for her.

Elegant, subtle, and sad.

ONE GOT AWAY

Lelchuk, S.A.
Flatiron Books (304 pp.)
$27.99  |  Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-250-17027-9

In the follow-up to *Save Me From Dangerous Men* (2019), bookseller/private detective Nikki Griffin lands in hot water when she takes on a wealthy new client.

Business is booming at Brimstone Magpie, Nikki’s Berkeley bookstore, and she’s found contentment with her English professor boyfriend, Ethan, who wants her to move in with him. Contentment doesn’t quite suit Nikki, however, so she’s raring to go when she scores new client Martin Johannessen, who happens to come from one of San Francisco’s wealthiest families. Martin says his octogenarian mother has been blackmailed by the charming and much younger Geoffrey Coombs, a suspected con man. Coombs’ trail leads Nikki to a ritzy Monterey hotel, and despite herself, Nikki finds herself attracted to the handsome, smooth-man- nered psychologist, who seems to see her for who she really is: a woman who loves being on the edge of danger. Nikki’s scenes with Coombs, chock full of snappy dialogue, are right out of a black-and-white noir, but, unfortunately, their time together culminates in his abduction by some very bad men who threaten to fit him with concrete shoes. Coombs may have been up to something nefarious, but allowing him to be killed by these guys is not in Nikki’s playbook, and after Martin terminates her contract, she’s hired by his mother, Marie, who is most definitely not helpless or a victim. Marie wants Nikki to save Coombs, and it will undoubtedly be dangerous, but Nikki has friends in high and low places who are always eager to help. She even gets a boost from Mason, an inquisitive 12-year-old she meets by chance. Nikki has
a moral imperative to mete out justice that is fueled by childhood tragedy. Those who dare to underestimate her are in for a nasty surprise, and she’s not afraid to use a little violence to help those who can’t help themselves. The nearly fearless and deeply empathetic Nikki is ridiculously easy to root for, and the pace is fast and furious all the way to a deeply satisfying finale.

A smashing sequel. More please.

MY FRIEND NATALIA
Lindstedt, Laura
Trans. by Hackston, David
Liveright/Norton (240 pp.)
$24.00 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-1-63149-817-6

An unnamed therapist develops an unusual relationship with a client in Finnish author Lindstedt’s first book to be published in the U.S.

From the moment Natalia first shows up in the office of the narrator, a therapist who is neither named nor gendered, she proves she’s not like other clients. She is the first to lie down on the office couch, the first to address a strangely magnetic painting hanging in the office, the first to bring an old-fashioned alarm clock to sessions and lay it on her stomach as she spins story after story of her past. The therapist diagnoses Natalia with “hypersexuality” and leads her through a treatment regimen the therapist calls “layering,” a “guided associative process” that consists of taking words from Natalia’s recollected stories and asking her to create stories that use the words in new ways. The effect is supposed to drag patients out of the “current” of their habitual thinking, resulting in deep changes to their thought processes. Like a lewd Scheherazade, Natalia weaves these new stories, collaging in poems, drawings, philosophy, and, most of all, epiphanies of her sexual life. As they move further into Natalia’s psyche, the therapist begins to wonder what Natalia’s true motives in seeking therapy may be. Lindstedt’s novel reads like the love child of a pornographer and a high theorist: Derrida meets Anais Nin. Ultimately, this is as much a novel about language as it is about
sexuality or psychology, and translator Hackston has performed a virtuosic task capturing the Finnish pyrotechnics in English. Lindstedt may not be looking to make an exact analogy between the work of therapy and the work an artist does, but it’s hard not to read this as an a r s po et i ca: “If you talk a lot,” the therapist says, “the sorrow might permanently change shape.”

Bawdy and beguiling.

**T O O G O O D T O B E T R U E**

Lovering, Carola
St. Martin’s (352 pp.)
$27.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-250-27137-2

The second novel from Lovering more than lives up to the promise of her debut, *Tell Me Lies* (2018).

Skye Starling appears to have it all—an enviable Manhattan apartment, a cool and successful book-editing job, and a pleasantly girly group of longtime friends. Still, her struggles with OCD have been a romantic-relationship deal breaker in the past. So when Skye meets the incredibly handsome Burke Michaels beachside at Montauk, the stage is seemingly set for a fairy-tale love story: Within six months they are engaged—much to the consternation of Skye’s BFF, Andie—and Skye is over the moon. But there are multiple clamoring voices in this chilling narrative that suggest all may not be well: We read Burke’s diary entries, written at the behest of his marriage counselor—yup, Mr. Perfect—for Skye already has a wife, a startling fact we learn within the early pages of the book; a former toxic boyfriend of Skye’s keeps emailing her creepy and threatening messages; and a decades-earlier narrative by Heather, Burke’s wife, confounds the dizzying plotline even further. Lovering, a master of manipulation to rival her own characters, does a skillful job of gradually unspooling her intricate tapestry of psychological intrigue while deftly juggling her multiple narratives. And neatly nested in this tale of just who is deceiving whom is a none-too-gentle critique of our system’s rigid social and economic inequities.

A nifty cat-and-mouse thriller that doesn’t stint when it comes to twists, turns, and “gotcha!” surprises.

**O N E K I N D F A V O R**

McIlvoy, Kevin
WTAW Press (272 pp.)
$18.95 paper | May 18, 2021
978-1-73298-203-1

A stylistically thorny novel about a lynching that encompasses prose-poem, satire, ghost story, and other rhetorical somersaults.

The heart of the sixth novel by experimentalist McIlvoy—author of *57 Octaves Below Middle C* (2017, etc.)—is a murder: Lincoln, a Black man, is found hanging from a swing set in the predominantly White burg of Cord, North Carolina, aka Crackertown. Investigators are summoned, locals are questioned, and Lincoln’s mother mourns. But little here follows the arc of a procedural. McIlvoy’s fury at racial violence stoked by “Trumpspawn” is clear: Lincoln is lynched on the day of Trump’s election, for starters, and the bigoted authorities are quick to dismiss the murder as a suicide. But the novel’s approach to the killing is oblique. What to make, for instance, of Mr. Panther, one of the investigators, who becomes a habitué of the town while carrying machetes on his person? Or that he falls for the fiddle-playing daughter of a prominent local who died years before and has been reincarnated as a mockingbird? Call it the triumph of free imagination over ignorance and hate: Acker, a character plainly inspired by the late experimental artist and writer Kathy Acker, is the novel’s guiding spirit of art, inclusion, and freedom. As the novel progresses, more characters become (or are revealed to be) “Presences,” ghosts who serve to remind others of the town’s racist past and present that the locals prefer to keep unspoken. Throughout the story, McIlvoy pivots from lyrical riffs
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("the bloodrust airtaste of the doused, excited, heavy rope"),
dark-humored passages about Second Amendment hard-liners,
and abstruse plotting. It's a perpetually disorienting book, but
McIlvoy's approach does establish a certain properly righteous
mood: In a town thick with injustice, placid prose and straight-
forward plotting simply won't do.

An unorthodox but compelling cry against racist violence.

A DOOR BEHIND A DOOR
Moskovich, Yelena
Two Dollar Radio (188 pp.)
$16.99 paper | May 18, 2021
978-1-953387-02-8

A stabbing sets off a mysterious
chain of events.
When Olga was a baby in the Soviet
Union, a boy from her apartment build-
ing went up to the sixth floor and stabbed
an older woman three times. Now Olga

is all grown up and living in Milwaukee with her girlfriend,
Angelina. Then, suddenly, Nikolai Neschastlivyi—the stabber—
starts calling her phone in the middle of the night. Despite all
these details, though, it’s hard to say what Moskovich’s latest
novel is actually about. Nothing here is straightforward or lin-
ear. The prose appears in short bursts, each one topped by an
all-caps header and most no more than a few sentences in length.
One is titled “YEARS PASSED.” The text that follows: “I forgot all
about Nikolai from floor five.” The next header reads: “AND THE
OLD LADY WHO GOT STABBED?” followed by: “What was her
life, lived with such precise values, against ours, unfolding into
daylight like a corn being husked.” The effect of all these flashes
and bursts of prose is rather like that of a pane of glass that has
shattered onto the floor. Individually, the shards are slick and
sharp, but taken together, it’s hard to
know what to make of them. There’s a
diner in this book, and a
waitress named Lisette, and then somehow Olga
is in jail with someone named Tanya, and then, finally, the first-person
narration is taken over by a dog. How these
details connect to each other is anyone’s guess. Olga’s
brother stabs Tanya, but does this
actually happen, or is it a dream? And if it happened, when did it
happen? And why? Moskovich doesn’t give us anything to go on,
and that makes it hard, in the end, to feel much of anything
for these characters—including a sense of humor.

Moskovich offers her readers little insight into either her
characters or plot, and the result is frequently alienating.

THINGS WE LOST TO
THE WATER
Nguyen, Eric
Knopf (304 pp.)
$25.95 | May 11, 2021
978-0-593-31795-2

In this decades-spanning novel, a
family of Vietnamese refugees makes a
home in New Orleans.
Hurong, who’s pregnant, arrives in
New Orleans in 1978 disoriented and
overwhelmed but clear on one thing: She must get in touch with
Công, her husband, who was inexplicably left behind when she
and their young son boarded the boat that carried them away
from Vietnam and the encroaching Communist regime. As
she, her son, and her new baby settle into the Versailles Arms,
an apartment building on a polluted bayou populated entirely
by Vietnamese refugees, she sends letter after letter to their
old addresses in Vietnam and constantly replays the moment
of their unexpected parting in her head. “How had Công’s hand
slipped?” she kept asking herself. That was the only explanation.
The only possible one.” It’s only when Công sends her a brief
postcard back—“Please don’t contact me again” is the jist of it—
that denial gives way to grief and a steely resolve to protect her
two sons, no matter what. Over the following years, the novel
moves fluidly among each of the family members’ perspectives:
Túơn, her elder son, grows from a boy gentle with animals to
a teenager trying to prove his toughness to the members of a
Vietnamese American gang called the Southern Boyz. Bình—or Ben, as he insists on being called, never having known Vietnam—loves to read, slowly realizes that he’s gay, and eventually embarks on a transoceanic voyage of his own. Hurong begins dating a kind car salesman named Vinh, but all three family members are haunted by Công’s absence. Hurong tells the boys early on that their father is dead, a lie that plants the seeds for familial rupture later on. Debut author Nguyen movingly portrays the way adopted homes can become as cherished and familiar as ancestral ones (Hurong 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. Seeing her sons, so like their father, growing away from her, Hurong thinks: “It’s always like she’s losing him again—to the world, to life, to fate.”

An engrossing, prismatic portrait of first- and second-generation Vietnamese American life.

**JUNGLE UP**

_Pirog, Nick_  
Blackstone (450 pp.)  
$14.99 paper | Apr. 27, 2021  
978-1-982673-89-5

A retired homicide detective braves the Bolivian jungles to rescue the woman he loves.

While he recovers from an accident, Thomas Prescott is living in France and helping his sister, who has a child, an art gallery, and multiple sclerosis. Then he gets a very short call from former lover Dr. Gina Brady begging for help. Thomas and Gina had lived together in Seattle until the World Health Organization asked her to work on a tuberculosis outbreak and she chose Bolivia over Thomas. Now she’s been kidnapped. After a friend sets him up with Papagayo, a former Marine who has contacts in South America, Thomas hitchs a plane ride with a team of filmmakers and archaeologists in search of a lost Incan city. Upon arrival in Bolivia, he...
heads out with his little group, including a beguiling sloth, to track down Gina. The filmmakers’ own party, which includes a young archaeology professor who’s petrified of everything, an arrogant producer, and two former British Special Forces members on hand to keep them alive, helicopter into an area that a flyover indicates is the location of many ruins swallowed by the jungle. The reason Gina was kidnapped was to help a badly injured man who needs to be kept alive. Each group undergoes hair-raising adventures as the fates keep bringing them together and splitting them apart in their search for hidden treasure, pharmaceutical finds, missing persons, and archaeological fame.

A fascinating backdrop, exciting adventures, plenty of twists, and perhaps too many plotlines.

**A MAN AT ARMS**

Pressfield, Steven

Norton (336 pp.)

$27.95 | Mar. 2, 2021

978-0-393-54097-0

A warrior and an unlikely cohort face the might of the Roman Empire in this vivid tale of tribulation.

In Anno Domini 55, a 14-year-old Jewish boy named David witnesses a group of brigands launch a failed ambush upon a wagon train. They are scant match against the mercenary Telamon of Arcadia, who bears a tattoo of his former Roman Tenth Legions. After rescuing the wagon train from the bandits, the fearless warrior assists a mute and “feral girl-child” named Ruth and her caretaker, Michael. Star-struck, David declares himself Telamon’s apprentice. Meanwhile, the Romans are chasing Michael, whom they consider “the most dangerous man in Palestine.” They fear that he’s carrying a lengthy and seditious letter written by Paul the Apostle or that he knows where it is. Said letter is destined for the Christian underground in Corinth, Greece. Meanwhile, Marcus Severus Pertinax, the Roman commander in Jerusalem, knows Telamon well and directs him to find the messianic “Jewish subversive calling himself Paul the Apostle,” a man who “cannot be suborned, coerced or reasoned with.” And Severus urgently wants Paul’s letter. Although Telamon claims to believe in nothing but money, he travels across the desert with Michael, Ruth, and David, who don’t have two coins to rub together. And Michael and Ruth won’t say if the letter even exists. They endure unrelenting trouble: bloody skirmishes, parching thirst, terrible torments, threatened crucifixion, and a treacherous witch (is there any other kind?) who wants to rip Michael’s guts out to look for the missive. Throughout their arduous journey are hundreds of colorful details, such as the balloon trousers of the Sadducees and the underground city called The Anthill. The writing style feels at times like that of an old storyteller of the day: “David could not see the lead sling bullet, so swiftly did it fly.” Though the foursome do not share a common faith, they show each other unflagging fealty.

Action, loyalty, bravery, and blood make for fine historical fiction, and it’s all here.

**THE FIVE WOUNDS**

Quade, Kirstin Valdez

Norton (432 pp.)

Apr. 6, 2021

978-0-393-24283-6

As members of the Padilla family navigate their way through the harsh realities of life in northern New Mexico over the course of a year, they discover the depths of their faith in each other and in themselves.

The Padillas are an old family from the fading village of Las Penas, but now they’ve dwindled to four people: the patriarch, Yolanda; her two adult children, Amadeo and Valerie; and her elderly Tío Tíve, head of the village’s morada, an informal religious meeting house, where he has chosen Amadeo for the role of Jesus in the upcoming Good Friday procession. Amadeo, unemployed and alcoholic, still lives with his mother. As the book opens, Yolanda is on vacation in Las Vegas; Amadeo’s estranged teenage daughter, Angel, shows up on his doorstep, pregnant, after having had a fight with her mother, and Amadeo reluctantly takes her in. Angel, who is in a school for teenage mothers, idolizes her teacher, Brianna, a young woman from Oregon. Meanwhile, in Las Vegas, Yolanda goes to the emergency room and receives a devastating diagnosis, sending her back home to her children and grandchildren, determined to find a way to fix the crumbling foundations of their relationships. However, the birth of Angel’s son and Amadeo’s lifelong habit of financial and emotional dependence on his mother blind them to Yolanda’s rapidly declining health. When Brianna instigates a secret sexual relationship with Amadeo, they are each guilty of being selfish and careless with Angel’s life, but it is Brianna who causes a series of reverberating consequences for Angel and the other girls in the program while she walks away unscathed. With beautifully layered relationships and an honest yet profoundly empathetic picture of a rural community —where the families proudly trace their roots back to the Spanish conquistadors while struggling with poverty and a deadly drug epidemic—this novel is a brilliant meditation on love and redemption.

**LEGACY**

Roberts, Nora

St. Martin’s (448 pp.)

$8.99 | May 25, 2021

978-1-2502-7293-5

Roberts sticks to formula in this romantic thriller—which should please fans and newcomers alike.

The only daughter of a woman with a wildly successful fitness company, 7-year-old Adrian Rizzo is used to traveling with her mother for videos and photo shoots, the child star of the
Get the ultimate inside scoop on the best new books.

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brand. But everything changes one night when a man breaks into their house, confronts her mother for destroying his marriage, and then dies in a fall down the stairs. Adrian spends the summer with her beloved grandparents, enjoying the idyllic pace of small-town life and making some strong connections. Several years later, teenage Adrian gains the confidence to start her own business with the help of some high school misfits who become her best friends. Fast-forward a few years: Adrian's grandmother dies in an accident followed by the death of a friend's wife. Adrian decides to move in with her grandfather and to finally make a home. As frequently happens in Roberts' novels, Adrian's friends all end up living nearby, and they create a loyal, loving network that sees them all through marriage, birth, loss, success, and the other touchstones of maturity. In the background lurks a threat, though: For years, Adrian has been receiving disturbing letters signed only "The Poet," and they begin to arrive more frequently. Adrian's perfect, messy, successful life—and blossoming relationship—may be in danger from this psychopath, but her friends and family will be there to support and protect her to the happiest of endings. If you're a fan of Roberts' thrillers, the structure of this novel will bring few surprises, but the familiarity is comforting. Roberts' strength has always been her ability to create likable, complex characters, and this crew is even more appealing than most—they are never whiny in insecurity or snobbish in success; rather, they provide unwavering support for each other's ups and downs.

The most comforting of comfort-food reading—with a few chills for fun.

**BURNING GIRLS AND OTHER STORIES**
Schanoes, Veronica
Tor (336 pp.)
$25.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-250-78150-5

History and fairy tales are reimagined, repurposed, and remixed in this intriguing debut story collection.

Drawing deeply from history (particularly leftist, labor, women's, and Jewish history), folklore, fairy tales, and pop culture, Schanoes explores themes of historiography, queerness, duty, justice, and oppression. In the powerful "Among the Thorns," Ittele, a Jewish girl eschewing the trajectory typical for a 17th-century woman, dedicates herself instead—with intercession from an ancient, neglected deity—to taking revenge on the fiddler who was responsible for her father's humiliation and murder. In "Phosphorus," an Irish girl laboring in a London match factory falls ill with a ghastly disease but, thanks to a heartbreaking bargain, is able to see the workers' strike for better conditions through to the end. Despite this strong start, the collection begins to sag toward the middle, notably at the end of "Emma Goldman Takes Tea With the Baba Yaga." What begins as a captivating examination of the ways narrative choices, including state propaganda, affect perception and outcome, with the narrator imagining Goldman making a renewed commitment to revolution in the Baba Yaga's forest cottage following her disillusionment with the Bolshevik state, suddenly fizzes into a direct accounting of the United States' recent slide toward fascism. "Rats," a retelling of the calamitous relationship between Sid Vicious and Nancy Spurgeon, again starts off compellingly, examining the essential lie at the heart of fiction and our impulse to impose narrative order on the chaos of life, only to fall apart in an unpalatable take on the inevitable end, pegging Lily (Nancy's stand-in) as not only responsible for her own murder, but desirous of it. Fortunately, things pick up again beginning with "Lily Glass," a piercing variation on "Snow-White and Rose-Red" about an early film starlet navigating a complex maze of anti-Semitism, homophobia, and repressed desire, and culminating with the masterful Shirley Jackson Award–winning title story, which follows a gifted young witch and her seamstress sister as they escape the 1906 Bialystok pogrom to hoped-for safety in New York.

An ambitious but uneven collection from a writer of significant talent and promise.

**ARE YOU ENJOYING?**
Sethi, Mira
Knopf (208 pp.)
$24.00 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-328-73287-5

Sexuality and class intersect in this collection of short stories set in Pakistan. The characters in Sethi's debut struggle with their individuality because of the straightjacket imposed by conventional society. In "Mini Apple," Javed, a divorced television star, engages in a passionate affair with an American official only to find that he inconveniently develops feelings for her. In "Breezy Blessings," up-and-coming actress Mehak Ahmed comes to terms with the limits of moving ahead on talent alone. She realizes she needs to wield her sexuality as a commodity if she wants to play more than the role of "lead's sister" for the rest of her life. The stories are especially striking for their portrayal of hidden homosexuality. While Roshan, Mehak's on-site assistant, must depend on the whims of his boss for his secret to remain safe, the rich have better means. In "Tomboy," one of the more touching stories, childhood friends Zarrar and Ahsa, who are both closeted, marry each other to deliver the pretense that they're straight. Each understands that it's a marriage of convenience. In "A Life of Its Own," the young newlyweds Farah and Kashif, who stay in Pakistan to help their aging parents rather than move to the U.S. for their careers, find that the harsh realities of life in small-town Pakistan can be softened with money. Class shows up again in the title story when upper-class Soni indulges in an affair with a boorish, married older man. While Sethi's descriptions—"the gray in Asher's hair became a mischievous afterthought, like a snaggletooth on a beautiful woman: the succumbing, teasing quirk of a faultless mold"—are punchy and the stories raw, they tread worn ground. There are not many novel insights to be garnered here.

Biting and incisive stories that successfully walk the fine line between boldness and sensationalism.
Paced like a prophetic thriller, this novel suggests that “pandemic” is a continuing series.

Shepard has frequently employed research as a foundation for his literary creations, but never before in such pulse-racing fashion. He’s set this narrative in the near future, when the threat of Covid-19 has passed but provides a cautionary lesson. And what have we learned from it? Not enough, apparently, as an outbreak within an extremely isolated settlement of Greenland begins its viral spread around the globe. Readers will find themselves in territory that feels eerily familiar—panic, politics, uncertainty, fear, a resistance to quarantine, an overload of media noise—as Shepard’s command of tone never lets the tension ease. Eleven-year-old Aleq somehow survives the initial outbreak, which takes the lives of everyone close to him, and he may provide the key to some resolution if anyone can get him to talk. The novel follows the boy and the pandemic from Greenland to a laboratory facility in Montana as, in little more than a month, the virus or whatever it is, spread by touching, traveling, breathing, has infected some 14 million around the world. Jeannine Dziri and Danice Torrone, a pair of young researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who have dubbed themselves the “Junior Certain Death Squad,” find themselves on the front lines as they attempt to balance personal relationships (which occasionally read like plot contrivances) with all-consuming professional responsibilities. Meanwhile, the pandemic proceeds relentlessly. “APOCALYPSE II?” screams a Fox graphic amid “the social media cacophony,” as mass hysteria shows how human nature can take a horrible situation and make it so much worse. And though the novel builds to a sort of redemption, it suggests that there will be no resolution to the current pandemic beyond nervous anticipation toward the ones to come. Channeling Pasteur, Shepard...
promises—or threatens—“It will always be the microbes that have the last word.”

All the narrative propulsion of escapist fiction without the escape.

**IN MEMORY OF MEMORY**

Stepanova, Maria

Trans. by Dugdale, Sasha

New Directions (400 pp.)

$19.95 paper | Feb. 9, 2021

978-0-8112-2883-1

A brilliant evocation of the last years of the Soviet Union, extending deep into the past.

In a work that crosses the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction, Russian poet and journalist Stepanova recounts the lives of her ancestors, rural Russian Jews who, on moving to Moscow, could never quite go home again. She opens with Galya, an aunt whose relationship with her brother, Stepanova’s father, was strained: “There was an uneasiness between the families and a history of perceived snubs.” Galya nevertheless shared with her niece a constantly renovated series of collections, just this side of hoarding, as well as her favorite chocolates; on her death, a vast archive of notebooks, diaries, newspaper clippings, and other such documents that she had assembled to record “the oval shape of her life” and that remind Stepanova of “chain-link fencing” provide clues for Stepanova’s investigations. Alone in Moscow after her parents immigrate to Germany, she attempts to make sense of her family and their stories, some of which emerge from her aunt’s records, others from her own inquiries and travels. At the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., a curator attempts to shut her down, but she will have none of it: “One of those books where the author travels around the world in search of his or her roots—there are plenty of those now,” he says dismissively of her project. She answers, “Yes…And now there will be one more.” Apart from delivering a mine of family and national history, Stepanova exercises a well-honed sense of the apposite literary allusion (“The chimneys in the view from the window resembled flowerpots, Kafka said something similar about them”). Stretching from the days before Lenin took power to the “Doctor’s Plot” and the collapse of the USSR and beyond, Stepanova’s book is lyrical and philosophical throughout, as when she writes, toward the end, “Sometimes it seems like it is only possible to love the past if you know it is definitely never going to return.”

A remarkable work of the imagination—and, yes, memory.

**GOOD COMPANY**

Sweeney, Cynthia D’Aprix

Ecco/HarperCollins (320 pp.)

$27.99 | Apr. 6, 2021

978-0-06-287000-3

A tale of two marriages and a long-buried secret.

Thirteen years ago, when their daughter, Ruby, was 5 and they were having the happiest summer of their lives, Flora’s husband, Julian, lost his wedding ring in a pond. The pond was on a property in upstate New York where Julian’s theater group—Good Company—was putting on their annual outdoor play. There was a photo taken of the family sitting on the steps with their best friends, Margot and David, all leaning together, arms entwined around Ruby. Now Ruby is graduating from high school, and Flora is looking for the photograph to frame as a gift. In the process, she finds something else: the wedding ring that was supposed to be in the pond. While that unfortunate situation is unfolding in the present, flashbacks take us to the history of the friendships. Along the way, the characters’ working worlds are depicted in absorbing detail: Margot is a megastar on a hospital TV series, Flora is a former Broadway singer and dancer, now a voice-over artist, David is—or was, actually—a cardiac surgeon. One of the best scenes in the book is the night David and Margot meet, over the body of a heart attack victim during Shakespeare in the Park. Always the New York maven, Sweeney nails the Central Park setting—“teenagers shrieking, the occasional smash of a bottle of beer morphing into a million glittering emeralds on the pavement”—and amusingly notes the many different versions of the story that survive over years of retelling. No one can agree how David ended up onstage or how they got to the Chinese restaurant afterward, but Margot “knew her version was—if not the most accurate—the best.” All that said, this novel is far quieter than Sweeney’s hit debut, *The Nest* (2016), and the characters are less well developed. We should know Flora best, but Margot is more clearly drawn (which would be no surprise to Flora, always second fiddle).

While a little thin, plotwise, Sweeney’s second novel lives up to its title: warm, witty, and interesting.

**RIVER, SING OUT**

Wade, James

Blackstone (315 pp.)

$27.99 | Jun. 8, 2021

978-1-982601-08-9

Wade, whose striking debut, *All Things Left Wild* (2020), traveled back a century in Texas history, uses an unlikely friendship to explore an equally wild present-day landscape.

John Curtis runs a far-reaching crystal meth empire in East Texas. Dakota Cade,
whose life he saved in Iraq, helps him keep potential insubordinates in line, and he’s even branched out into running dogfights that fuel his sense of social relations at their most atavistic and conflictual. But even the closest-knit families have their problems, and one day Cade’s 17-year-old tweaker girlfriend grabs a knapsack stuffed with product and takes off. As she wanders the woods, she encounters Jonah Hargrove, 12, whose abusive father gives him little enough reason to stick close to home, and the two of them, in a marriage of Cormac McCarthy and Deliverance, go into hiding together. The story burns slowly at first, its early stages laced with lyrical passages about nature and solitude and eternity. Gradually, however, the suspense implicit in the children’s journey builds to match Wade’s overheated rhetoric. Curtis finds himself pinched between “Mexicans on one front, feds on the other….And between it all, the girl.” Mr. Carson, the elderly neighbor who seems to be Jonah’s only real friend, supplies the pair with a canoe, but it’s far from certain that they can escape the dragnet laid by Curtis, not to mention all those feds and Mexicans. At length the decorously spaced casualties mount until they reach the fugitives.

A haunting fable of an impossible relationship fueled by elemental need and despair.

OUR WOMAN IN MOSCOW
Williams, Beatriz
Morrow/HarperCollins (448 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-06-302078-8

Twin sisters find themselves caught up in a Russian spy ring at the height of the Cold War.

In 1952, Ruth Macallister, a former fashion model and the power behind the throne at a Manhattan modeling agency, receives a postcard from her twin sister, Iris Digby—sent from Moscow. When FBI man and former Yale fullback Sumner Fox comes sniffing around, Ruth at first withholds this information, but later the two will team up, pretending to be newlyweds,
to go to Moscow with the intent of extracting Iris from the clutches of the Stalin regime. Or at least that’s Ruth’s intent—Sumner’s mixed motives are a source of more confusion than intrigue. The 1952 sections, narrated by Ruth, alternate with Iris’ story, set in 1948 Great Britain, detailing how her marriage is foundering. She always knew her husband, Sasha Digby, was a spy for the Russians, a mole embedded in the U.S. diplomatic corps. Lately, however, his drunkenness appears to have rendered him all but useless to his handlers. Iris met Sasha during foundering. She always knew her husband, Sasha Digby, was a quite place it.” With her verbal mastery loosening, the narrator, suffering from aphasia, struggles to describe what’s happening to her. The 1948 narrative slows down the present action without really adding much crucial insight into how, or why, Sasha and Iris end up defecting, with their children, to Moscow or even why, after his poor performance, Moscow would want him. Making occasional appearances in the 1952 timeline is Lyudmila Ivanova, a tough-as-nails KGB operative and a single mother due to her informing on her husband, who was sent to the gulag. He’s not the only family member she’s turned in. Lyudmila has been assigned to monitor expat defectors like Sasha. Iris is the most fully developed and sympathetic character here. Ruth is another iteration of the wisecracking narrator, suffering from aphasia, struggling to describe what’s happening to her. She is losing her ability to retrieve the words for things. More tragically, she may have lost her lover: “Forgetting hairbrush became forgetting our address became forgetting dates became fragmenting, became I remembered your beautiful, beautiful face but could not quite place it.” With her verbal mastery loosening, the narrator improvises. Though her condition is rare, she’s not alone since the following stories suggest that language’s riches and its imprecision are another source of slipperiness as well as creative potential. These pieces often take the form of one-sided conversations, allowing Williams’ first-person narrators to riff on finding the perfect backdrop for a kiss in a gallery (“Smote”) or choosing the right words to shout at a lover storming away after a tiff (“Spins”). Time stands still, it expands luxuriously as is possible only in fiction, giving characters all the time in the world to muse. This is certainly true in “Alight at the Next,” which alights on this image and that idea while the narrator constructs and deconstructs the significance of her physical proximity to her date and what she should do to the man who has stepped onto the tube and threatens this magical moment of intimacy: “I am certainly braver than before, when the pre-you afternoon got jumbled with you-eveing at rush hour, where throats squirmed with the old smoke and stream of tunnels: a world pinstriped by eyelashes, uproarious with the need for a Friday, downroarious with lost cards.” These stories are not for those who relish plot, but they will please daydreamers and lovers of verbal wizardry and wit.

**A work of linguistic exuberance and lyrical meandering.**

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**ATTRIB. AND OTHER STORIES**

**Williams, Eley**

*Anchor (160 pp.)*  
$16.00 paper | May 18, 2021  
978-0-593-31235-3

_A jewel box of 16 stories._

“The Alphabet” sets the tone for Williams’ verbally dazzling collection: The narrator, suffering from aphasia, struggles to describe what’s happening to her. It’s been so long since Heather Evans killed herself after leaving behind a note addressed “To you both.” Heather doesn’t have any siblings. What unbearable secret led her mother to put an end to her life, and who else was she writing to? Searching for answers among Colleen’s effects, Heather finds a cache of letters written by Michael Reave, a friend of Colleen’s from the Fiddler’s Mill commune in the 1970s who’s been imprisoned for years as the Red Wolf responsible for a gruesome series of murders. The appearance of new victims of a copycat killer who’s clearly made a close study of the Red Wolf leads DI Ben Parker to urge Heather to talk with Michael Reave, who’s oddly eager to talk to her as well. But Reave, alternately reticent and rambling, is far from eager to tell Heather what either she or Parker most wants to know. After an anonymous note informs her, “I know what you are, and I think you do too,” Heather, more anxious than ever to get to the bottom of the mystery after her sudden estrangement from Parker, ventures with her old friend teacher Nikki Appiah onto the grounds of Fiddler’s Mill, where the pace of events will rapidly quicken.

_A fairy tale for adults with strong stomachs._

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**A DARK AND SECRET PLACE**

**Williams, Jen**

*Crooked Lane (304 pp.)*  
$26.99 | Jun. 8, 2021  
978-1-64385-574-5

_Fantasist Williams comes down to earth—well, somewhat closer to earth—in this tale of a disgraced journalist’s search for the truth about her mother’s suicide. It’s been close to her mother that she doesn’t have a key to her house. Even if they’d been much closer, nothing could have prepared her for the double shock of learning that Colleen Evans killed herself after leaving behind a note addressed “To you both.” Heather doesn’t have any siblings. What unbearable secret led her mother to put an end to her life, and who else was she writing to? Searching for answers among Colleen’s effects, Heather finds a cache of letters written by Michael Reave, a friend of Colleen’s from the Fiddler’s Mill commune in the 1970s who’s been imprisoned for years as the Red Wolf responsible for a gruesome series of murders. The appearance of new victims of a copycat killer who’s clearly made a close study of the Red Wolf leads DI Ben Parker to urge Heather to talk with Michael Reave, who’s oddly eager to talk to her as well. But Reave, alternately reticent and rambling, is far from eager to tell Heather what either she or Parker most wants to know. After an anonymous note informs her, “I know what you are, and I think you do too,” Heather, more anxious than ever to get to the bottom of the mystery after her sudden estrangement from Parker, ventures with her old friend teacher Nikki Appiah onto the grounds of Fiddler’s Mill, where the pace of events will rapidly quicken._
And if Allison gets out of line, Kira can always ask her senior ful prospect of losing daily contact with her children’s teachers.

attorney Allison Barton to plead her case. She thinks that as the attack. In alternating chapters, Wright contrasts conniving Kira and gemlike flame, gives the client her all, although she disagrees to intervene. For the most part, Allison, who burns with a hard term isn’t her biggest worry. Being bounced off her boards and, worse, being barred from the school, is. Kira hires young defense attorney Allison Barton to plead her case. She thinks that as the mother of a kindergartener, Allison will empathize with the pain-ful prospect of losing daily contact with her children’s teachers. And if Allison gets out of line, Kira can always ask her senior partner, Dan MacDonald, forever a sucker for a peek of cleavage, to intervene. For the most part, Allison, who burns with a hard and gemlike flame, gives the client her all, although she disagrees with Kira’s desire to cast the suspicion of racism—since Summer is biracial—on a fellow PTA board member as a motive for the attack. In alternating chapters, Wright contrasts conniving Kira with conscientious Allison, leaving the reader to wonder what a legal victory would even look like.

A female-forward courtroom drama with bit parts for a few lucky guys.

THE DARKEST FLOWER
Wright, Kristin
Thomas & Mercer (304 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-7278-9103-7

A desperate housewife relies on a young attorney’s skills to save her from disaster.

Kira Grant loves her pockets of power. As president of the Garden Club, she can make sure that her turn to host falls in the highly prized late spring months, when her hydrangea border is at its peak. As president of the Wolf Run Elementary School PTA, she can insist that her son, Finn, be honored as one of the two students to earn straight As from first through fifth grades. So when Kira is arrested for attempted murder after handing a poi-soned smoothie to fellow PTA board member Summer Peerman at the fifth grade graduation party, the prospect of a long prison term isn’t her biggest worry. Being bounced off her boards and, worse, being barred from the school, is. Kira hires young defense attorney Allison Barton to plead her case. She thinks that as the mother of a kindergartener, Allison will empathize with the pain-ful prospect of losing daily contact with her children’s teachers. And if Allison gets out of line, Kira can always ask her senior partner, Dan MacDonald, forever a sucker for a peek of cleavage, to intervene. For the most part, Allison, who burns with a hard and gemlike flame, gives the client her all, although she disagrees with Kira’s desire to cast the suspicion of racism—since Summer is biracial—on a fellow PTA board member as a motive for the attack. In alternating chapters, Wright contrasts conniving Kira with conscientious Allison, leaving the reader to wonder what a legal victory would even look like.

A female-forward courtroom drama with bit parts for a few lucky guys.

THE PROPHET
Bailey, Martine
Severn House (288 pp.)
$29.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-7278-9103-7

In 1753, an upwardly mobile couple has much to overcome.

Tabitha Hart and Nat Starling are now Mr. and Mrs. De Vallory, heirs to Sir John of Bold Hall now that he’s acknowledged Nat as his illegitimate son. Heavy with child, Tabitha is still trying to enjoy some freedom. She and Nat are riding in the woods to see the ancient Mondrem Oak when they find the dead body of an unknown young woman nearby. Tabitha, who’d originally returned to Netherlea in order to solve her mother’s murder, doesn’t feel that she can ignore this death. Nearby, a group of squatters who claim to be traveling to America to start a utopian community are led by the charismatic Baptist Gunn, who has spells when he prophesies. Tabitha, who finds him both disturbing and fascinating, is angry when he speaks of her past as a courtesan and mentions a baby that will be a savior. Tabitha and Nat’s lowly origins do nothing to endear them to the snobbish gentry or the family on the neighboring estate that is trying to steal their land. Tabitha engages a nursemaid whom she comes to trust more than her own sour-faced maid, but superti-sonal and old wives’ tales still make her uneasy about the impending birth. Part of a twin ring found on the body provides a clue that leads Tabitha to a foundling home and the identity of the dead girl, bringing danger to herself and her unborn baby.

Spooky historical detail enlivens a mystery thronged with suspects.

THE GRANITE COAST MURDERS
Bannalec, Jean-Luc
Minotaur (304 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-2507-5306-9

Unsolved crimes and a restless policeman turn out to be excellent holiday companions in Brittany.

Commissaire Georges Dupin is on vacation. His doctor has ordered it. His girlfriend, Claire, has arranged it. Most important, his assistant, Nolwenn, is enforcing it. Two weeks of rest on the beach, that’s it. No phone calls about any dastardly deeds back in the gendar-merie in Concarneau. Inspectors Riwal and Kadeg have been instructed to answer his calls by regaling him with tales from Breton folklore. So of course Dupin’s going absolutely crazy. Despite the spectacular scenery of the Rose Coast, with towering cliffs of pink granite cascading down to a turquoise sea, despite its quaint inns with beautiful vistas, despite delicious meals each night on the spacious terrace of his hotel, he’s bored silly. Fortunately, it amuses Rosmin Bellet, proprietor of L’Île Rose, to regale his restless guest with tales of local outrages. The statue of the patron saint has been stolen from Chapelle Sainte-Ann. Someone has broken into the Gustave Eiffel House, once owned by the famous tower’s architect. A stone thrown through her window injures Deputy Viviane Rabier. Soon Dupin is sneaking out like a guilty lover to Tabac-Presse, where owner Élodie Riuo fills him in on the latest gossip. Wealthy quarry owner Jérôme Chastagner is suspected of financial fiddles. So is Mme. Rabier’s sworn enemy, Hugues Ellec. Then Gilbert Durand’s flighty young wife, Alizée, disappears after dinner. Vacation is soon every bit as exciting as work for Dupin, who attacks this smorgasbord of malefeasance with gusto.

Between the food, the scenery, and the felonies, what’s not to like?
Ricky Lewiston and his mother, Evangeline, the wife of Lucy’s father’s law partner, Richard Lewiston, who’s never given up her assurance of Gavin Humphreys, the new head of MI5, that Brodsky is the real assassin of his colleagues. But if Brodsky really was oligarch Yuri Peyrovski and Masha Peyrovskaya, his beautiful wife, has a history of murder, as a closer look at the forensics indicates, and the killer wasn’t one of the queen’s intimates, who was it? Since Elizabeth is in no position to do her own legwork, she enlists Rozie Oshodi, her Nigerian rookie assistant private secretary, to make discreet inquiries. But the crucial deductions are those of the 90-year-old monarch Rozie aptly calls “the Boss.”

The suspects are few and the mystery disappointing, but the queen makes a wonderfully self-effacing sleuth.

An unwelcome reunion with a former suitor has decidedly unsavory results for Outer Banks librarian Lucy Richardson. A beachside engagement party for Lucy and her fiance, Connor McNeil, is marred by the unexpected arrival of Ricky Lewiston and his mother, Evangeline, the wife of Lucy’s father’s law partner, Richard Lewiston, who’s never given up her dream of Lucy marrying Ricky. Lucy is surprised and delighted to see her Boston-based parents, whose relationship with her has always been strained by Lucy’s preference for the Outer Banks. But everyone’s appalled to see Ricky, Evangeline, and her dog, Fluffy. The next evening, the two families share an uneasy restaurant dinner, made worse when creepy, litigious Gordon Frankland, one of Ricky’s clients who’s also visiting the Outer Banks, comes to their table and drops some nasty hints. Then the body of Richard Lewiston is found outside. Lucy has a history with Detective Sam Watson, and although he warns her to leave this case to the police, he knows that his warning is in vain. Neither Ricky nor Evangeline, who left dinner early, has an alibi, but the unearthing of long-hidden secrets reveals plenty of other suspects. It seems Lewiston was deeply in debt, and his creditors included several mobsters. Lucy’s research, which turns up a possible illegitimate child and some doubts about Ricky’s parentage, also brings her to the attention of a determined killer. Over and above sleuthing and searching for a house she and Connor can afford in Nag’s Head, Lucy is stressed by having to take care of Fluffy, who’s thrown out of the hotel for barking but turns out to be a heroine after all.

A comedy of misunderstandings and multiple motives makes for a happy read.

It might be a #MeToo backlash when a fearless feminist’s rhetoric is used to frame her for the murders of several misogynists. Though she’s always seen herself as a feminist firebrand, particularly compared to her neighbors in Zinnia, Mississippi, Sarah Booth Delaney has nothing on her newest client, Alala Diakos. Dr. Diakos is a Greek professor who’s come to town to work on her latest, a nonfiction book on women’s struggle for equality, and she’s been practicing what she preaches all over Zinnia. Her thoughts on the patriarchy, particularly on what should happen to male abusers, seem unfortuntably linked to a series of mysterious deaths of men from Alala’s academic circles, though she swears she’s being framed. Alala hires the Delaney Detective Agency after the latest fatality, well-known local wife beater Curtis Miller, who Alala insists wasn’t the victim of her extermination-focused justice. Another obvious suspect in Curtis’ death, his beleaguered wife, Tansy, seems easy to rule out because of the many times she let Curtis drive her home from the emergency room after he put her there; in fact, she was in the ER for a sprained wrist when Curtis was shot. But if Alala isn’t behind Curtis’ death, who is? Sarah Booth and her partner, Tinkie Richmond, dig in, though their usual meddling is hampered as Tinkie approaches what feels like her one-millionth trimester. Sarah Booth’s boyfriend, Sheriff Coleman Peters, provides some assistance, though there’s no time for much romance between the two. As for Jitty, the resident haint of Sarah Booth’s ancestral home, her cryptic “help” is only a sign that Jitty wants to steal the spotlight.

Tackling timely matters puts a serious spin on a usually lighter series.
Austin, as Hoagy soon learns, is “a highly unstable, anti-social psychotic who has the emotional maturity of a ten-year-old boy” and a billionaire whose wealth is eclipsed only by that of attorney Michael Talmdadge, his brother and trustee. For years, Michael has paid child psychologist Dr. Annabeth McKenna, of the Yale School of Medicine, $1 million a year to keep his brother in line. This year it’s not enough. Detained, sedated, and locked away, Austin easily escapes, kidnaps Hoagy by that of attorney Michael Talmdadge, his brother and trustee. For years, Michael has paid child psychologist Dr. Annabeth McKenna, of the Yale School of Medicine, $1 million a year to keep his brother in line. This year it’s not enough. Detained, sedated, and locked away, Austin easily escapes, kidnaps Hoagy and his beloved basset hound, Lulu, and imprisons them in a root cellar on Mount Creepy. His long-range plans, whatever they are, are scuttled when his throat is cut. Since Austin’s life-long campaign of nasty tricks on virtually everyone in New London County gave them all a grudge against him, which of his many victims has finally turned on him?

An easy-listening whodunit that brings its likable hero one step closer to the success he dreams of.
DEAD OF WINTER
Jones, Stephen Mack
Soho Crime (312 pp.)
$27.95 | May 4, 2021
978-1-641-29102-6

Ex-cop and philanthropist August Octavio Snow gets backed into a third case that shows once again that all Detroit politics is personal in good ways and bad.

As he’s dying of lymphoma, Ronaldo Ochoa is pressed to sell his Mexicantown corn and flour business, Authentico Foods, to a shadowy real estate speculator named Sloane, who claims he’s fronting for billionaire developer Vic Bronson. Fearing that the buyer, whoever it is, will tear down the place and put up another ghost town of faceless residential buildings that will denature the neighborhood, Ochoa wants to sell the business to Snow—the son of a Mexican mother and Black father—for a third of the price Sloane has offered. It doesn’t sound like a good idea to Snow even though he’s sitting on the $12 million he was awarded in the wrongful termination suit he filed against the Detroit PD. But Snow can’t turn away when Ochoa is killed and his daughter, Snow’s old high school crush Jackie Ochoa, begs him for a more familiar kind of help.

In no time at all, Snow’s up to his neck in civic corruption that reaches as high as City Council President Lincoln Quinn, who’d been a leader in calling for Snow’s dismissal. Hardball politics, blackmail, abduction, and beheading will be overlaid atop the city’s susurrus of combustible racial strife. The one bright spot is Snow’s reunion with German Somali ex-bartender T atina Stadtmueller, who mitigates her outrage at every vigilante step he takes long enough to join him in a commitment ceremony. Could matrimony be next for the hometown hero who proudly announces, “I’m the Blaxican”?

Ignore the tangled plot and enjoy the raucous close-ups and the joyous, unsavory overview of contemporary Detroit.

A TRAIL OF LIES
Logan, Kylie
Minotaur (320 pp.)
$26.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-2507-6863-6

Hard living and alcohol add up to a nightmare for a woman with a checkered past.

Jazz Ramsey is back in a relationship with her boyfriend, police officer Nick Kolesov, whose alcoholic mother, Kim, is a constant thorn in her side. Late one night Kim phones Jazz, claiming that Nick is dead in her yard. Even though no one is dead in the yard, Kim continues to maintain that she killed someone. While calming Kim down, Jazz discovers some old pictures that may prove the key to solving a murder, though not the one Kim thinks she committed. Nick, who’s often called away to work cases, knows how unreliable his mother is. Jazz, though irritated, still feels some responsibility to investigate Kim’s wild story, but Wally, the cadaver dog she’s training when she’s not working her administrative job at a girls school, doesn’t alert in Kim’s yard. When a body is found in a park, Jazz returns to Kim’s backyard with her late father’s retired tracking dog, Gus, who does alert, suggesting that a body was there after all. The identification of the dead man as one of Kim’s many lovers and possibly Nick’s father makes it harder for Jazz to ignore Kim’s claims as alcohol-fueled dreams. Busy as she is at St. Catherine’s Prep, she’s determined to investigate, and when she uncovers a complicated web of lies, she gets death threats.

The apparently levelheaded heroine makes some rash decisions en route to unmasking a surprising killer.

THIEF OF SOULS
Klingborg, Brian
Minotaur (288 pp.)
$27.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-2507-7905-2

A maverick Chinese police detective hunts a twisted serial killer.

In the Raven Valley Township of northern China, Inspector Lu Fei is drinking himself into his customary oblivion at the Red Lotus bar when he’s called to a brutal murder scene. The young victim, Yang Fenfang, has been “hollowed out like a birchbark canoe.” Suspicion immediately falls on her boyfriend, Zhang Zhaoxing, who works as a butcher. Once he’s arrested, Lu’s bosses at the Public Security Bureau are content to end the investigation and incarcerate Zhang. Klingborg takes the time to lay out the structure and conventions of law enforcement in China, a welcome aid for Western readers. Lu finds a kindred spirit in sarcastic medical examiner Dr. Ma Xiulan, who takes his rejection of her sexual advances in stride. No forensic evidence implicates Zhang. Though Lu thinks the young man is innocent, he’s overruled by his superiors, who order that Zhang be kept in custody until more conclusive evidence against him can be found. A wave of protests has little effect on this decision. But the discovery of two similar murders in nearby Harbin gives the investigation new life. Terse dialogue dominates this series debut, which wraps its depiction of contemporary Chinese society in the tropes of police novels. Even when the righteous Lu goes too far in interrogating a suspect, he keeps on going.

Klingborg’s twisty, tense police procedural seems poised to kick off a series.
“From the drawing room to the back alley, murder is no match for this unlikely pair of marriage brokers.”

**A ROGUE’S COMPANY**

**ARSENIC AND ADOBO**

*Manansala, Mia P.*

Berkley (336 pp.)

$16.00 paper | May 4, 2021
978-0-593-20167-1

Helping out in her Illinois family's Filipino restaurant backfires when a young woman is accused of the murder of a restaurant reviewer who happens to be her ex-boyfriend.

Maybe Lila Macapagal’s Tita Rosie's restaurant isn’t the fanciest, but Tita Rosie’s serves up the finest Filipino cuisine in Shady Palms, no matter what online reviewer Derek Winter says. After all, curmudgeonly Derek isn’t even a real reviewer; he’s just a local boy–turned–man with a computer and a chip on his shoulder from his breakup with Lila years ago. And would he keep coming back if the food were bad? When Derek shows up with his stepfather, Mr. Long, the restaurant’s landlord, Lila dreads serving them but can’t resist trying out her latest dessert creation, ube crinkles, on them. As usual, Derek can’t find anything nice to say in between ravenous bites. When he ends the meal facedown in his food, Lila admonishes him for being melodramatic. But Derek’s not kidding around, and by the time Lila calls 911, it’s too late. Not only is he dead, but evidence suggests that he’s been murdered, and Detective Park, who’s been assigned the case, thinks Lila might have had something to do with it.

With the help of her resourceful best friend, Adeena Awan, and Amir, Adeena’s lawyer-brother, on the case, Lila hopes to stay out of jail. But rising tensions between the friends are stoked by the romantic interest between Amir and Lila, which the families would frown on because of the cultural differences between Lila's Filipino American background and Amir's Pakistani Muslim one. Oh my gulay, as Manansala’s glossary indicates is Taglish for OMG: Lila could be in real trouble.

A debut that embraces its lightness.

**A ROGUE'S COMPANY**

*Montclair, Allison*

Minotaur (332 pp.)

$26.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-2507-5032-7

A genteel war widow and her street-wise business partner far exceed their modest job descriptions in their third postwar outing.

Gwendolyn Bainbridge has a fight on her hands to regain custody of her son, Ronnie, from the firm grip of her domineering father-in-law, Lord Harold Bainbridge. Her recent stay in a sanatorium after she lost her husband in World War II has labeled her an unfit parent even though she and her friend Iris Sparks have enjoyed success in operating The Right Sort Marriage Bureau. Running an expanding business and taking martial arts classes give Gwen a greater sense of control in her battles with Lord Bainbridge, and Iris, a former counterintelligence operative a little too fond of the bottle, supplies both much-needed pep talks and hard-won perspective. But then Gwen discovers that her late husband's share—now hers—of her father-in-law's copper and munitions business is also under Lord Bainbridge's thumb. A mysterious Right Sort client with more on his mind than finding a bride, a dead body near the dust bins behind Bainbridge's exclusive men's club, and Gwen's unintended interruption of a nefarious scheme call on her wits, her newfound skills, and Iris’ shady but effective gallery of friends.

From the drawing room to the back alley, murder is no match for this unlikely pair of marriage brokers.

**NO GOING BACK**

*Ragan, T.R.*

Thomas & Mercer (288 pp.)

$11.99 paper | May 4, 2021
978-1-5420-9392-7

Despite the title, a crime reporter’s deeply disturbing past comes back to haunt her.

Sawyer Brooks and her two sisters all bear psychological scars from years of living with sexually abusive parents. Sawyer, who’s made a name for herself as a crime reporter, is covering the case of the Black Wigs, a cadre of female vigilantes wreaking revenge on unconvicted rapists by kidnapping and humiliating them. Sawyer’s sympathetic to their cause, but when men start to turn up dead, she fears that a copycat is at work and uses all her sources to track down the backgrounds of the men involved. Although she turns up information that links the crimes to a Dickensian orphanage that eventually burned down, her nemesis, Detective Perez, won't listen to her theories. She’s forced to work with tough fellow reporter Lexi Holmes, who’s far less sympathetic to the wronged women and wants to see them unmasked. Sawyer enlists her sister Aria, who works at a shelter and prefers animals to people, to investigate while worrying about Harper, the elder sister whose marriage is very fragile and who’s keeping secrets from everyone. Although all the women have been deeply wronged by a legal system not always sympathetic to their suffering, Sawyer still finds it hard to believe that the Black Wigs would resort to murder.

A disturbingly violent portrayal of a systemic problem that will leave you sympathetic but unsatisfied.
**A PECULIAR COMBINATION**

**Weaver, Ashley**  
Minotaur (288 pp.)  
$26.99 | May 11, 2021  
978-1-2507-8048-5

A clever young woman’s criminal lifestyle improbably puts her on the road to redemption in this exciting World War II series debut from Weaver.

Electra McDonnell was born in the prison where her mother died before she could be hanged for a murder Ellie’s convinced she didn’t commit. Raised by her Uncle Mick, she became part of the burglary squad her family ran as a sideline from their legitimate locksmithing business. Then, one night, while they’re opening a safe in a house that’s supposed to be deserted—they’d been told there would be jewelry there—Ellie and Mick discover that they’ve been set up. They’re given the choice of working for the British government or going to jail. Mick and Ellie may be thieves, but they’re also patriots, and with Britain locked in war with Germany, Ellie’s happy to try cracking a safe that contains classified documents that have been stolen. Imperious Maj. Ramsey, who’s running the operation, introduces Ellie to a whole new world. Ellie and Ramsey enter a house whose safe is supposed to contain the documents only to find the safe open and a man lying dead on the floor. Still on the trail and enjoying a bit more of Ramsey’s trust, Ellie’s outfitted to pose as Ramsey’s date while they attend a party at the mansion of suspected German sympathizer Sir Nigel Randolf. During a lecture, they sneak off to Randolf’s study, where Ellie easily opens another safe but finds nothing of interest. Sparks fly when Ellie and Ramsey recognize their attraction to each other as Ellie continues to help Ramsey in a desperate search for those documents.

Brave Ellie and her aristocratic love should appeal to fans of Susan Elia MacNeal and Tessa Arlen.

**GONE TOO FAR**

**Webb, Debra**  
Thomas & Mercer (381 pp.)  
$11.99 paper | Apr. 27, 2021  
978-1-5420-9177-0

As in her series debut, *Trust No One* (2020), Webb presses the question of whether wealth and power can shield criminals from the consequences of their actions.

The strong working relationship between Birmingham, Alabama, police detectives Kerri Devlin and Luke Falco is tested when they catch the gang-style murders of two victims: Leonard Kurtz, the owner of the high-end tobacco and liquor store where the bodies were found, and Asher Walsh, the Harvard-educated son of wealthy parents based in Boston. Because Walsh recently became deputy district attorney in Birmingham, they assume he was the killer’s target. Kerri’s immediately distracted by the involvement of her 14-year-old daughter, Tori, in the death of a fellow student who fell or was pushed down the stairs, an incident witnessed by Tori, her best friend, Sarah, and Alice Cortez, a new student from Mexico. In the meantime, Falco learns that Walsh made a call to Sadie Cross, a former police detective whose kidnapping while she was undercover in the Osorio Mexican cartel left her with serious physical injuries and big holes in her memory. To Kerri and Falco’s fury, Sadie’s father, coldhearted DEA agent Mason Cross, takes over the case. Sadie, now a private investigator, admits to helping Walsh, who wanted to take down the Osorio cartel and hoped Sadie could help. For Kerri, helping her traumatized daughter has to come first, especially after a whispering campaign started by Alice accuses Tori of pushing her bullying classmate. The gradual return of Sadie’s memory reveals hideous details of her captivity, dangerous secrets, and surprising connections between the two cases.

An intriguing, fast-paced combination of police procedural and thriller.

**SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY**

**I’M WAITING FOR YOU**

**Kim, Bo-Young**  
Harper Voyager (336 pp.)  
$26.99 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-0-06-295146-5

In four paired short stories, Korean science-fiction doyenne Kim imagines the vanishingly distant future.

“You interstellar marrying types are all traitors.” So says a colleague to a 25-year-old copy editor who is heading into the faraway stars. The round trip voyage should take just 4.5 years, since by this time earthlings have mastered travel at the speed of light. When the trip is over, a wedding awaits back on Earth. In a series of letters, the traveler describes life in a featureless cosmos, the spaceship moving too fast to take in any sights—or to stick to its schedule, so that just a couple of months into the voyage, the years as measured by Earth time have almost tripled. You can always wait another 11 years and then hop a freighter, the unconcerned captain tells another traveler, but it wouldn’t be a happy return: “That Earth eleven years from now isn’t a place where anyone would want to live. That it’ll be uninhabitable, even for people who have been there all their lives, let alone those returning from years on other planets.”
The copy editor's betrothed, in a bracketing story, is on a mission of her own to faraway Alpha Centauri, and when she gets back, civil war, nuclear disaster, and climate change have ruined the planet. As for her beloved, "He must have died a million years ago." No matter, for, as the pair of stories nested between them inform us, in the future we shall be as gods, if perhaps not entirely self-aware: "Just as you can't understand your past self," Kim writes, "someday your future self won't understand your present self." Playing with notions of immortality and toying with improbable transgressions of the laws of physics, Kim delivers a suite of stories that is at once lyrical and full of foreboding, keeping dramatic tension tight among poetic evocations of a home planet that is "our hall of learning, our cradle of experiences, our short-term interactive training ground," if one we have also destroyed.

Much of the best science fiction today is coming from East Asia, and Kim's work ranks high in that emerging tradition. A HISTORY OF WHAT COMES NEXT
Neuvel, Sylvain
Tor (304 pp.)
$24.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-250-26206-6
Series: Take Them to the Stars, 1
The first installment in Neuvel's Take Them to the Stars trilogy is a historical science-fiction thriller set largely in World War II Europe that follows a mother and daughter whose mysterious family's multigenerational mission is to save humankind.

Mia Freed and her mother, Sarah, are members of the Kibsu, an all-women society whose mysterious origins go back thousands of years to ancient Mesopotamia—and beyond. Generation after generation, the Kibsu consists of a mother-and-daughter team, and their objective never changes: "Take them to the stars, before Evil comes and kills them all." Pursued across the world by someone known as the Tracker, Mia and her mother must keep one step ahead of their mythical pursuer while also attempting the impossible—to somehow get aerospace engineer Wernher von Braun, a pioneer in rocket technology, out of Nazi Germany before the Russians can get him and his knowledge. As Mia and Sarah struggle to achieve their lifelong task of getting humankind into space, Mia questions her very existence when she falls in love with a young woman who forces her to look at her life, and her suspected extraterrestrial heritage, from a different perspective. With the backdrop of the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union adding tension and intrigue, Neuvel weaves a story that's similar in tone to an X-Files episode, replete with arcane secrets, conspiracy theories, and the possibility of aliens living among us. The real power of this novel, however, lies in the adeptly developed character of Mia and her painful and revelatory journey of self-discovery. The abrupt and unsatisfying conclusion will leave some readers disappointed and others scratching their heads, but the second installment could easily set this saga, which is filled with virtually limitless possibilities, back on track.

A flawed beginning to a potentially fascinating science-fiction series.

ROBOT ARTISTS & BLACK SWANS: The Italian Fantascienza Stories
Sterling, Bruce
Tachyon (256 pp.)
$25.95 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-1-61696-329-3
Seven Italian-flavored confections from one of the prime architects of cyberpunk, who lives in Turin.

It’s been a while since we’ve heard from Sterling, most recently with the novella Pirate Utopia (2016), a piece of what the Italians call fantascienza, an SF–adjacent combination of history and speculation. Here, he takes it to another level, labeling these seven stories as the work of Bruno Argento, his alter ego, a renowned dramatist who has driven the Italian subgenre into the mainstream. With an introduction by Sterling’s spiritual offspring Neal Stephenson and a nod to Primo Levi, arguably the most famous denizen of Sterling’s adopted hometown, this collection resurrects some recent works published previously as e-books and introduces a handful of stories in a similar vein. “Kill the Moon” is endearing in its naïve imagination as it expounds on the embarrassment the narrator feels in 2061 about Italy reaching the moon. “Black Swan,” in the manner of Pirate Utopia, hinges on futuristic technology that serves as a MacGuffin but also plays havoc with history, postulating an alternative reality in which a journalist whose world features Nicolas Sarkozy as an underground terrorist suddenly finds himself presented with multiform realities. “Elephant on Table” is less Matrix than Chaucer as the denizens of a medieval-flavored Shadow House navigate the inevitable politics of imperial power. “Pilgrims of the Round World” continues the royal drama as Sterling delivers a Shakespearean tale set a century or so before the bard took the stage. “The Parthenopean Scalpel,” previously published in the collection Gothic High-Tech (2012), is rich but will probably carry more weight with readers familiar with Turin’s history. Finally, there’s “Esoteric City,” explaining how Italian hell is different from regular hell, and “Robot in Roses,” an imaginative take on the moral quandaries of Blade Runner, finishes the ride.

A delightful mix of high fantasy and futuristic speculation featuring royalty, noblemen, bandits, and other scoundrels.
**TERMINAL BOREDOM**
Stories
Suzuki, Izumi  
Trans. by Barton, Polly & Bett, Sam & Boyd, David & Joseph, Daniel & Matushchi, Aiko & O’Toole, Helen  
Verso (224 pp.)  
$19.95 paper | Apr. 20, 2021  
978-1-78873-988-7

This eagerly awaited short story collection by Japanese writer Suzuki (1949-1986)—her first book to be translated into English—showcases her fluency in the bizarre and surreal.

Each story, set in a dark and punky future, depicts the lives of young people submerged in apathy. “Women and Women,” set in a matriarchal utopia where men exist only in prison or in secret, tells the story of a young girl whose curiosity is squashed after her brief encounter with a boy who escapes isolation. “You May Dream” explores government-sanctioned population control in a society plagued by “a lack of self-confidence tangled up in fatalistic resignation.” “That Old Seaside Club” turns rehab into a bizarre hypnotic sleep detached from the physical world. “Forgotten” examines the pitfalls of an overly stimulated and “dissolute lifestyle” through the semiromantic relationship between a woman named Emma and an alien named Sol. And in the title story, a TV-obsessed population indulges further with plans to enforce eternal screen time onto everyone in society.

Though some people oppose the imposition, the story is much more concerned with the young protagonist’s descent into idleness and indifference. Not much happens in these stories, and yet they transport readers to worlds both familiar and unfamiliar, indulging our fantasies and fears of the future. Suzuki writes with wonderful despair, showing humanity as resistant to change even as our societies and technologies fail us. She plays interesting questions about gender and sex, and this is not a dry philosophical exercise. It is authentic and careful and was ahead of its time—even down to the media references that documentaries about NXIVM underscore the power of a charismatic leader to convince or coerce their flock into suffering horrendous and humiliating treatment while they desperately try to convince themselves that it makes them stronger or, at least, that it is deserved. But this story ultimately offers balm; whether or not magic is real, the energies which apparently drive it can be channeled in more positive directions, toward hope and healing.

Dark and slightly absurdist, this collection is a poignant rumination on the despair and isolation of modern society.

**FIRST, BECOME ASHES**
Separa, K.M.  
Tor (304 pp.)  
$27.99 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-250-21618-2

Magic or not? Abuse or necessary preparation for a sacred warrior? Szpara tackles tough questions of perception and consent in this disturbing, occasionally hallucinatory tale of the destruction of a cult.

Meadowlark is Anointed, chosen by Nova to learn both magic and martial skills to fight the monsters that overrun the world outside the warded gates of the Fellowship of the Anointed’s compound in Druid Hill, a former public park in the heart of Baltimore. His beloved partner, Kane, has already turned 25 and has been sent out on a quest against the monsters. But two months before Lark’s own 25th birthday, the Forces of Evil strike first: The FBI and the police invade the compound and take Lark away, calling the Fellowship a dangerous cult and demanding that Lark testify against Nova. Worse still, Kane is the one who betrayed the compound. Aid by other captured Anointed, Lark employs magic to escape government custody. With FBI Agent Miller, Kane, and Lark’s sibling Deryn in pursuit, Lark embarks on his quest, resolving to destroy the monster who has clearly corrupted Kane. He finds unexpected help from Calvin, a professional cosplayer who sees Lark as a fantasy hero made real—an impossibly beautiful and painfully attractive man who claims to wield magic—and Calvin’s podcaster friend, Lilian, who’s there for the novelty and to support Calvin. During the journey, we learn more about the physical and sexual abuse that Kane and Lark experienced as part of their training. This novel exists in the same intriguingly inchoate territory as Russell H. Greenan’s *It Happened in Boston?* and Richard Matheson’s *Somewhere in Time*, leaving it up to the reader to decide if the curious events that occur are the product of magic, delusion, or some murky place that draws from both possibilities. Frankly, the most implausible aspect of the story is the extreme latitude granted to Agent Miller, who should never have been in charge of the Druid Hill case given her very personal connection to the cult. Other aspects of the story seem more sadly believable: Recent documentaries about NXIVM underscore the power of a charismatic leader to convince or coerce their flock into suffering horrendous and humiliating treatment while they desperately try to convince themselves that it makes them stronger or, at least, that it is deserved. But this story ultimately offers balm; whether or not magic is real, the energies which apparently drive it can be channeled in more positive directions, toward hope and healing.

A timely tale about the dangers of committing too fervently and unquestioningly to a person and their cause.

**ROMANCE**

**HANG THE MOON**
Bellefluer, Alexandria  
Avon/HarperCollins (384 pp.)  
$15.99 paper | May 25, 2021  
978-0-06-300084-1

A woman who doesn’t believe in love and a man who’s made finding love his life’s work discover that real romance is more complicated than either imagined.

Annie Kyriakos has just arrived in Seattle to surprise her best friend, Darcy.
With Annie's constant travel for her job at a human resources consulting firm and Darcy's preoccupation with her new girlfriend, Elle, the two haven't seen each other in more than a year. But Annie's got other motives for her impromptu visit: She's hoping to move to London for a promotion and wants to tell Darcy in person. The bad news? Darcy is on vacation in Vancouver. The good news? Her brother, Brendon, has the key to her apartment. When Brendon Lowell, hopeless romantic and founder of dating app OTP, hears that Annie is in town, he hopes he might have another shot with his teenage crush. At dinner, the two hit it off immediately. But Annie is not looking to be swept off her feet, especially not by her best friend's younger (though unexpectedly very handsome) brother. In fact, Annie thinks love is dead, and dating apps like Brendon's are partly to blame. So, Brendon devises a plan: He'll take cues from his favorite rom-com films to prove to Annie that romance is real and, with a little help from Darcy, Elle, and their friend Margot, convince her to leave her unfulfilling job and stay in Seattle. The rom-com re-creations do the trick. Tropes including "there's only one bed" and embarrassing moments like falling into a lake in formal clothes are used to great result—but the author doesn't let the gimmick overtake strong character development, and the writing feels fresh, never derivative.

Smart, sexy, and sweet. Readers will be over the moon for this rom-com.

FLOAT PLAN
Doller, Trish
St. Martin's Griffin (272 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-2507-6794-3

After the suicide of her fiancé, Anna Beck sets sail to find herself in this Caribbean island-hopping romance.

"Ten months and six days ago, Ben swallowed a bottle of prescription Paxil and chased it with the cheap tequila that lived under the sink, and I don't know why." After almost a year of depression and isolation, Anna takes the sailboat she goes to church on Sundays. Propinquity on a small vessel works for Lavinia, but she quickly sets Thaddeus straight, and they unlock a powerful chemistry. As they spend evenings together fulfilling their bargain, they come to realize they have much more in common than they thought and begin to privately fall for each other—but each fears they are the only one who wants to bravely face her future with him. Doller clearly knows her Caribbean islands: After months of pandemic sheltering, her detailed travel log is fun and very, very tantalizing.

With humor, love, and skill, Doller shows her heroine surviving a loved one's suicide, something rare in romantic fiction.

A WICKED BARGAIN FOR THE DUKE
Frampton, Megan
Avon/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-06-302308-6

A marriage of convenience starts with a negotiation and delivers more than either party agreed to. Thaddeus Dutton, Duke of Hasford, doesn't want much. Just a woman who is "unassuming in looks and manner," "able to immediately handle her duties as his duchess," and, the last item on his list, able to "engage satisfactorily in sexual congress." As soon as he starts looking, he's already found her: Lady Jane Capel. The trouble is that her sister, Lady Lavinia, knows that Jane is already in love with another, so she inserts herself in their courtship. Lavinia herself is not set on marriage, preferring to devote herself to her secret career as a popular author. But when an accidental tumble lands them in a very compromising, very public position, Lavinia does succeed in keeping Thaddeus from marrying Jane, because she's soon married to him herself. Both spouses are reasonable and willing to bargain to make their marriage of convenience work, and they agree that once an heir is born, they will go their separate ways, as they are complete opposites. Their initial couplings are less than satisfactory for Lavinia, but she quickly sets Thaddeus straight, and they unlock a powerful chemistry. As they spend evenings together fulfilling their bargain, they come to realize they have much more in common than they thought and begin to privately fall for each other—but each fears they are the only one who wants to renegotiate their agreement. As in previous entries in Frampton's Hazards of Dukes series, Thaddeus and Lavinia's story is a charming combination of steamy, funny, and warmhearted. It's thrilling to read a romance heroine who's not afraid to directly say "I would like to have more fun doing it" and a hero who's not offended by the request but is, rather, happy to oblige. As in previous books, Frampton combines the best elements of classic Regency with contemporary touches. The story stands alone well enough, but fans of the first two books will be especially pleased.

Frampton has written another historical romance that feels classic while also respecting the expectations of modern readers.
Ancient enemies jeopardize a deepening romance between two vampires in the third book of Frost’s paranormal romance Night Rebel series.

Picking up right where Wicked Bite (2020) left off, vampire and rogue Law Guardian Veritas is desperate to save her gravely wounded lover, Ian, following their climactic battle with a demon named Dagon, whose wickedness has plagued them for centuries. But the end of an old foe comes with even greater enemies. Veritas has defied the ruling vampire council, and her show of power in the netherworld has ripped a hole between the planes, allowing passage of terrifying creatures into the mortal world. It’s a high stakes race against time to save the world, and Veritas also has to deal with her own family dysfunction, getting to know the half brother she’s only just learned about. This book isn’t for newcomers, as Veritas and Ian’s relationship has been developed significantly in their previous two books, and characters from Frost’s other series pop up for cheeky cameos, making for newcomers, as Veritas and Ian’s relationship has been developed significantly in their previous two books, and characters from Frost’s other series pop up for cheeky cameos, making

A fun and flirty series that has run its course.

A British woman takes a job as a chef at a bed-and-breakfast owned by a handsome, grumpy man.

Eve Brown has always struggled to finish what she starts—university, jobs, relationships. After her latest job-related disaster, her parents give her an ultimatum: They’re cutting off their financial support until she can hold down a job. Furious and embarrassed at disappointing herself and her family again, Eve takes off in her car and ends up a few hours away in the Lake District. On a lark, she applies for a job as a cook at a bed-and-breakfast, but owner Jacob Wayne can just tell that Eve is too inexperienced and undisciplined for the job. When an unexpected accident leaves Jacob with no choice but to hire her, though, they’re forced to work together to keep the bed-and-breakfast running. There isn’t much of a plot; instead, it’s all situational: How will these two people coexist despite their differences? Eve is caring but plagued by insecurities while Jacob is taciturn and methodical. Jacob, who has autism, helps Eve realize her own place on the spectrum. Eve’s journey to understanding her fears is sweet, and Jacob’s belief in her as a caring, capable adult is the stuff romance heroes are made of. Hibbert has a gift for writing truly funny dialogue and genuinely tender emotional moments. Full of heart and humor, this is a sexy, satisfying end to a beloved series. Absolutely charming.

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An unexpected interlude turns antagonists into allies—and lovers—in Regency England.

In the third addition to the charming Palace of Rogues boardinghouse series, Lady Lillias Vaughn butts heads with American merchant and aspiring politician Hugh Cassidy. Hugh is in England to locate the runaway daughter of his mentor, and Lillias is temporarily lodged at the women-run rental property with her family while their grand home is under renovation. From their first encounter, the two headstrong protagonists are like duelists, with every scene a battle against each other and their attraction. But Lillias is also secretly grieving thwarted hopes, and Hugh is trying to reconcile his pull to her with his dream of a biddable helpmate who will aid his political ambitions in New York. As their fiery interactions start to compete with Lillias’ yearnings and Hugh’s plans, a moment of indiscretion forces the couple into facing their true desires. Then a third plot turn leaves their choices hanging in the balance. Though tonally nimble and similar to Mary Balogh’s novels in its layered meditation on loss, sacrifice, and mature desire, the story valorizes American classlessness and freedom against British hierarchy and constraints in a way that strikes an off note. Yet Long’s distinctive metaphor-rich style is a treat, a visual and textural tapestry that expresses the characters’ emotional lives through their senses. She suffuses the prose with images of fire and musical reverberations, distilling into them the erotic affection, sensual banter, and crackling chemistry that arcs between the combatant lovers.

You’ll be seduced by this fake-engagement romance set at the London docks.
“A stunning romance of first love found again.”

ANCHORED HEARTS

ONE LAST STOP
McQuiston, Casey
St. Martin’s Griffin (432 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-250-24449-9

A young woman meets the love of her life on the subway, but there’s one problem: Her dream girl is actually a time traveler from the 1970s.

Twenty-three-year-old August Landry arrives in New York with more cynicism than luggage (she can fit everything she owns into five boxes, and she’d love to downsize to four), hoping to blend in and muddle through. She spent most of her childhood helping her amateur sleuth mother attempt to track down August’s missing uncle, and all that detective work didn’t leave a lot of time for things like friendship and fun. But she ends up finding both when she moves into an apartment full of endearing characters—Niko, a trans psychic whose powers are annoyingly strong; his charismatic artist girlfriend, Myla; and their third roommate, a tattoo artist named Wes. And then, on a fateful subway ride, she meets Jane. Jane isn’t like any other girl August has ever met, and eventually, August finds out why—Jane, in her ripped jeans and leather jacket, is actually a time traveler from the 1970s. The story does drag on a bit too long, but through. She spent most of her childhood helping her amateur sleuth mother attempt to track down August’s missing uncle, and all that detective work didn’t leave a lot of time for things like friendship and fun. But she ends up finding both when she moves into an apartment full of endearing characters—Niko, a trans psychic whose powers are annoyingly strong; his charismatic artist girlfriend, Myla; and their third roommate, a tattoo artist named Wes. And then, on a fateful subway ride, she meets Jane. Jane isn’t like any other girl August has ever met, and eventually, August finds out why—Jane, in her ripped jeans and leather jacket, is actually a time traveler from the 1970s. The story does drag on a bit too long, but

AN CHORED HEARTS
Olivares, Priscilla
Zebra (352 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-4201-5019-3

Former childhood sweethearts reunite after 12 years apart in this emotional romance set in balmy Key West.

Anamaría Navarro is a woman who isn’t afraid of hard work, balancing her own business as a personal trainer. She’s motivated, driven, and begrudgingly ruled by her well-meaning Cuban mother. It’s because of her Mami that Anamaría has agreed to visit the family home of Alejandro Miranda, a man she’d hoped never to see again after their painful separation more than a decade earlier. Alejandro isn’t pleased to be there, either. A highly sought-after international photographer, Alejandro spurned his father’s dream of having him work in the family restaurant to pursue his passion. Now, after a serious fall in Puerto Rico has put his leg in a “cyborg-looking contraption,” he’s back in Key West to recuperate—and his family has called the one person he most wanted to avoid. When Alejandro left, he’d hoped Anamaría would join his jet-setting lifestyle. Instead, his pushing her became the catalyst for their breakup. While both Alejandro and Anamaría lived full lives apart, their meddling families never lost hope that they’d find their way back together, even if they require a hefty nudge. Olivares has perfected the second-chance romance trope with Alejandro and Anamaría. Their anguish is so real that the book should come with tissues. The Key West setting is vibrant, adding a blessed touch of armchair travel to the current global circumstances. Wonderfully soapy, this is a romance to read in one sitting.

A stunning romance of first love found again.

AN EARL, THE GIRL, AND A TODDLER
Riley, Vanessa
Zebra/Kensington (384 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-4201-5225-8

An accidental father and a woman without a past combine to create an unusual family.

In 1812, families across England are devastated to hear of the wreck of the Minerva, a passenger ship en route from Jamaica. None is more upset than Daniel Thackery, Earl of Ashbrook, who was expecting Phoebe Dunn to arrive after they fell in love by correspondence and married by proxy. When he arrives at the docks, he’s instead presented with a toddler, one of the only survivors. Though Phoebe hadn’t said anything about having a child, the girl is a “Blackamoor,” like Phoebe and Daniel, and he decides to pretend he’s her father and raise her in London. He names
York society circles, their home lives couldn’t be more different: Maddie’s family is loving and caring, fully supporting her dreams but was crushed to realize she thought of him like a family disowned him when he tried to stop his father’s abuse of the housemaid, Harrison fled to Paris. Now his family has gross mismanagement of Archer Industries has left the company in shambles. Harrison’s family wants him to marry an heir—en to steal Maddie away from the Duke while he purchases the remaining stock he needs. The individual strands of Shupe’s busy plot aren’t effectively braided together. Harrison’s revenge plot against his family is introduced but then put on hold while he courts Maddie. The late-stage conflict between the lovers seems to be manufactured to elongate the plot rather than an organic outgrowth of their characters.

The first book in a new romance series fails to coalesce.

**THE HEIRESS HUNT**
Shupe, Joanna
Avon/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Mar. 9, 2021
978-0-06-304504-0

In Gilded Age New York, a tennis champion is torn between a duke and her childhood best friend.

Maddie Webster and Harrison Archer grew up promenading on Fifth Avenue and playing in Newport. Although they are both from the same rarefied New York society circles, their home lives couldn’t be more different: Maddie’s family is loving and caring, fully supporting her dreams of becoming a women’s tennis champion; meanwhile, Harrison’s family is cold and cruel, always treating him as a worthless second son. Three years earlier, Harrison intended to offer for Maddie but was crushed to realize she thought of him like a brother. Hurt and disappointed in Maddie and furious that his family disowned him when he tried to stop his father’s abuse of the housemaid, Harrison fled to Paris. Now his family has called him home. After his father’s death, his older brother’s gross mismanagement of Archer Industries has left the company in shambles. Harrison’s family wants him to marry an heiress to infuse cash into the business, not knowing he’s planning to wrest full control of the company by becoming the majority stockholder. Maddie’s betrothal to the Duke of Lockwood is all but assured, so she offers to host a house party to introduce Harrison to her friends. Harrison accepts her offer, intending to steal Maddie away from the Duke while he purchases the remaining stock he needs. The individual strands of Shupe’s busy plot aren’t effectively braided together. Harrison’s revenge plot against his family is introduced but then put on hold while he courts Maddie. The late-stage conflict between the lovers seems to be manufactured to elongate the plot rather than an organic outgrowth of their characters.

**THE WAY YOU LOVE ME**
Wright, Elle
Dafina/Kensington (304 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-4967-2581-3

A wildly popular actress must face unfair consequences when she gives in to a long-standing attraction to her talented agent.

Superstar Paige Mills is popularly regarded as "Black America’s Sweetheart," but her carefully crafted public persona is threatened when her powerful and vindictive director husband drags out their divorce negotiations. Paige is supported unquestioningly by her whole team with one notable exception—her trusted agent and close friend, Andrew Weather. Reeling in the aftermath of the negotiations and hurt by Andrew’s abandonment, Paige drops off the grid once the divorce is finalized. Andrew has complicated feelings for his client and has been keeping his distance from Paige because he can’t bear to see her being emotionally abused by her husband. When he hears that Paige has chosen to seclude herself, however, Andrew tracks her down to her uncle’s remote home in Michigan. As they spend several days together, shielded from public scrutiny, Andrew and Paige face their feelings for each other. But the romantic idyll—and their careers—is threatened when the media learns of their whereabouts. As Paige faces a publicity nightmare, she must make difficult decisions to find happiness and peace in her personal and professional lives. The third book in Wright’s Pure Talent series underlines the strength of family ties and the precariousness of female stardom. The chemistry between Andrew and Paige is palpable and sweet, and their personalities complement each other. Andrew’s affection for a talented and bright client blossoms credibly into love for a strong woman wearing her emotions on her sleeve. But the trajectory of Paige’s escalating feelings for Andrew is not mapped with enough attention to emotional detail, with the result that several of her decisions seem unduly hasty.

A warm and familiar romance that dwells engagingly on the significance of emotional fortitude.
REOPENING MUSLIM MINDS
A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance
Akyol, Mustafa
St. Martin’s Essentials (336 pp.)
$27.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-250-25606-5

A cogent appeal for an Islamic enlightenment based in Islamic values.

Akyol, author of Islam Without Extremes and The Islamic Jesus, presents a well-prepared argument for “finding Enlightenment values—reason, freedom and tolerance—within the Islamic tradition itself.” The author explains that early Islamic history spawned two broad ethical schools, one of which he characterizes as “ethical objectivism theory,” the other as “divine command theory.” The latter rose to prominence in the form of Ash’arism, a Sunni school of theology that stresses the role of scriptural and clerical authority. Ash’arism, writes Akyol, “won the day not because of its merits, but because of the support of the states that ruled the medieval Muslim world.” The author shows how authoritarian states have dominated Islamic history, using the divine command theory of ethics to uphold their power. According to Akyol, this trend has continued into the modern day, supporting authoritarianism and its attendant lack of freedoms. The author, who has spent much of his career studying and clarifying many aspects of Islam, calls on readers to ponder the early Islamic scholars who championed reason, science, personal liberties, and self-determinism, showing the importance of implementing these values in a modern Islamic enlightenment. Akyol especially highlights the 12th-century philosopher Ibn Rushd, known to the West as Averroes. He also calls on believers to mine the Quran for lessons in peace and personal freedoms that Ash’arism has suppressed through the centuries. “The big remedy we need...is really having ‘no compulsion in religion.’ It is, in other words, giving up coercive power in the name of Islam,” writes the author. “This means no more religious and moral policing, no threats to apostates and ‘innovators,’ no blasphemy laws, no public flogging or stoning, and no violence or intimidation in the family.” An exchange of liberalism for legalism, he maintains, will solve this dilemma. A clarion call to restore long-diminished traditions in Islamic thought.
In our last issue, I wrote about resurrecting Black history. Here, I want to highlight what our reviewers have to say about five February books that address the contemporary Black experience in America. It’s an evergreen topic, but it took on special resonance following the treasonous attacks on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, a violent eruption instigated by a racist outgoing president. I’m hoping that these—and countless other—relevant books can serve as much-needed education on Blackness and racism in this country.

Surviving the White Gaze, by Rebecca Carroll (Simon & Schuster, Feb. 2): “Throughout the memoir, Carroll...demonstrates the most indelible qualities of the genre: an ability to inhabit a version of one’s self that no longer exists; an instinct for what’s important and what isn’t; and a voice that implies personal growth gained through missteps and ultimately self-knowledge. Born to a White mother and Black father, the author was adopted by a White couple with a laissez-faire approach to parenting and very little concept of race....The heart of the book lies in her back and forth with [her mother], who cast a spell on her daughter even as she spewed racist venom and situated herself more as a jealous peer than a dutiful parent. Carroll’s quest for authenticity fuels the text, but there’s also a quietly tragic subtext of failed parenting, of the many ways one generation can put its own needs before those of the next.”

Floating in a Most Peculiar Way, by Louis Chude-Sokei (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Feb. 2): “A distinguished literary scholar delivers an affecting memoir of life as an exile.” After leaving Nigeria and spending time in Jamaica, his mother’s native country, the author arrived in the U.S., where he “discovered further mysteries, including something he’d never heard before—the N-word—and something he’d never encountered before: an odd sort of racism that came at him from both sides, from Whites and from Blacks....A beautifully written contribution to recent work of the African diaspora.”

One Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race by Yaba Blay (Beacon, Feb. 16): “Blay opens with a primer on the history of the one-drop rule in the U.S., the laws that codified it, and the rulings that later deemed it unconstitutional. Through nearly 60 crafted first-person essays paired with striking portraiture of the essayists, the collection explores how historical definitions of race continue to influence our present-day view of racial identity. The author interviewed 70 people ages 21 to 103, representing 25 countries....Black, beautiful, and bound to spark necessary conversations.”

Racism in American Public Life: A Call to Action, by Johnnetta Betsch Cole (Univ. of Virginia Feb. 16): “Three lectures on racism in America and the role of a liberal arts education in challenging it....Cole brings a highly knowledgeable historical and personal perspective and context to these issues, showing how deeply racism is embedded in the DNA of America and urging an engagement in the ‘courageous conversations’ required to heal the many divisions that plague the nation....Cogent dissections of issues that require constant attention.”

Raceless: In Search of Family, Identity, and the Truth About Where I Belong, by Georgina Lawton (Perennial/ HarperCollins, Feb. 23): “In her debut memoir, Guardian columnist Lawton offers a unique perspective on identity and family in an era of racial awakening. The author guides readers through her childhood as a mixed-race girl raised by two White parents who insisted that her darker skin was the product of a so-called ‘throwback gene.’ After the death of her father, Lawton took a DNA test that forced her to confront why her Blackness was always treated as a burden instead of a self-evident truth....A timely, engaging exploration of family and racial belonging featuring many valuable lessons.”

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
“Aronoff mounts a compelling indictment of capitalism for making climate change reform impossible.”

OVERHEATED

CLEOPATRA
The Queen Who Challenged Rome and Conquered Eternity
Angela, Alberto
Trans. by Gregor, Katherine
HarperVia/HarperCollins (448 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-0-06-298421-0

A readable narrative of the legendary Egyptian queen that combines scholarship with novelistic detail and character depth.

First published in Italy in 2018, this popular history captures the essence of one of the most iconic figures in world history, a “stunning-looking, intelligent, and elegant woman with a deep gaze, and oozing sensuality.” Italian scholar, paleontologist, and journalist Angela focuses his inquiry on a key question, one that Cleopatra scholars have explored for centuries: “How did a delicate, lone woman, in an ancient world dominated by men, lead the kingdom of Egypt to its greatest expansion ever and become one of history’s brightest stars?” The author devotes the first 100 pages of his lengthy study building up to the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.E., showing how the watershed event affected Cleopatra’s own vulnerable standing in the geopolitical realm. She took protection under Rome to stabilize her position of power in relation to her ambitious brothers and ensure Egypt’s autonomy. Upon Caesar’s death, however, she had to cultivate good standing with the new leadership. Using her singular combination of beauty, confidence, intelligence, and cunning, she was able to seduce Mark Antony, a process Angela re-creates with fairly over-the-top description. Notwithstanding the author’s lapses into overheated language (“we can picture the queen on her bed, her curves rising with every breath, as she gazes at Antony confidently, intensely, invitingly, her full lips half open”), he effectively draws on previous scholarship, wading through legend and myth to get at the truth of what actually occurred. Angela engages readers with rhetorical questions and emphasizes that Cleopatra was a thoroughly modern woman, instrumental in paving the way for the Roman Empire under the ruthless Octavian. “Cleopatra is not only an alluring woman and a queen very capable of managing power,” he writes, “but also an incredible historical catalyst.”

A character-rich historical biography that will have special appeal to young students of history.

OVERHEATED
How Capitalism Broke the Planet—and How We Fight Back
Aronoff, Kate
Bold Type Books (432 pp.)
$30.00 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-56858-947-3

Our environmental future depends on radical economic change.

Drawing on government documents, interviews, environmental studies, and reports from a wide range of media sources, journalist and New Republic staff writer Aronoff mounts a compelling indictment of capitalism for making climate change reform impossible. The fossil fuel industry, representing “the most powerful and politically entrenched companies on earth,” has hijacked such reforms, she asserts, funding climate change deniers, influencing governmental policy, and blocking any measures that would affect the industry’s financial growth.
“The line between what constitutes an official US governmental priority versus that of its biggest companies is a thin one,” writes the author. To undermine politicians who seek reform, for example, the industry has engaged in “fearmongering” about how measures such as cap and trade, designed to limit carbon emissions, “would kill jobs and raise fuel costs.” Portraying fossil fuel executives as opportunists, Aronoff reveals that from 2000 to 2018, despite “selling themselves as climate champions,” energy companies invested less than 4% of their capital expenditures in low-carbon technologies. To counter the pernicious effects of capitalism, the author proposes “low-carbon populism” that sets out goals “other than the boundless accumulation of private wealth.” As in her previous book, A Planet To Win, Aronoff champions the Green New Deal as a flexible, responsive framework “for reimagining the fractured social contract upon which this country was built” and for acknowledging the connection between racism and environmental vulnerabilities. Reprising the achievements of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, Aronoff suggests nationalizing the fossil fuel industry, turning to unions to train workers for clean energy jobs, and spurring technological innovation. “The New Deal’s throughline wasn’t socialism or even big government,” she asserts, “but a thoroughly democratic political economy.” The business model of the fossil fuel industry, she concludes in this well-documented and necessarily provocative book, is “incompatible with a livable future.”

An informative, urgent, and sure to be controversial argument.

BREAKING THE SOCIAL MEDIA PRISM
How To Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing
Bail, Christopher A.
Princeton Univ. (240 pp.)
$24.95 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-691-20342-3

Social media imprisons us inside echo chambers—or does it? After conducting a more or less standard sociological survey whose methodology is laid out in an appendix, Bail, who directs the Polarization Lab at Duke, offers a fruitful suggestion: The echo chamber effect, by which social media users surround themselves with those who agree with them politically—social media arguments are almost always about politics—may in fact represent a chicken-and-egg conundrum. “How,” asks the author, “could we be sure that people’s echo chambers shape their political beliefs, and not the other way around?” His findings suggest that both may be at play, to varying degrees. Some users become radicalized over the course of weeks and months of internet arguing while others are firebrands online but apparently moderate in real life. As Bail writes, “the rapidly growing gap between social media and real life is one of the most powerful sources of political polarization in our era.” Interestingly, he notes, people who were experimentally exposed to contending points of view tended to become more hardened in their beliefs. The explanatory power of the echo chamber—a term, Bail notes, that predates the internet by decades—goes only so far; the real source of polarization lies within ourselves. Even more interestingly, he observes, most Americans, left to their own devices, avoid the subject of politics and tend toward a moderate view. What pushes people to extremes is the narcissistic thrill of spouting off and gathering likes as a reward. Meanwhile, the moderate majority, shouted down, stays quiet. “Status seeking on social media creates a vicious cycle of political extremism,” writes Bail, and that extremism correlates closely with a lack of social status offline, which makes online ugliness all the more attractive.

A study that raises as many questions as it answers but provides useful pointers for understanding online (mis)behavior.
“Combining the author’s intensely personal stories with relevant examples from the culture at large, the book is heartbreaking and hopeful, infuriating and triumphant.”

Face
One Square Foot of Skin
Bateman, Justine
Akashic (272 pp.)
$27.95 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-61775-922-2

An in-depth examination of “why we should ever find an older face ‘horrible’ to begin with…and feel compelled to ‘fix’ it.”

In Fame (2018), Bateman deconstructed the flimsy edifice of celebrity. In this equally fiery and potent follow-up, she does the same for our notions of what constitutes a beautiful face. “When I was a smooth-skinned and plump-faced teenager,” she writes at the beginning of the book, “I really wanted to look like the older European actresses I saw in the Italian and French films of the 1960s and ’70s.” Examining her own experiences with how society viewed her as she moved from child actor to adult, she recounts how her pride and self-esteem faltered when she received public backlash about her appearance. She describes the book as “by no means an exhaustive exploration of ‘older women’s faces’ in our current society, but rather a series of snapshots that focus on the reasons for the negative attitudes regarding those faces.” Instead, the book is a series of “47 short stories in which I have incorporated my experiences and feelings on the topic, and those of about 25 people I interviewed.” Occasionally disjointed, the narrative is most impressive in the aggregate, as women at all stages of life acknowledge and sometimes transcend societal views about women’s faces. By exploring the issue via multiple points of view, Bateman is able to show “many of the reasons for the negative attitudes regarding those faces” as well as the hypocrisy and double standards involved in such attitudes, especially in contrast with how aging men are often considered. Combining the author’s intensely personal stories with relevant examples from the culture at large, the book is heartbreaking and hopeful, infuriating and triumphant.

An engrossing look at an issue that continues to be problematic for millions of women every day.
TRAVELING BLACK
A Story of Race and Resistance
Bay, Mia
Belknap/Harvard Univ (400 pp.)
$35.00 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-0-674-97996-3

The disturbing and absorbing story of Black America’s enduring battle for freedom of mobility.

From stagecoaches to iron horses to Cadillacs to the unfriendly skies, Black people in the U.S. have never been truly free to traverse the open road. In this unique contribution to the literature of Black American history, Bay, a professor of American history at the University of Pennsylvania, successfully resurrects the story of “a sustained fight for mobility that falls largely outside the organizational history of the civil rights movement.” In doing so, the author effectively demonstrates “Black mobility as an enduring focal point of struggles over equality and difference.” Bay shows how Black travelers have faced a mercurial nationwide patchwork of segregationist laws and practices that have deprived them of accommodation and amenities, dignity, and safety and security. In the early 1800s, young Black boys rode on steamship decks, barely fed and exposed to the elements. During the Jim Crow era, Black passengers, forced to ride in flimsy, old, dangerous railroad cars, were routinely crushed and burned in collisions. As cars entered the mainstream, new Black drivers were denied access to fuel, bathrooms, and hotels, forced to navigate an unspoken White right of way. More than a century after the first Model T hit the road, driving while Black is still fraught. In a fascinating, occasionally unsettling. Bay elevates the importance of the Black right to mobility in the struggle for civil rights. Not simply a record of what makes this piece feel ungainly. The rest of the essays vary in style, substance, and quality.

A book that shocks, shames, and enlightens with critical scholarship on the Black pursuit of genuine liberty.

FESTIVAL DAYS
Beard, Jo Ann
Little, Brown (272 pp.)
$27.00 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-0-316-49324-6

Beard returns to creative nonfiction. “Something happened to her while she was eating, or right afterward. She began turning in circles and couldn’t stop.” This is the opening line of the first piece, and it may take readers a few moments to realize that “she” is a dog. This sense of disorientation serves the piece well. Brief and heartbreaking, “Last Night” details the decision to euthanize a beloved pet, and anyone who has struggled with this choice knows that uncertainty is part of what makes it so difficult. One might assume that this vignette is personal, but the piece works without a biographical hook. The question of genre is significantly more complicated in “Werner,” the story of a man who escapes aテンメント fire by diving from his apartment through a window in the building next door. The protagonist, Werner Hoeflich, is an actual person, and the author fleshed out what she learned from him with details of her own creation. The result is both gripping and meditative. Beard’s ambiguous approach is more disturbing in “Cheri,” which recounts the last days of a woman with terminal cancer who died with the assistance of Jack Kevorkian. This story was also based on interviews, this time with the protagonist’s daughter, but Beard has said that much of her piece is pure invention. In a 2011 Bookforum article, Beard said, “If I called it fiction, pretended Cheri Tremble was a figment of my imagination, it wouldn’t be interesting to readers, and if I treated it as journalism and wrote just facts, it might have been mildly interesting to readers but not at all interesting to me as the writer.” Readers can make of that what they will, but the resulting piece lacks the immediacy of “Werner,” and it’s possible that trying to honor fact while indulging in fiction is part of what makes this piece feel ungainly. The rest of the essays vary in style, substance, and quality.

A rangy collection, sometimes insightful, uneven, and occasionally unsettling.

NORTH BY SHAKESPEARE
A Rogue Scholar’s Quest for the Truth Behind the Bard’s Work
Blanding, Michael
Hachette (368 pp.)
$30.00 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-0-316-49324-6

How Shakespearean was Shakespeare? In this investigative follow-up to The Map Thief (2014), journalist Blanding dives into the ongoing debates over the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays with a lively profile of freelance writer Dennis McCarthy, who has mounted considerable evidence that Shakespeare drew heavily on the works of English translator, lawyer, diplomat, and writer Thomas North (1535-1604). The son of Edward North, a prominent courtier who rose in stature and wealth during the reigns of Henry VIII, his daughter Mary, and finally Elizabeth, Thomas kept a detailed journal during travels with his father and enjoyed a privileged view of aristocracy. With McCarthy, Blanding traced Thomas’ footsteps in England, France, and Italy, research that informs his brisk recounting of North’s life and turbulent times. Unlike some who claim that another person—Francis Bacon, perhaps, or Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford—was the real author of Shakespeare’s plays; and unlike others who argue that Shakespeare likely
collaborated with multiple co-writers, McCarthy told Blanding that “he believed the Bard of Avon wrote every word attributed to him during his lifetime.” He also believed, however, that Shakespeare—who never traveled in Europe and had no connection to court life—needed to rely on sources. Even Mark Twain questioned how Shakespeare “mastered the nuances of a lawyer, a courtier, and a soldier” without experiencing those roles. While scholars agree that historical chronicles by Holinshed and Hall provided much material, McCarthy claims that Shakespeare lifted plots, characters, and even phrasing from North. Using plagiarism detection software and referring to the huge database Early English Books Online, McCarthy has concluded that correspondences between Shakespeare and North are indisputable. Not surprisingly, McCarthy’s arguments have not been welcomed by Shakespearean scholars; too many, he asserts, are invested in the image of Shakespeare as a solitary genius. Readers who peruse his lengthy appendix, offering parallel excerpts from North and Shakespeare, can come to their own conclusions.

An entertaining look at a literary iconoclast.

THE INVENTION OF MIRACLES
Language, Power, and Alexander Graham Bell’s Quest To End Deafness
Booth, Katie
Simon & Schuster (416 pp.)
$30.00  |  Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-5011-6709-6

A writing teacher shows why Alexander Graham Bell “went down in Deaf history as the culture’s great enemy” and examines his enduring influence.

Bell’s invention of the telephone has eclipsed some of his quirkier traits, such as his habit of celebrating his triumphs by doing a Mohawk war dance that he learned from Indigenous people after his family moved from Scotland to Canada. More significantly, the telephone has overshadowed his early work as a teacher of the deaf and his steadfast view that they should learn to speak rather than sign. Booth, a hearing author who was raised in a mixed hearing/Deaf family, expands the picture with a respectful yet critical biography that draws on scholarly research and her years of communicating with deaf relatives through signing. She casts Bell as a well-intentioned teacher who nonetheless did lasting harm by viewing deafness as a “defect” and by championing “oralism” (learning to speak) when research showed the greater benefits of “manualism” (signing) or “combinism” (using both methods), the approach favored by Edward Miner Gallaudet and others. Booth skillfully recaps signal events of Bell’s youth in Edinburgh, his down-to-the-wire battle with Elisha Gray to patent the telephone, his marriage to his deaf student Mabel Hubbard and subsequent American citizenship, and his friendships with Helen Keller and others. She also links his work to the continuing “institutional oppression” of the deaf. In one of a number of potentially controversialstances, the author argues that cochlear implants “can be a helpful tool for deaf people, but they are not a cure” and that some implant education programs are a modern version of the oralism favored by Bell, which she believes insufficiently considered the views of the deaf. At a time when “less than 8 percent of deaf children grow up with regular sign language access,” this ardent book is likely to reignite debates over what constitutes justice for the Deaf community.

A well-written biography reveals less-familiar aspects of the life of the famed inventor.
The editors of COVID Chronicles put out a call for comics about the pandemic. They were overwhelmed by the response

BY TOM BEER

First off, tell me about Graphic Mundi.

Kendra Boileau: Graphic Mundi is a trade imprint of graphic novels and comics anthologies. It arose from a line of books we were publishing called Graphic Medicine, which came about from some academic connections with people at Penn State who are working in this [field] called “graphic medicine.” We were expecting [Graphic Medicine] to be more of an academic, analytical approach to the topic rather than actual comics and graphic novels themselves. But it turned out that we ended up publishing more graphic novels in that series than we had anticipated, and so for practical marketing reasons we decided it was time to take all of those trade books and put them in a new line. A lot of those graphic novels were either set in health care settings or pretty narrowly connected to questions of health, medicine, and disability. In Graphic Mundi, we’re scaling up, looking for topics that get away from those narrower health

“Got the virus” are the first words of Jason Chatfield’s “Covid-19 Diary,” a brief, intimate comic that recounts 12 days in the life of the artist as he grapples with illness and finds unexpected humor while facing deadly fears. It’s the first of 64 powerful stories in COVID Chronicles: A Comics Anthology, edited by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson (Graphic Mundi, Feb. 15), a collection that explores the impact of the pandemic in both deeply personal and broadly universal terms, employing a diverse range of styles. The book is the first offering from Graphic Mundi, a new graphic novel imprint at Penn State University Press.

Boileau, assistant director and editor-in-chief at the press, and Johnson, a publishing consultant and comics veteran, put out a call for submissions on April 6 — just a little more than a month after much of the world went into lockdown. They commissioned work from established artists and sought permission to republish work they discovered online. All contributions were donated, and proceeds from the sale of the volume go to the Book Industry Charitable Foundation, which supports independent bookstores, comics shops, and their employees. The long list of contributors includes Thi Bui, Sarah Firth, John Jennings, Rob Kirby, Janet K. Lee, and Terry Moore, among others.

I recently spoke with Boileau and Johnson about COVID Chronicles on a three-way Zoom call; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.
care settings and look at things like environmental justice and social justice.

Rich Johnson: The Covid book was the perfect bridge. While it is obviously about a pandemic and a medical crisis, it’s also about politics, about personal lives, about emotions, and the economy, and everything else rolled into one. That is the heart and soul of what Kendra wants Graphic Mundi to be.

For many readers, the pairing of Covid and comics will be unexpected.

KB: This amazing group of people who work in graphic medicine—artists, practitioners, academics—what they’re doing is promoting the value of the medium of comics to tackle really difficult topics—losing a loved one to Covid, for example. Comics are so good at expressing the ineffable, what you just can’t put down in words.

RJ: There’s a quote (and I’m going to butcher it) from Brian Fies, who did Mom’s Cancer, something akin to “The combination of words and images are more powerful than either one standing alone.” When I was at DC Comics, we did the 9-11 anthology. And Dark Horse [did] a companion volume. And then when I was at Lion Forge, we did a comic anthology about the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico [Puerto Rico Strong]. Going to the comics community, which was also very affected by the pandemic, just seemed natural. It was almost a no-brainer.

Speaking of 9/11, I was struck by the fact that at least two of the comics in this anthology reference that day.

KB: In Shelley Wall’s comic [“Grief Changes”], she had lost a partner before Covid. Her point was that every new trauma re-suscitates past traumas, and so Covid was resuscitating the loss of her life partner and the fact that they met around 9/11. As the Kirkus review said, not only do these comics show what it was like to be in the moment, but also the extent to which this is affecting us all and causing us to revisit past traumas. It will be something that stays with us for a long time, I think.

Many of the comics are surprisingly funny. Is humor a way that the artists cope with a dark situation?

RJ: I go to the very first piece [Chatfield’s “Covid-19 Diary”], which is just sadly funny and beautiful, where an artist is literally drawing himself maybe dying. But it’s funny. He adds humor to it. With any horrific situation, there’s always some type of humor, just to release the pressure of what’s really going on.

KB: I’m not sure if he did that [comic] after the fact, after [he and his wife had] recovered, or if that was a true day-by-day account.

RJ: I mean, if he was able to draw like that while he was sick, God bless him.

In Comic Nurse’s “Quarantine Week 10,” the artist describes feeling “sad, stressed, and fatigued. Also guilty.” But then: “Drawing always does seem to help.”

KB: The graphic medicine people, when this pandemic started, actually started doing virtual get-togethers where they would sit down and draw together and share drawings. And much of that was not only trying to maintain a sense of community and stay in touch with friends, but also to express a sort of cathartic process. There is definitely a school of thought that “drawing helps,” as MK [Czerwiec] or Comic Nurse said. That’s part of the ethos of graphic medicine.

Were there particular challenges to doing an anthology like this in the middle of a pandemic?

RJ: For us the biggest challenge, because of how this kept evolving, was where do we stop? We would have these talks once in a while, like, wait, this just happened, we should add that. Honestly, not to give Kendra a heart attack, but there could easily be a second volume because of everything that has happened since this one was put to bed. I mean, with a spike again, with the further politicization of it, and now the vaccine. It’s another volume.

Anything else you’d like to add?

KB: “Impassioned” is one of the words that came up in the Kirkus review, and everyone who contributed to this brought a lot of passion to the task. That was very affirming and helpful to me personally. I think this volume sets the stage for what’s to come in the imprint—the way comics can help us make connections, whether that’s across racial divides, across class divides, across cultural divides. We hope that Graphic Mundi fulfills that mission as we go forward.

COVID Chronicles received a starred review in the Jan. 15, 2021, issue.
The multiple Grammy Award–winning troubadour chronicles her life and career so far. Carlile has quite a story to tell, and she digs deep into her memories of her formative years in the Pacific Northwest: poverty, evictions, familial struggles with alcoholism and depression, and the meningitis that put her into a coma and accelerated her exit from childhood. Early in her adolescence, she knew she was gay, which brought a host of other challenges, not least because “I was told for most of my childhood by multiple sources that to be gay was a one-way ticket to hell.” Throughout the narrative, Carlile shows acute grace and clarity as she follows her navigation of certain rites of passage. Participating in her family’s band, she was a precocious child who loved the spotlight. After dropping out of high school, she continued her musical development with her own band and subsequent solo career. A turning point arrived with her collaboration with twin brothers Tim and Phil Hanseroth, established fixtures on the Seattle scene who added vocal and instrumental richness and increased her credibility with her expanding audience. Like many musicians, Carlile had run-ins with labels and producers and experienced the physical and mental suffering that a balance of recording and touring can inflict. Then there’s the personal side: falling in love and fighting for the right to get married as a gay woman, have children, and take her children on tour. Along with lyrics and snapshots that suggest a scrapbook, the author provides crucial behind-the-scenes insight into her rise to stardom. Especially illuminating are her descriptions of the process of creating such songs as “The Story” and “The Joke,” showing how her personal struggles strengthened her art. The story builds to her Grammy triumphs, her role in the Highwomen supergroup, her co-production of childhood hero Tanya Tucker, and her friendships with Joni Mitchell, Elton John, and the Obamas. With plenty more likely to come, the memoir ends on a high note.

An intimate, life-affirming look at a musician whose artistic journey is far from over.
The author's main strength is his effective combination of his experiences as both a pastor and a leader, exploring highly personal instances of emotion, frailty, endurance, and vision along with broader views on the state of the Catholic Church and the future of American society. His musings range from current trends in popular culture to the realms of theology and philosophy, and he cites a wide variety of writers and artists, including Horace, Roger Scruton, Elie Wiesel—and of course, plenty of Bible verses. Though prone to calling out what he sees as wrong with culture today, Chaput's overall view is one of faithful optimism. “The Church is always weak,” he writes, “but her Lord is always strong.”

Heartfelt, worthwhile thoughts from a seasoned church leader.
that expropriated land; then U.S. military intervention. The latter is scarcely known to most Americans (and indeed, in its details, to many Central Americans), but it set in motion forces that finally led to the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador—the latter two propped up by the Reagan administration, which averred that the governments were committed to human rights along with anti-communism. The latter was surely true, but, as Chomsky notes, the flood of refugees to El Norte “gave the lie to Reagan’s claims of the governments’ legitimacy and right to US support.” Even Jimmy Carter pledged that after the fall of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, “he would not allow another social revolution to occur in Central America.” The failed policies of the Trump administration were in line with a system that imposed and promulgated neoliberal policies on what were de facto colonies, but even the wall-builders could do nothing about the resulting exodus. As Chomsky notes, in 1970 the U.S. census counted 114,000 Central American immigrants; as of 2017, there were nearly 3.5 million. Of course, “the real figures are likely higher... because immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, are notoriously undercounted”—and in keeping with her provocative thesis, forgotten as well by “almost all our political leaders, mainstream media, and educational system.”

A convincing case that much of Central America's violent unrest can be laid at the feet of U.S. leaders.

Sexton, “wilder and more flamboyant”—Crowther sees commonalities in their efforts to escape “the cultural and historical messages they had absorbed” about women's aspirations and behavior. Both, for example, tried to reconcile their creative drive and ambition with motherhood. Plath, a friend recalled, “desperately wanted to be a mother but was terrified it would get in the way of her poetry.” Sexton, who was bipolar, plummeted into recurring depressions after her daughters were born. Crowther laments that “Plath and Sexton are portrayed as crazy, suicidal women, an attitude that impressively manages to sweep up sexism and stigma toward mental illness and suicide in one powerful ball of dismissal.” As a corrective, she shows them as “so ahead of their time,” with their works and the examples of their lives contributing still to “the long slow struggle that is social change.”

A perceptive dual biography.

PARIS WITHOUT HER
A Memoir
Curtis, Gregory
Knopf (256 pp.)
$24.95  |  Apr. 20, 2021
978-0-525-65762-0

An aching memoir of life as a widower. She was a striking vision of beauty and intelligence, writes former Texas Monthly editor Curtis about his first glimpse of Tracy, who would become his wife, at the magazine’s office in 1974. “I still know precisely what I was thinking at that moment—nothing. I couldn’t think,” he recalls. Eventually, he came up with the words to woo her—but that comes later, for the author’s next memory is of Tracy as she passed away nearly 40 years later, felled by cancer caused by her history as “a defiant smoker.” The first injury after his tragic loss came in the form of an officious minister who contradicted Curtis’ eulogy by citing Tracy’s fear. “She didn’t want to die,” he writes, “but that’s not the same thing as being afraid.” Clearly, she loved life, especially time spent in her beloved Paris. A second injury involved the ministrations of “well-meaning acquaintances” struggling to say something useful: “They want to show their concern, so they trap you and ask a series of questions—always the same ones—which you have had to answer time and again with other casual acquaintances in similar situations.” Curtis returned to Paris to visit the places the couple loved, but he also branched out to make discoveries of his own and, bravely, enrolled in language classes with students a third his age. His genially learned evocations of Paris are somewhat more lightly worn than those of Adam Gopnik’s Paris to the Moon, but they’re just as informative. Though readers will feel Curtis’ pain, they will also share his joy—and perhaps relief—at being in a place both beautiful and anonymous. “Paris was not at all hostile, but Paris didn’t care whether I was there or not,” he writes, finding comfort as a stranger in a place both familiar and unknown.

For those suffering from bereavement, a candid, moving book of commiseration and encouragement.
FIRST STEPS
How Upright Walking Made Us Human
DeSilva, Jeremy
Harper/HarperCollins (320 pp.)
$27.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-06-293849-7

Big brains, opposable thumbs, and tool use made humans masters of the planet, but walking upright came first.

In this fine account, Dartmouth paleoanthropologist DeSilva writes that humans are “the only fully bipedal ape,” and there is no shortage of explanations of how we evolved that way. Darwin speculated that standing freed our hands to make tools, which jump-started the growth of our brains. It’s sound logic, but common sense is no substitute for evidence, and fossils reveal that hominids walked long before they made tools. DeSilva makes a solid scientific case with an expert history of human and ape evolution, emphasizing the importance of food. Humans have a nongrasping big toe in line with the other toes, which are short and bend upward as we walk. This is the opposite of all other primates, whose toes are long and bend downward for grasping. Since Darwin’s time, fossils reveal ancient but upright hominids close to 6 million years old, the accepted period when hominid and ape evolution diverged. Since all living apes walk on their knuckles, researchers yearned to discover the first primate who rose up to become the founding proto-human. It turns out he or she may not have existed. Ardipithecus, perhaps the oldest hominid, walked upright despite possessing feet with some apelike features, and this was also a feature of ape fossils from the period before the common ancestor. As a result, some (but not all) anthropologists believe that knuckle-walking is not a primitive trait; modern apes evolved it. One scientist pointed out, “Asking why humans stood up from all fours is the wrong question….Perhaps we should instead be asking why our ancestors never dropped down on all fours in the first place.” DeSilva devotes the final 100 pages to the generally dismal consequences of bipedalism: dangerous childbirth, backaches, hernias, knee injuries, bunions, etc. On the bright side: Walking is good for us.

Accessible, valuable popular anthropology.
“A mesmerizing, wonder-filled nature study that also serves as a cautionary tale about wildlife conservation.”

THE GLITTER IN THE GREEN

BLOOD AND TREASURE

Daniel Boone and the Fight for America’s First Frontier

Drury, Bob & Clavin, Tom

St. Martin’s (400 pp.)

$29.99 | Apr. 20, 2021

978-1-250-24713-1

Popular historians Drury and Clavin deliver a ripsnortin’ tale of the early frontier and its first and most powerful legend.

The authors open on a frightful note, depicting a 16-year-old son of Daniel Boone being tortured “on the frozen scree beneath the Cumberland Mountain’s shadow line,” a Shawnee warrior tearing his fingernails and toenails off before finally killing him. Undeterred, Boone led a party of settlers over the Cumberland Gap, made his way into Kentucky, and in time established a walled compound on the Kentucky River. The narrative seldom finds a moment of calm thereafter. As Drury and Clavin observe, the arrival of Whites across the Appalachians began “a slow-motion genocide” for many Native peoples, not least of them the Shawnee, Boone’s principal foe. Boone was unusual for many reasons, not least because he “respected, if not completely understood, the spirituality and philosophy that underpinned [the Natives’] culture” and “never underestimated their intelligence.” Boone’s arrival also figured in a complex series of conflicts that involved France, Britain, Indigenous peoples, and the newly founded U.S. Keeping his fellow settlers alive in the bargain landed Boone in more than one spot of trouble. He was held prisoner by the British, accused of loyalist sympathies by frontier revolutionaries, and, in the end, recognized as a true patriot whose actions kept the British from flanking the Continental Army in the South. A particularly exciting set piece is the authors’ account of a combined British/Canadian/Native siege of Boonesborough in 1778, with bad results for one loud-voiced spokesman for the besiegers: “The next time Pompey showed his face, Collins blew it into the Kentucky River.” The war on the frontier became bloodier still. Though not as comprehensive as John Mack Faragher’s 1992 biography Daniel Boone, this book offers a vivid account of Boone’s frontier years, one that may not be for the faint of heart.

A well-written, fast-paced account that neatly bridges the gap between historical fact and fiction.

THE GLITTER IN THE GREEN

In Search of Hummingbirds

Dunn, Jon

Basic (352 pp.)

$30.00 | Apr. 20, 2021

978-1-5416-1819-0

An acclaimed natural history writer and wildlife guide explores the Americas in search of hummingbirds.

As Dunn notes, storytellers have always held hummingbirds in “high regard,” from pre-Columbian oral mythologists to 20th-century writers like Gabriel García Márquez. In his latest, the author chronicles his travels from his home in the Shetland Islands to the Americas in search of this alluring bird. Fittingly, Dunn’s journey begins in Alaska, where, tens of millions of years ago, hummingbirds arrived after crossing over the land bridge from Siberia. Here, the author introduces us to the “sombre green and white plumage” of the Rufous hummingbird, a species that, in 2010, was documented traveling 3,500 miles, the longest known migration ever recorded by a hummingbird.” Among Dunn’s numerous vividly recounted adventures, we visit gardens and lush areas in the Sonoran Desert that have become magnets for bird-watchers; a market in Mexico City where we learn about a macabre secret; the Zapata Peninsula in Cuba, home to the bee hummingbird, the smallest in the world; and Tierra del Fuego, in Argentina, where the author spotted the Green-backed Firecrown, a species that Darwin encountered in 1832 “flitting about in a snowstorm.” All of these marvelous voyages are only part of what makes this book so enchanting. Along the way, Dunn compassionately shares his extensive knowledge of the species endemic to each location, including their aesthetics, mechanics, habitats, and related regional culture and folklore, and he discusses factors contributing to the decline of hummingbirds, including pesticides, climate change, and habitat loss. Encouragingly, he “encountered examples of where human intervention had come just in time and, locally at least, had pulled a hummingbird back from the brink.” However, he also discovered that hummingbirds continue to be seen by some as a “commodity to be consumed and manipulated for their own ends, regardless of the birds’ welfare.”

A mesmerizing, wonder-filled nature study that also serves as a cautionary tale about wildlife conservation.
GALLERY OF CLOUDS
Eisendrath, Rachel
New York Review Books (176 pp.)
$22.95 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-68137-543-4

A writer smitten with the interplay of language and meaning discourses on art, literature, and the joys of reading.

Eisendrath, professor of English and chair of medieval and Renaissance studies at Barnard College, disarms readers with her opening lines: “New York City, August 2021. I died and then found myself walking across a large, green field,” where she encounters Virginia Woolf and several admirers. Eisendrath carries a manuscript, diffidently, which she offers to Woolf, and to us. The writing is in non-narrative mode, possessing its own brand of unity—or planned disunity. The author presents a kaleidoscope of pieces and themes, fractured but not scattered, which she terms a book of “clouds.” Her mind wanders from the Italian pastoral romances of the late 15th and early 16th centuries to English literary, social, and art history from 20th-century prose fiction to her own personal life. But she always returns to Elizabethan-era writer Sir Philip Sidney and his intricate romance Arcadia (her book’s only sustained motif). From an early age, reading provided Eisendrath with solidity and engagement, a means of inhabiting her own mind “with a pose of sufficient complexity and suppleness that it felt real and also could whir along with a certain lightness.” Her observations appear in episodic fashion, though her erudition and perceptiveness are no pose. She is a gifted stylist, finding surprise around every corner. She muses, as Sidney did, on action vs. contemplation, and she navigates a brief history of prose style, including the major 17th-century literary shift that introduced a less oratorial, more realistic and colloquial vocabulary. Even for confirmed litterateurs, her caravan of clouds can have extraneous passengers, her language becoming as ornate as Sidney’s. But she also grounds herself in everyday matters, offers appreciative and insightful character sketches, and shows she is as conversant in photography and theater as she is in literature.

Eisendrath deftly melds aestheticism with a strategy of creative digression.
SEND A RUNNER

A Navajo Honors the Long Walk

Eskeets, Edison & Kristofic, Jim
Univ. of New Mexico (192 pp.)
$27.95 | Apr. 1, 2021
978-0-8263-6233-9

The story of a 59-year-old Diné (Navajo) man and his 16-day, 330-mile run to honor the Long Walk of the Navajo.

Co-written by Eskeets, a runner, coach, and artist, and Kristofic, a Taos-based journalist who grew up on a Navajo reservation in Arizona, the book follows two stories: first, Eskeets’ plan to run 330 miles (“a marathon a day”) to commemorate the Long Walk, “the forced removal of most of the Diné people to a military-controlled reservation on the Pecos River in south-central New Mexico” between 1864 and 1868; second, a chronicle of the Long Walk in historical context.

Eskeets, supported by friends and family throughout the run, and Kristofic, his friend, provide fascinating portraits of both the beauty and physical punishment of the journey, smoothly alternating with a history of the Diné people. The authors recount the grim historical realities that faced the Diné over the centuries: arrival of the Spanish, kidnapping and selling of Diné children into slavery, murder and betrayal, the movement of White Americans across their territory, and the continued attacks on their people. With starkly beautiful prose, the authors bring all of this to urgent life, vividly depicting the numerous outbreaks of brutal violence and clearly demonstrating the remarkable resiliency of the Diné.

A unique, important addition to the literature on the Navajo.

THE UNFIT HEIRESS

The Tragic Life and Scandalous Sterilization of Ann Cooper Hewitt

Farley, Audrey Clare
Grand Central Publishing (304 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-5387-5335-4

The shocking story of an heiress who was sterilized without her consent.

In 1936, Ann Cooper Hewitt, daughter of inventor Peter Cooper Hewitt and socialite Maryon Cooper Hewitt, sued her mother for $500,000. She alleged that Maryon conspired with Ann’s doctors to have her sterilized during a scheduled appendectomy in order to deprive Ann of her inheritance since Peter’s will stipulated that Ann’s share of his estate would revert back to her mother if Ann died childless. In this dramatic work of creative nonfiction, Farley focuses primarily on the lives of Maryon and Ann, exploring each of their abusive childhoods, subsequent relationships with men, and, particularly, how they were portrayed in the media. She also chronicles the trials of Maryon and her alleged accomplices and the estranged mother-daughter relationship at the heart of the story and weaves in bits of the history of eugenics. At the time of the trial, writes Farley, “many Americans didn’t know that tens of thousands of individuals had been sterilized in state institutions nationwide.” Due to the social status of the family, Americans from all walks of life followed the proceedings closely, stimulating conversations about medical ethics, especially the use of sterilization for population control and the ability of doctors to perform surgery “without written consent.” The author also sheds light on the number of sterilizations that have occurred more recently, either involuntarily or under false pretenses, in order to selectively control the population. She highlights both instances where federal funds have been used to sterilize low-income, Indigenous, incarcerated, and other marginalized women as well as related lawsuits and legislative amendments. Throughout, Farley maintains the focus on Ann and her family. While she does not provide a comprehensive discussion of eugenics, the eye-opening story of the family is a concrete example of lamentable policies that continue to shape the reproductive rights of women.

A disturbing yet thought-provoking tale of family strife and ethically unsound medical practice.
THE HORDE
How the Mongols Changed the World
Favereau, Marie
Belknap/Harvard Univ. (304 pp.)
$29.95 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-0-674-24421-4

Rather than being the murderous mob depicted in film and popular history, the Mongol horde, this book reveals, was a complex Euro-Asian culture whose history “remains as though behind a veil.”

From the 13th to 15th centuries, the nomadic people who composed the horde bestrode the vast treeless Eurasian grasslands, the steppe, that stretched thousands of miles across Siberia and west into central Europe. Deriving from the 12th-century conqueror Genghis Khan and existing, via his sons and others, into the 14th-century days of the great military commander Tamerlane, the horde divided and subdivided into many groups. Yet, as Favereau shows, its component parts maintained a remarkably rich and stable culture while absorbing and equitably governing the peoples it subdued. As much a community as a state, the horde created “a new kind of empire” suited to the ecosystem it occupied. The author dispels the myth that it was just a rampaging mass of warriors; it possessed great governing skills, was adept at social relationships, and remained a major force on the Eurasian landmass until it began to withdraw eastward after the Black Death. So why has its history been unknown and ignored? Because, Favereau contends, the Mongols, a herding, horse-riding agricultural people always on the move, left little by way of architecture, literature, and urban centers. This book helps rectify their absence from Western consciousness and fills a major gap in our knowledge of world history. Although the author writes her largely academic work with more fervor than grace, she fully succeeds in rescuing her misunderstood subject from the world of poetry and myth and anchoring it firmly in scholarly learning. Readers will have to adjust to little-known names, terms, and geographical realities, but Favereau does her best to help, and numerous maps, often missing in books of this sort, offer skilled assistance.

A fine contribution to our understanding of the culture that “knit together east and west.”

“...a thoughtfully conceived memoir.”
“...straight-talking narrative...”
“The author pulls no punches....will find solace in recognizing their own struggles in his unflinching account.”

“Bold in its approach, this book could prove an invaluable lifeline for caregivers seeking guidance.”

“Forthright, edifying writing about Alzheimer’s caregiving.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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Fleming has little memory of his life before age 11 or 12. As a child, he screamed for hours each day and never wanted to be more than a few feet from his mother. Eventually, with the aid of family, friends, and educators, the author, who “wasn’t expected to graduate from high school,” received a college degree and was named a Rhodes Scholar. At Oxford, he recently completed his master’s degree in philosophy. In his debut book, Fleming tells his story to Winik, and the result is a fascinating deep dive into the murky waters of consciousness and identity. Because the author doesn’t think about language like most people, he must translate information into his own code to understand it. He says he has “no idea” how other people process emotion, but he learned how to listen with empathy from a college leadership training manual. Whereas most people just “have” a personality, Fleming had to construct one: “serious and friendly and intellectual” but also “bubbly and dorky and witty.” Fleming’s rules for living spring from his Christian faith, and he believes that when it comes to solving the world’s abiding problems, it’s vital that we practice both “ruthless optimism” and “practical idealism.” Winik interviewed Fleming multiple times and went through hundreds of pages of transcripts to help him shape the narrative, organizing the material in a Q&A fashion around chapters covering topics such as energy and memory, language barriers, and “things that matter.” Never intrusive, she elegantly provides context for Fleming’s brilliantly unique outlook. This tremendous work should be savored; every clearly written chapter offers fresh insight into how to shape a life from the inchoate matter of consciousness.

Fleming’s extraordinary journey will inspire any reader weighing what it means to be human in a troubled world.

A Cook’s Story: Remaking a Life From Scratch

An acclaimed chef and restaurateur offers engaging stories from the kitchen and beyond.

In this immersive memoir, French delves into her life so far, covering the twists, turns, successes, and failures that led to her successful career as the owner and head chef of the much-lauded Lost Kitchen in the tiny town of Freedom, Maine. Though this is her first book of narrative nonfiction (following her 2017 cookbook), French demonstrates her talents as a storyteller, whether she’s discussing her early cooking career, which she spent managing the fryolator, serving clam baskets, and producing perfect soft-serve ice cream cones at her father’s diner; recounting a childhood replete with bucolic wonder (“I spent countless summer days from breakfast until dinner running wild through the seemingly endless pastures and wilderness”); or delineating her struggles as an adult. The harrowing details of her first marriage—her alcoholic husband eventually became...
abusive, and she lost herself in pill addiction—add palpable tension to her story, as do the scenes set in an “all-female rehab facility.” Despite these hardships, French refreshing avoids unnecessary self-pity or sentimentality, and the life-affirming details are just as strong: The author notes her love of Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Stevie Nicks, and the “Cape Verdean jazz” of Cesária Evora, and she shares an amusing tale about baking pot brownies and getting “high for the first time of my life” at age 33. Also relatable are her accounts of tussles and reconciliations with her sister. From a secret, at-home supper club and an early iteration of the Lost Kitchen, the author stays on point in her evocative portrayal of the importance of food in her life. “As a girl,” she writes, “I had learned from my father that good food could be a vessel, a way to show love, even when you might not have the words to say so.”

A canny life story from a determined woman with the gift of vision and the wherewithal to implement it.

THE LETTERS OF ROBERT FROST, VOLUME 3
1929-1936
Frost, Robert
Ed. by Richardson, Mark & Sheehy, Donald & Hass, Robert Bernard & Atmore, Henry
Belknap/Harvard Univ. (752 pp.)
$39.95 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-674-72665-9

The latest installment of the poet’s letters, in which he becomes a celebrity. Meticulously edited by scholars Sheehy, Richardson, Hass, and Atmore, the third of a projected five volumes of letters of Robert Frost (1874-1963) covers the poet’s life from 1929-1936, when his reputation soared. The 602 letters and telegrams, 70% previously uncollected, afford a comprehensive view of Frost’s family, work, and friendships as well as opinions on human nature, academia, and art. A literary star, Frost fulfilled myriad

Forgiveness is an art form. Once you practice this art and the methods described in this book, a world of peace opens to you.

“CJ illustrates her book with touching, personal stories of how she has used forgiveness to take her from a well of depression into a world of light....pick up and read this book. It will change your life.”
—Wil Dieck, Author and Psychology Professor

“A recommended read for those seeking a new route to inner peace.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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obligations: teaching, lecturing, serving as poet-in-residence, and giving a prodigious number of readings. In 1931, he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Collected Poems; many other honors followed. When his friend Louis Untermeyer failed to win a Pulitzer in 1936, Frost commiserated. “I have suffered nervous collapse in my time from the strain of conscious competition and learned from it how to pretend at least that I am below or above it for the rest of my life,” he wrote. “And I’m a good stout pretender when I set out to be.” Along with professional success, though, came personal misfortune. In 1931, his beloved daughter Marjorie and daughter-in-law Lillian were both in sanatoriums for tuberculosis. “We are in many many troubles for the moment,” he confided, “so many that grief loses its dignity and bursts out laughing. I toughen it seems to me.” When Marjorie died of puerperal fever, in 1934, he was disconsolate. Many letters reveal Frost’s prickly opinions on politics and poets. For example, he disparaged Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and scorned “modernismus” in poetry, although he admired Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. “For my part,” he wrote, “I should be as satisfied to play tennis with the net down as to write verse with no verse form set to stay me.” Besides an informative introduction contextualizing the letters and consistently rigorous footnotes, the editors provide a biographical glossary and a narrative chronology.

A richly detailed portrait of Frost in his own words.

REMEMBER
The Science of Memory and the Art of Forgetting
Genova, Lisa
Harmony (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-0-593-19184-2

The neuroscientist and bestselling author of Still Alice explains how memories are made, how to retrieve them, and why forgetting the reason you walked into the kitchen is no reason to panic.

Everyone fears forgetting. Yet for most people—at any age—forgetting is not only normal, it’s an important aspect of how memory functions. “Even in the smartest of heads, memory is fallible,” writes Genova. “A man famous for memorizing more than a hundred thousand digits of pi can also forget his wife’s birthday.” As the author shows, how memory works, and how we can optimize it, is a complex subject. In conversational language, Genova details how the brain processes events and how we have the power to help select what transfers from fleet ing knowledge to long-term memory. For example, while it is common to forget the name of a person you briefly met, you can also train yourself to improve attention to such details and improve recall. “Memory is the sum of what we remember and what we forget,” writes the author, “and there is an art and science to both.” In addition to her beautiful explanations of the brain’s function, Genova also spells out how everyday behaviors strongly affect memory as well as the risk of developing various forms of dementia. Sleep, stress, diet, and exercise all play important roles, which is profound because it means that there are accessible ways to prevent memory loss. Also significant is the author’s recurring reminder that, above all, we “are more than what we remember.” Genova’s plentiful anecdotes from her personal and professional lives make it easy for readers to relate, and her obvious expertise in memory and the brain results in a book that is more insightful than many others on the subject.

Sharp writing and accessible storytelling make for a compelling read.

THE WASTE-FREE WORLD
How the Circular Economy Will Take Less, Make More, and Save the Planet
Gonen, Ron
Portfolio (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-593-19184-2

A sensible manifesto on behalf of recycling and other means of reducing waste.

Appointed New York City deputy commissioner for sanitation, recycling, and sustainability during the Bloomberg administration, Gonen is a longtime advocate of environmental restoration and protection with a sharp eye for practical tactics. As he learned in NYC, because corporations depend on taxpayer dollars to dispose of their waste, “a modern form of socialism” supporting ostensible champions of the free market, the public sector spends huge amounts of money on disposal that might better be used to upgrade infrastructure. Here, examining many corners of the economy, the author agitates for adopting “circular methods of production, distribution, consumption, and reuse of products and materials.” The pandemic provides a case in point: Gonen argues that the shortage of personal protective equipment could have been alleviated if single-use masks were not trashed but instead sterilized with a hydrogen peroxide mist. “Throwing away PPE,” he writes, “was a legacy of a horribly inefficient business model, not a medical requirement.” Throughout, the author examines the role of government for good and ill. He lauds the victory garden program and waste-reduction measures of the Depression era while noting that after World War II, federal programs “helped supercharge consumption” by making cheap credit easily available and pushing goods with planned obsolescence built into their DNA. Gonen also praises responsive industries—e.g., paper manufacturers, who, though likely glad that the paperless office has not come to pass, are taking care to plant two trees for every one felled and inventors who tinker with means to convert abundant materials, such as cow (and human) waste, into biogas. The author closes by urging businesses to adopt circular models if only as a selling point, since consumers are increasingly demanding environmental responsibility. Advocating a point without descending into mere rhetoric, the author
ventures a well-reasoned case for changing our ways as producers and consumers.

Green-minded readers will learn much from Gonen’s investigations.

**RADICALIZING HER**

*Why Women Choose Violence*

Gowrinathan, Nimmi

Beacon (152 pp.)

$24.95 | Apr. 13, 2021

978-0-8070-1355-7

An intimate dive into the lives of female freedom fighters in the Global South, correcting long-standing American misconceptions of women, violence, and politics.

As the director of the Politics of Sexual Violence Initiative at the City College of New York, Gowrinathan is perfectly equipped to tackle this significant yet overlooked subject, and she forces readers to reckon with the erasure of freedom fighters as political actors. Interspersed with her own family’s history with resistance in Sri Lanka, the author uses a combination of sociological critique, philosophical texts, political theory, and interviews she conducted over the span of 20 years to provide a new understanding of gender and power. “Violence, for me, and for the women I chronicle in this book, is simply a political reality,” she writes. Though the author is astute in her analysis of the complex issues at play, she is candid about her inability to offer concrete solutions. “As a part of a lifelong project that took shape in the image of the female fighter,” she writes, “Radicalizing Her is open-ended: offering no recommendations, only an exploration of new landscapes of political possibility.” Regardless, this book is a well-informed jumping-off point for any further study. From the heart-wrenching separation of Kala, a Tamil Tiger fighter, and her mother, Latha, who sought refuge in London, to Sandra, the senior commander in Bogota’s branch of the FARC, the Marxist guerrilla group in Colombia, Gowrinathan examines the roles of rape, marriage, motherhood, and policies to create a necessarily complicated picture of why some women choose violence and some choose nonviolence as their preferred form of resistance. “Our view of the female fighter has been obstructed by both the moral compulsion to decry violent resistance and a societal drive to divide categories of thought along gendered lines,” writes the author, and this limited view perpetuates a host of oppressive myths about female fighters, myths that she corrects in this powerful book.

A captivating, essential perspective on a neglected conversation.

**EVERYTHING IS FINE**

*A Memoir*

Granata, Vince

Atria (304 pp.)

$27.00 | Apr. 13, 2021

978-1-982133-44-3

Probing memoir of a family tragedy and the search for explanations.

Granata was 27 when his brother, Tim, “convinced that the woman who made him peanut butter sandwiches when he was a grass-stained child was the source of his constant pain,” killed his mother. Ultimately, the court declared his brother to be not guilty “by reason of mental disease or defect… Defect, like there was a flaw in Tim’s design, an error buried in the schematic for his brain.” Arriving at that decision—and Granata’s acceptance of it—involved developing a more granular understanding of schizophrenia and its effects than most of us carry in our minds. A critical component is anosognosia, a neurological effect that prevents a mentally ill person from recognizing the illness and substitutes for clinical terms something that, in the brother’s case, approached a language of the hero quest: “spiritual warfare, the wrong path, demonic possession.” About 300 mothers are killed by their children in the U.S. each year, and about two-thirds of those victims are slain by children who suffer from untreated mental illness—the key term being untreated. “Is there a link between untreated serious mental illness and violence against self or others? All of my language here needs to be clear, every word,” writes the author. One of the problems is that sufferers often fail to take their medication. Confined to a Connecticut mental hospital for “a period that would likely span decades” after being found not guilty, Tim adopted a voluntary regimen of medication that has enabled him to see his actions differently and take responsibility for the act. Granata records his own sometimes discomfiting reactions to events, such as the impulse to turn his mother into a martyr and figuring out how to keep in balance the contradictory repulsion for and love for a desperately ill brother.

Candid and carefully argued, Granata’s memoir helps us better understand the horrors of mental illness.

**THE CLIMATE DIET**

*50 Simple Ways To Trim Your Carbon Footprint*

Greenberg, Paul

Penguin (176 pp.)

$13.00 paper | Apr. 13, 2021

978-0-593-29676-9

This is no cookbook but rather an accessible pocket guide to climate-focused lifestyle and reducing one’s carbon footprint.

Greenberg is a bestselling environmental writer whose previous books (Four Fish, American
of being a psychopath. Whitman had ridden back all the way to Boston to defend himself from church inquiries and secure further support for his growing mission, stopping in Washington on the way. Spalding, whose career was faltering, inflated the importance of Whitman’s trip, imagining that this sojourn in the nation’s capital was the “tale of a pious patriot riding east to save Oregon from the perfidious British.” Harden’s vivid reconstruction illustrates the process of Western mythmaking, beloved of Americans when it paints them in a heroic light; and of cultural collision, with the Whitmans almost willfully ignoring the Cayuse worldview. There’s a strong strand of anti-Catholicism, Know-Nothingsm, and racism throughout, too, which lends Harden’s welcome study an unfortunate timeliness.

A boon for those who like their history unadorned by obfuscation and legend.

**THE AGE OF DECADENCE**
* A History of Britain: 1880-1914
  * Heffer, Simon
  * Pegasus (912 pp.)
  * $39.95 | Apr. 6, 2021
  * 978-1-64313-670-7

A dense narrative account of Great Britain’s social and political conflicts in the decades before World War I. “Swagger was the predominant style of the period,” asserts journalist and popular historian Heffer in his first book to be published in the U.S. He notes that the affluence and complacency of the English upper classes, traditionally viewed as defining features of the late Victorian and Edwardian years, covered up working-class, feminist, and Irish discontents. The Third Reform Act of 1884 went a long way toward extending the franchise, and the House of Lords reluctantly assented to it, but the Lords’ fierce resistance to the “People’s Budget” of 1909 provoked a constitutional crisis that nearly resulted in the abolition of the aristocratic upper chamber. Heffer covers this struggle as well as the parliamentary battles over Irish home rule and the government’s maladroit handling of such colonial imbroglos as the Boer War and the Siege of Khartoum. The author’s level of detail will daunt casual readers, but those who like their history long and leisurely will enjoy his approach. He offers similarly in-depth treatments of various juicy scandals among the Marlborough House Set, the louche circle formed around the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII), and he shows how they were examples of the triviality and sexual hypocrisy of Britain’s upper classes. Queen Victoria fares no better, sketched of as a dour reactionary who detested the liberal governments she was forced to collaborate with as a constitutional monarch. Heffer comes across as middle-of-the-road politically and socially: He deplores Britain’s economic inequality and imperial injustices, but he depicts the strikes of trade union activists and the protests of militant suffragettes as provocative and needlessly divisive. Judicious but brief passages about the period’s culture, including exegeses of such paradigmatic works as John
Galsworthy’s play *Strife* and H.G. Wells’ novel *Ann Veronica*, somewhat leaven the heavy overall focus on political maneuvers. Fans of sturdy, traditional history will appreciate this comprehensive survey.

**MINE!**

*How the Hidden Rules of Ownership Control Our Lives*

**Heller, Michael A. & Salzman, James**

Doubleday (336 pp.)

$27.99 | Mar. 2, 2021

978-0-385-54472-6

A look at the increasing complexities of ownership.

Law professors Heller and Salzman bring their expertise to bear on this cogent explanation of the myriad ways that humans define, claim, and defend ownership. Ownership, they assert, “is the scaffolding that society uses to structure every struggle over the things we all want.” Those things range from knee space on airplanes to inheritances, internet passwords to genetic codes, natural resources to online purchases. Illustrating their analysis with abundant examples, the authors identify six pathways to claiming ownership: possession, attachment, first-in-time, labor, self-ownership, and family. Possession “is a primal instinct rooted in animal behavior and hardwired in our brains,” but it does not always apply to disputes over ownership, such as in cases of inheritance and divorce. The authors cite law-suits, for example, where husbands or wives claim ownership to finances based on their contributions to their spouse’s career and earnings—even future earnings. Awarding ownership because of labor (I’ve made it, it’s mine) becomes problematic when it applies to complex systems, such as technological or scientific discoveries. Patents, which were designed to protect the holder’s ownership, have created “ownership gridlock” that can inhibit innovation, such as the development of new drugs. The online world presents new complications. “When you buy online,” write the authors, “you get limited ownership of whatever you buy, with terms that the internet company can change at will.” They continue, “the companies we interact with online are masters of ownership engineering.” Because “much of our identity is bound up with the things we own,” the authors are rightly skeptical of the sharing economy, which fragments ownership. If, for example, Airbnb renters take over a community, neighborhood solidarity erodes. Being cognizant of rules of ownership, they hope, can make each of us “a more effective advocate for yourself, your community, and our common good.” For a more in-depth examination of ownership as it applies to physical land, pair this book with Simon Winchester’s *Land*.

**Heart of Fire**

*An Immigrant Daughter’s Story*

**Hirono, Mazie K.**

Viking (352 pp.)

$28.00 | Apr. 20, 2021

978-1-984881-60-1

The life story of the first Asian American woman and only immigrant in the Senate.

Hirono was born in 1947 in a rural town in Japan. Following years of abuse, her mother escaped back to her native Hawaii with the author and her older brother in hopes of a better life. Being a single parent, she had to work multiple jobs to support the family. “She had a heart of fire and would always pick herself up and try something else, seek another way forward,” writes Hirono. “Mom didn’t believe in feeling sorry for herself or in bemoaning her circumstances. She intended to take care of us, and in that purpose she never wavered. Always looking out for the next opportunity.” They initially lived in a “small, windowless room” in a boardinghouse and had no access to health care. These early experiences became pivotal in her decision to pursue public service in order “to help the most defenseless among us.” Given her cultural roots in Japan and Hawaii, as well as the often unfair expectations placed on women in politics, Hirono often exercised restraint in showing her emotions in order to get measures passed during much of her early political career. However, her demeanor changed markedly following the 2016 presidential election. No longer could she stay silent in the face of grave injustices. “My expectations of the most xenophobic, misogynistic, corrupt, and self-dealing president in history could not have been lower, yet he would sink beneath even that, plunging the nation into one crisis after another,” she writes. “There was no end to the cruelty, compulsive lies, and outright fraud perpetrated by Trump and his enablers.”

With both ferocity and compassion, Hirono chronicles her experiences in Congress, exposing the rampant hypocrisy and illogical behavior she has witnessed. At the same time, warmth and love shine through, as she attributes her success and determination to the example set by her mother. A heartfelt and fiery political memoir and immigrant story.
LEAVING ISN'T THE HARDEST THING

Essays
Hough, Lauren
Vintage (320 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-593-08076-4

A collection of interconnected essays from a woman who has lived a wide variety of lives.

In her debut, Austin-based writer Hough, “born in Germany and raised in seven countries and West Texas,” probes an identity she once hid behind stories that made her “better at lying than...at telling the truth.” As the daughter of parents who followed the Children of God cult around the world, Hough joined the Air Force as a teenager, in part to prove an Americaness she never felt strongly. She revealed little about her background to military colleagues and described her parents as “missionaries.” The author did not especially like the Air Force, but the military and cult life seemed oddly similar. Like military members, the Children of God traveled all over the world and had to follow strict rules. Too often, Hough often found herself targeted for being different—“too loud, too quiet, too stubborn, too masculine”—and during her time in the Air Force, she received death threats for being gay. She eventually left the military and began to live as an openly gay woman in Washington, D.C., only to find she did not fit in with the “happy well adjusted” members of the LGBTQ+ community she met. Instead, Hough lived a hand-to-mouth existence that resembled her impoverished childhood. Yet the old need to fit in drove her to eventually live the American dream, and she “scraped and saved” enough to buy a suburban home and attempted to care about “football and video games.” Only when she began to write and allow herself to be who she was did she realize she wanted no part of the “[cult of] normal” she had sought all her life. This thoughtful, occasionally mean-spirited book explores the shaping power of the past and also raises provocative questions about what really constitutes a cult.

An edgy and unapologetic memoir in essays.

MY BROKEN LANGUAGE

A Memoir
Hudes, Quiara Alegría
One World/Random House (336 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-399-59004-7

A Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright presents a tender yet defiant tale about finding strength in one’s roots.

In this elegant and moving memoir, Hudes begins with her upbringing in Puerto Rico and Philadelphia, examining the complexities involved in negotiating two distinct worlds early on. At first, she fixated on the languages spoken around her and the ways in which their syllables and pronunciations told stories that would become woven into her own. As she grew older, however, her awe morphed into an acute awareness of her difference from other children, and she was embarrassed by her mother’s spiritualist practices. “I so wanted to take my dad’s side, join his disavowal of any god, his assertion that religion was the root of all evil,” she writes. “It would have brought a perverse relief to write off mom’s gift as gremlins of brain chemistry, to name some psychological diagnosis.” But as members of her family fell ill or became victims of violence, Hudes realized the significance of acknowledging the power of their stories and the importance of maintaining familial bonds and traditions. The text often reads like poetry, but it is also playful, the author toying with the barriers of language, and the narrative is propelled by the urgent notion that community matters in a world designed to push the have-nots further into the margins. It’s rewarding to see how, with the help of a loving mother and support network, Hudes derived power from her own culture and found success. She admits that the work is never fully finished. “No matter how far I traveled, how old I grew or how loudly I voiced us, our old silence chased me down, reaffirmed their hook,” she writes near the end. If the author’s worst fear is to be silent, she can rest assured that this memoir speaks volumes.

A beautifully written account of the importance of culture and family in a small but powerful community.

LOW COUNTRY

A Memoir
Jones, J. Nicole
Catapult (240 pp.)
$26.00 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-948226-86-8

Ghosts and legends swirl in an affecting family memoir. Making a captivating debut, Jones recounts growing up in coastal South Carolina amid alligators, water moccasins, and Venus’ flytraps, seedy bars and souvenir shops; where raging hurricanes pummeled the shore and strong-willed ghosts haunted the land. While her relatives became wealthy from the tourist trade in Myrtle Beach, her own family eked out a living, “beaten down by one bad break after another, surviving as always due to the generosity of family until it was too much effort to imagine escaping.” The disparities between rich and hardscrabble were as blatant to her as those between men and women. “I come from a line of women,” she writes, “for whom being walked all over and jumped on for the fun of cruelty was progress.” Nowhere was this cruelty more evident than in her paternal grandparents’ marriage. “Granddaddy’s violence needed no provocation,” writes Jones about the physical beatings that plagued his wife, sons, and grandsons. “I came to understand,” she writes, “from the first time I saw him raise a hand to Nana, that his inner well of fury ran too deep to be contained in just one body, and that the terrifying anger behind his violence was the spring of his other most defining quality.
“Men leave, fame fizzles, family breaks your heart...but Jones knows a good story and how to tell it.”

LAST CHANCE TEXACO
Chronicles of an American Troubadour
Jones, Rickie Lee
Grove (384 pp.)
$27.00  |  Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-8021-2712-9

A memoir from the veteran singer and songwriter whose long career has involved plenty of ups and downs. Born in Chicago in 1954, Jones begins with vivid stories of her early childhood in Arizona, where her family moved in 1959. Throughout, she proves herself as engaging a storyteller on the page as in her songs. A peripatetic family life took her through countless schools. “Constant moving was my parents’ version of running away,” she writes, “and this inclination was reinforced in every year of my life.” She began hitchhiking early in her teens and was kicked out of high school, labeled “an undesirable element” by the reactionary vice principal, “the real life version of Dean Wormer of Animal House.” But California hippie culture awaited, and more good luck than narrow escapes, and the perfect timing of curiously strong illicit substances—though the latter eventually bit back hard. “I was living a life enchanted by impossible connections, narrow escapes, and the perfect timing of curiously strong coincidences,” she writes, recounting the time she bumped into her cousin at a Jimi Hendrix concert. The great passions of her pop-star years—Lowell George, Dr. John, and, most of all, Tom Waits—still inspire dreamy prose arpeggios. “Now we were religions, we converted to each other, we inspired each other and we spoke in tongues,” she writes about Waits. “He growled, I cooed. He softened, I growled....We were jellyfish, floating from day to night.” Sadly, however, “the apex of my love life corresponds to the apex of my career success, and unfortunately my success corresponded with my drug use.” The high times petered out by 1983, when she quit drugs and “headed to France.” She chronicles her life since then, including marriage and motherhood, in just a few pages—a wise editorial choice.

Men leave, fame fizzles, family breaks your heart...but Jones knows a good story and how to tell it.

HOME GROWN HATE
Why White Nationalists and Militant Islamists Are Waging War Against the United States
Kamali, Sara
Univ. of California (440 pp.)
$29.95  |  Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-520-36002-0

A scholar of systemic inequities, White nationalism, and militant Islamism analyzes why White nationalists and militant Islamists (the term used throughout the book) commit terrorist acts and what the U.S. can do about it.

Written before rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol—or before the identities of the participants were fully known—this book may strike readers as eerily prescient in its thesis: “White nationalism is as great a threat as militant Islamism, if not more so, to the sociopolitical, economic, and security interests of the United States.” Fueled by a sense of victimhood and real or perceived threats to their survival, White nationalists like the Proud Boys and militant Islamists like Dzhokhar Tsarnaev “target America for the purposes of claiming the nation as theirs and theirs alone, either as a White ethnostate or as part of a global caliphate.” Kamali suggests that White nationalists may do greater harm. According to a study published by the Center for Investigative Reporting, in the years 2008 to 2016, “terror plots and actions by far-right domestic groups...outnumbered Islamist domestic cases by 2 to 1.” In an exhaustively researched but often repetitive study that includes frequent Arabic transliterations or translations, Kamali rebuts the idea that “lone wolves” drive terrorism and focuses on a comparative analysis of the White nationalistic and militant Islamist groups that can drive it. She examines their aims, beliefs, tactics, rhetoric, organizational structures, and influencers, such as the Oath Keepers, Osama bin Laden, Dylann Roof, neo-Nazis, and Timothy McVeigh, “revered as a White nationalist martyr.” Faced with such groups, writes Kamali, the U.S. should adopt “holistic” counterterrorism strategies that aim for “equity for all rather than maintaining White hegemony and perpetuating the criminalization of people of color.” Worthy as such goals are, the author’s specific proposals are half-baked, with too few examples of how such strategies have worked elsewhere.

A dense tome of interest to scholars of terrorism, but general readers will zone out.
A Tehran-born American journalist invites readers to reexamine what they think they know about Iran and its people.

Kangarlou, an accomplished international correspondent who has spent years reporting from the Middle East for CNN, NBC, and other outlets, is clear-eyed about the goal of her debut book: Recognizing that many Westerners see Iran as an oppressive theocracy, she seeks to rectify this simplistic take on her home country. Her approach—a series of vignettes of individual Iranians set against a broader historical background—is disarming and mostly effective. Kangarlou confronts stereotypes about Iranians and how those stereotypes are often complicated by people's private lives—e.g., the gay son of a general in the Revolutionary Guard; a reformist Shia Muslim cleric known as the “Blogger Ayatollah”; Iran’s first female race-car driver, who, despite hardships, chooses to remain in her country (“my entire family, failures, successes, struggles, wins, are all here”); and a transgender woman with childhood dreams of becoming a cleric. The author’s portraits reveal a country that is more intricate and tolerant than many readers comprehend. For example, Kangarlou shows how the government permits many freedoms to religious minorities like Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Furthermore, “Iran is the only Muslim country in the region that grants legal rights to transgender people.” In other ways, the stories confirm certain impressions of Iranian society; such as sweeping limits on the press or the fact that Iran’s gay community has been forced to live largely in secret for decades. Because Kangarlou doesn’t dig as deep into the nation’s brutal side, the book isn’t a comprehensive picture of “the real Iran.” However, it’s a readable narrative that sounds strong notes of compassion about a nation that is often misunderstood.

Valuable human-interest stories that provide food for thought and hope for change regarding a troubled yet vibrant society.

HEARING HOMER’S SONG
The Brief Life and Big Idea of Milman Parry
Kanigel, Robert
Knopf (352 pp.)
$27.95 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-525-52094-8

The story of a classics scholar who decisively changed views of Homer’s artistry.

Drawing on considerable archival sources, Kanigel recounts in thorough, engaging detail the life of Milman Parry (1902-1935), a Harvard classics professor whose investigation of Homer’s works proved groundbreaking. Because Parry was hard to know—colleagues recall the “impermeable steadfastness” of a man who shared little with anyone—Kanigel portrays him largely through the work that consumed him. Analyzing Homer’s epic poems for patterns of words and phrases, Parry argued that they were “born in song and speech,” not written but handed down orally. Rather than taking up the question of authorship—whether the Iliad and Odyssey were created by one person or several—Parry believed that they were part of a tradition that “placed scant premiums on invention or originality.” Often performed by illiterate singers, they were “forever altered in performance,” responding to listeners’ expectations about style and language. Kanigel chronicles Parry’s youth in Oakland, California; education at Berkeley, where he was influenced by anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, among others; and completion of doctoral studies at the Sorbonne, where his thesis, published in 1928, “built a new intellectual edifice” and, through the efforts of his student Albert Lord, created the new discipline of oral studies. Beginning in 1933, Parry undertook extensive visits to Yugoslavia to find and record modern-day epic singers, returning with more than 1,000 recorded discs. While still an undergraduate, Parry married a fellow student after she became pregnant, but she was hardly a soul mate, and Kanigel uncovers evidence of her volatile personality and rage about her husband’s alleged infidelities. The quality of their marriage looms over the circumstances of Parry’s death: While he and his wife were in a Los Angeles hotel, he died of a gunshot wound. Ruled an accident, some family members—their daughter, for one—suspected that his wife killed him. As in previous books, Kanigel’s skill as a biographer is on full display, though general readers may get lost in some of the technical analysis.

A vivid chronicle of intellectual passion.

THE MARATHON DON'T STOP
The Life and Times of Nipsey Hussle
Kenner, Rob
Atria (288 pp.)
$27.00 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-1-982140-29-8

The first full biography of the multifaceted entrepreneur, committed philanthropist, and rising rap star.

Before his tragic murder in 2019, Nipsey Hussle (born Ermias Asghedom in 1985), who was already a fixture in the hip-hop community, was destined for a mainstream breakthrough year. In 2018, after a series of well-received mixtapes, he released his debut studio album, Victory Lap, a critical success that showcased how to transcend expectations and transform one’s environment—in Nipsey’s case, the violent streets of South Central Los Angeles, “a once-thriving Black neighborhood blighted by decades of divestment and a policy known as redlining that amounted to real estate
“It’s an extraordinarily honest look at life behind closed suburban doors—and with a sublimely redemptive conclusion.”

AND NOW I SPILL THE FAMILY-secrets

Kimball, Margaret
Illus. by the author
HarperOne (288 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Apr. 20, 2021
978-0-06-300744-4

Intensely candid debut memoir by illustrator and writer Kimball.

“The Secret,” the opening act of the book, pairs a charming illustrative style, marked by bold-line geometries and little handwritten pointers (“Essential sandwich ingredients,” “Weird, secret storage room”), with a startling first sentence: “My mom was thirty-one when she decided to take her own life.” That desperate act sets in motion the endless psychological battles surrounding custody. In the blended household in which she landed, her new family soon “began to splinter along biological lines,” with blood siblings forming alliances in what would become a long cold war. Kimball is never shy to point the finger at herself, recognizing her anger that her mother’s illness forced her to witness “the fact that she transformed from parent to stranger.” The drama grows with the emerging recognition that her mother is not the only member of the family to suffer from mental illness. It’s an extraordinarily honest look at life behind closed suburban doors—and with a sublimely redemptive conclusion.

A welcome debut that will leave readers eager for a successor—and soon.

THE BOOKSELLER OF FLORENCE
The Story of the Manuscripts That Illuminated the Renaissance
King, Ross
Atlantic Monthly (496 pp.)
$30.00 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-8021-3852-9

The role of books in the Florentine Renaissance.

In his latest, King revisits Florence, the setting for Brunelleschi’s Dome and Michelangelo and the Pope’s Ceiling. In 1433, on a street that was “at the very center of Florence’s manuscript trade,” 11-year-old Vespasiano da Bisticci began a “long and astounding career as a maker of books and a merchant of knowledge.” Known to many as the “king of the world’s booksellers,” the bright and amiable Vespasiano was well positioned to become friends with some of the city’s most influential and book-loving citizens, including Pope Eugenius IV and Cosimo de’ Medici. Besides making magnificent, illustrated books for wealthy customers and assisting them in building their libraries, Vespasiano’s main claim to fame, argues King, was his own book, The Lives of 103 Illustrious Men, which Swiss historian Jacob Burkhardt used as a primary reference for his influential The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860). Vespasiano wrote about important manuscript hunters who unearthed ancient texts that were vital to literary and historical scholarship. He became an expert on the manuscripts and authors and traveled to inspect private libraries and make purchases for his bookshop and wealthy clients, took commissions to help stock important libraries, and hired copyists to reproduce manuscripts. King discusses in lavish detail how scribes copied manuscripts and illustrators produced illuminated decorations. The development of new scripts allowed speedier copying; one Florentine copyist could produce 20 pages, front and back, in two days. “The 1460s,” writes the author, “witnessed a higher production of manuscripts in Europe than at any point in history.” Throughout, King deftly navigates Florence’s rich cultural and political history, painting intimate portraits of Vespasiano and others involved in the book world during these incredible times,
including the man who would revolutionize it all, Johannes Gutenberg. Vespasiano’s fascinating and expansive story occasionally sags under the weight of the author’s desire to leave no detail unturned.

A treat for book lovers.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EARTH
Four Billion Years in Eight Chapters
Knoll, Andrew H.
Custom House/Morrow (272 pp.)
$22.99 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-06-285391-2

A geologist skillfully condenses the history of the Earth.
A Harvard professor of natural history and Earth and planetary sciences, Knoll begins when the Earth coalesced from dust and rocks circling the sun. Animals more complex than bacteria do not appear until the halfway point of the book, but few readers will complain. Good evidence for the Earth’s age did not appear until the 20th century, when measuring the decay of radioactive uranium revealed its age at 4.6 billion years. Rocks raining down generated enough heat to keep the Earth molten. By the time it cooled around 4 billion years ago, two substances we take for granted, water and oxygen, were missing. Water arrived from meteors, which continue to fall, although less often than in previous millennia. Knoll engagingly recounts the theories of how life began along with the startling fact that evidence of microbial life soon appeared after the Earth cooled. It’s possible that life is not a lucky accident but inevitable once certain conditions are present. In the absence of oxygen, primitive organisms lived off alternate sources of energy such as sulfur or iron, which existed in the oceans and hot springs. More than 1 billion years passed before cyanobacteria evolved to extract energy from sunlight and water. This process of photosynthesis produced oxygen, leading eventually to the "Great Oxygenation Event" that marginalized older life forms but jump-started evolution because respiration using oxygen yields far more energy. After another 3 billion years, more complex organisms appeared. Early animals date from 500 million to 600 million years ago. Fish appeared at around 450 million years ago and began walking on land 100 million years later. In later chapters, Knoll speeds up the narrative but maintains a focus on geology as he proceeds through dinosaurs, mammals, continent migration, and catastrophic mass extinctions. Of course, the author’s study of humans dominates the closing section, which recounts hominid evolution and the dismal details of how we are making a mess of things.

An expert primer on the history of everything.

A SHORT HISTORY OF HUMANITY
A New History of Old Europe
Krause, Johannes & Trappe, Thomas
Trans. by Waight, Caroline
Random House (288 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-593-22942-2

A lucid overview of European prehistory.
“Bones and stones” once dominated archaeology, but advances in genetics have produced new information and settled old arguments about human evolution, relationships, and migrations. Krause, the director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Biology, and journalist Trappe write that the young field of archaeogenetics enables scientists to “read skeleton fragments and identify connections that would have been unknown even to the people to whom the bones belonged.” By the end of the 20th century, anthropologists knew that ancient hominids had left Africa and spread across the old world. Modern Homo sapiens did the same more than once, arriving permanently in Europe 40,000 years ago. There, they encountered the closely related Neanderthals, who soon died off or were absorbed, leaving us a sprinkling of their genes. A series of ice ages made life difficult until the current warm spell began 12,000 years ago. Modern European DNA contains genes from the hunter-gatherers who thrived until they were marginalized 8,000 years ago by a mass migration of farmers from Anatolia (modern Turkey), which had undergone the agricultural revolution. Completing the modern European genome required another mass migration of pastoralists from the Russian steppes 4,800 years ago. Near the halfway point of the book, the authors pivot from the genetics of our ancestors to their diseases. Hunter-gatherers were too scattered to support epidemics, which began when humans began to live close to one another and their animals, the source of most modern-day epidemics. Readers may be surprised to learn that scientists were only able to offer guesses about the cause of the 14th-century Black Death and earlier plagues—until 2011, when they decoded the genome of the bubonic plague bacillus. Leprosy also terrorized our ancestors but retreated, replaced by tuberculosis, a closely related bacillus, which became the leading killer until the 20th century. The authors conclude their tight yet wide-ranging survey with a discussion of how science does not support any claims of racial supremacy.

An impressive update on human evolution.
“Fascinating insight into the development of an inquisitive, probing authorial mind.”

THE HARD CROWD

Rachel Kushner

Essays 2000-2020

Scribner (272 pp.)

$26.00 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-982157-69-2

The acclaimed novelist offers 20 years of entertaining essays on topics ranging from motorcycles and flying cars to Italian cinema and The Love Boat.

“To be hard is to let things roll off you, to live in the present, not to dwell or worry,” writes Kushner in the philosophical title piece. As she admits, those likely aren’t qualities a writer possesses. The essays serve as testaments to the author’s talent for marshaling her softness into a curiosity that allows her to write capably on a variety of subjects. These include the exceptional opening essay, on her participation in the annual Cabo 1000 motorcycle race in Baja California; her account of a visit to a Palestinian refugee camp; an essay about an Italian cruise ship that crashed in 2012 and the subsequent disgrace of the captain who abandoned his passengers; and that title essay, in which she muses that much of life is “living intensely in the present” until one’s later years, when a person will “turn reflective, interior, to examine and sort and tally”—which Kushner, who is in her early 50s, does by recounting episodes from her youth in San Francisco. A few of these pieces would have benefited from more reflection. Essays on a Bay Area concert promoter she worked for or a Dartmouth friend of her father’s who went to Paris “chasing European bohemia” are loosely focused reminiscences that don’t reach the depth of the others. Still, the best essays are superb: excellent works of literary criticism on Denis Johnson, Marguerite Duras, and Clàr rice Lispector; a revealing examination of the filmmakers and images that influenced her novel The Flamethrowers, a finalist for the National Book Award; and a perceptive work about the artist Jeff Koons, whom she calls, in a slyly cutting phrase, “a pragmatic, probing authorial mind.

Even as unknowns become known, however, “we press to silence any and all language that elicits pain. But sometimes, buried in this suppressed language is an ancestor—the power in a name.” In 1904, her great-grandfather Burt was lynched before he had a chance to meet his son, a tragic story that, though largely forgotten in broader historical contexts, is obviously still a wound for the family. In this narrative, Lane seeks an origin story, searching for what facts are available and wondering about the legacy she is passing on to a child she avoided having until she was 36. Always probing, the author casts about for a missing piece of the puzzle—maybe the voice of her grandmother, a picture of her father as a child, or a relic or heirloom—to ground her history in something other than the terrible memory of a lynching. Lane switches between present reflections—e.g., the trauma of seeing a hangman game in a toy store or how she changed her mind about not wanting to have children 20 years after she had an abortion—and a dissection of a past populated with the people who might have witnessed Burt’s last days. Though the interplay between the two voices is sometimes uneven, and the imagined scenes lack some of the poetry of the straightforward memoir sections, the text is still valuable as an investigation of the undeniable force of intergenerational trauma, especially as it pertains to the Black community.

A multiangled exploration of family trauma and the forging of an identity.

WE ARE BRIDGES

Cassandra Lane

A Memoir

Feminist Press (232 pp.)

$17.95 paper | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-952177-92-7

A prospective mother searches for—and at times invents—a creation story for her family that she can share with her future child.

“This story is a hybrid—a romance and a horror, a memoir and a fiction—forged out of what is known and what is unknown,” writes Lane at the beginning.

THE LOVE BOAT

Jenny Lawson

Broken (In the Best Possible Way)

Henry Holt (288 pp.)

$27.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-250-07703-5

The Bloggess is back to survey the hazards and hilarity of imperfection. Lawson is a wanderer. Whether on her award-winning blog or in the pages of her bestselling books, she reliably takes readers to places they weren’t even aware they wanted to go—e.g., shopping for dog condoms or witnessing what appears to be a satanic ritual. Longtime fans of the author’s prose know that the destinations really aren’t the point; it’s the laugh-out-loud, tears-streaming-down-your-face journeys that make her writing so irresistible. This book is another solid collection of humorous musings on everyday life, or at least the life of a self-described “super introvert” who has a fantastic imagination and dozens of chosen spirit animals. While Furiously Happy centered on the idea of making good mental health days exceptionally good, her latest celebrates the notion that being broken is beautiful—or at least nothing to be ashamed of. “I have managed to fuck shit up in shockingly impressive ways and still be considered a fairly acceptable person,” writes Lawson, who has made something of an art form out of awkward confessions. For example, she chronicles a mix-up at the post office that left her with a “big of sack filled with a dozen small squishy penises [with] smiley faces painted on them.” It’s not all laughs, though,
as the author addresses her ongoing battle with both physical and mental illness, including a trial of transcranial magnetic stimulation, a relatively new therapy for people who suffer from treatment-resistant depression. The author’s colloquial narrative style may not suit the linear-narrative crowd, but this isn’t for them. “What we really want,” she writes, “is to know we’re not alone in our terribleness…. Human foibles are what make us us, and the art of mortification is what brings us all together.” The material is fresh, but the scaffolding is the same.

Fans will find comfort in Lawson’s dependably winning mix of shameless irreverence, wicked humor, and vulnerability.

**THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE AMERICAN ESSAY**

**1945-1970**

Lopate, Phillip

Anchor (444 pp.)

$17.95 paper | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-525-56733-2

A celebration of writing on American culture and politics.

Essayist and anthologist Lopate gathers 38 pieces from 1945 to 1970, a period when essay writing flourished and “the figure of the public intellectual, who would be expected to transmit and explain complex ideas, was in ascension.” James Agee, Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, Elizabeth Hardwick, Rachel Carson, Martin Luther King Jr., Edward Hoagland, and Flannery O’Connor are among the writers included, with many essays relevant to our own times. For example, in “The Dilemma of Liberal Democracy” (1947), Walter Lippmann reminded readers that George Washington “believed that the people should rule. But he did not believe that because the people ruled, there would be freedom, justice, and good government.” Washington realized “that there was no guarantee that the rule of the people would not in its turn be despotic, arbitrary, corrupt, unjust, and unwise.” In 1964, Richard Hofstadter identified “the paranoid style” of politics, characterized by “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” and inflamed by mass media: “The villains of the modern right are much better known to the public; the literature of the paranoid style is by the same token richer and more circumstantial in personal description and personal invective.” Lopate notes that in the 1960s, the personal essay began to dominate with writers such as Norman Mailer (reflecting on meeting Jacqueline Kennedy), Susan Sontag (elucidating the concept of “Camp, with “its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration”), and Joan Didion. Lopate has selected both iconic essays (MLK’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail”) and lesser known pieces by famous writers: James Baldwin, for one, on visiting a Swiss village, where none of the 600 residents had ever seen a Black man; “there was yet no suggestion that I was human: I was simply a living wonder.” Other contributors include E.B. White, John Updike, Rachel Carson, and N. Scott Momaday.

Well-chosen essays on enduring themes.

**YOUR TURN**

**How To Be an Adult**

Lythcott-Haims, Julie

Henry Holt (406 pp.)

$26.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-250-13777-7

Constructive techniques to help young adults transition into productive grown-ups.

As any adult will tell you, becoming an adult involves so much more than just reaching a certain age. It also requires flexibility, problem-solving skills, and the ability to handle difficult situations without panicking or running to your parents for help. “Adulting can’t be boiled down to ten tips or even a thousand,” writes Lythcott-Haims in this natural follow-up to How To Raise an Adult. “Being an adult is a state of mind that ignites the ‘doing’ that ends up forging your adult self. It’s part wanting to, part having to, and part learning how. The hardest part is that because it’s happening in your own mind you pretty much do it by yourself.” Thankfully, the author, a former Stanford dean of freshman and mother of “two itinerant young adults,” is equipped with a wide-ranging collection of concepts that will make young adults feel like they are not alone in the process. She uses her own life situations as well as examples from people she’s interviewed to help convey the specific message expressed in each chapter. Topics include figuring out how to fend for yourself, developing a good character, learning how to handle your finances (invest early!), and maintaining a healthy body and mind. Regarding the latter, the author delves into mindfulness and the importance of being both grateful and kind, two attributes more necessary now than ever. Although the book is overlong and doesn’t present any groundbreaking discoveries, the author brings fresh, invigorating energy to her mostly common-sense information. Her conversational prose and can-do attitude will entice readers to make it to the end of this lengthy book, emerging with a greater sense of what adulting means and how to proceed with confidence and enthusiasm.

The author’s sensible advice and friendly tone will help many young readers grow into mature, responsible adults.

**JACKPOT**

**How The Super-Rich Really Live—and How Their Wealth Harms Us All**

Mechanic, Michael

Simon & Schuster (400 pp.)

$27.00 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-9821272-21-3

Is getting filthy rich really worth it? Mother Jones senior editor Mechanic offers a harsh wake-up call for the millions of American dreamers who still believe that winning the lottery—or just simply having obscene wealth—will change
A highly entertaining, celebratory, and essential reader for history buffs and barbecue lovers alike.

BLACK SMOKE

their lives for the better. The author ushers readers past the velvet rope to reveal the lifestyles of the ultrawealthy and the ever more expensive ventures they have to indulge in to not only keep themselves amused, but to outdo their wealthy peers. One of the most interesting factoids in this well-researched book is that, according to one study, a person’s “self-reported positive emotions improved with rising earnings up to a saturation point at about $65,000 per year. Negative emotions... declined as earnings increased, reaching an inverse saturation point at $95,000.” As Mechanic demonstrates throughout this eye-opening book, once the contentment with one’s finances ends, the addiction to “extrinsic” goals—e.g., buying mansions, cars, and other luxury goods—leaves less time for the “intrinsic” pursuits that give us real grounding. The author is a personable guide to this gilded world, showing how the ultrawealthy make their money and how U.S. tax laws and loopholes allow them to keep building it—but he also provides a cautionary tale about the myriad headaches that unbridled wealth can bring. Mechanic is happy to report that the rich are often bored and miserable—and (surprise!) less compassionate unless they can balance their extrinsic and intrinsic pursuits. Though the text is often a gleeful sendup of the absurd eccentricities of the super-rich, the author also spotlights a few billionaires who find genuine spiritual contentment in giving their wealth away. “For an actual rags-to-riches tale,” writes the author, “one might turn to Ford Foundation president Darren Walker, who grew up penniless in rural Texas and went on to become an icon in the world of philanthropy.”

A scathing but fair indictment of how the mindless worship of wealth makes us all poorer.

SPOOKED
The Trump Dossier, Black Cube, and the Rise of Private Spies

Meier, Barry
978-0-06-295068-0

The abrupt rise of corporatized spying in geopolitics and business, portrayed as a strange mix of journalistic ambition and Nixonian dirty tricks.

Meier, a two-time winner of the George Polk Award for International Reporting, assembles a worrying account with dry precision, concluding ominously, “the behavior of corporate intelligence firms has only become more predatory and abusive.” The labyrinthine narrative reveals a slick, high-stakes dark side to the proliferation of private intelligence firms via such flashpoints as the “Steele dossier” on Donald Trump and the “sleazy tactics” employed by Israeli firm Black Cube on behalf of Harvey Weinstein. Decrying “the oversized impact” of these private spies, the author circles back to a grim secret: “the big money is made not by exposing the truth but by papering it over or concealing it.” In his primary narrative thread, Meier tracks the startling journey of the anti-Trump dossier, starting with former journalist Glenn Simpson, founder of purportedly “ethical” investigative firm Fusion GPS, who contracted former British spy Christopher Steele to conduct the investigation. (Unsurprisingly, neither Simpson nor Steele agreed to speak with the author.) Even four years later, the account of the frantic push to publicize Steele’s memos before the 2016 election remains tense and startling. “Absent efforts by Glenn Simpson and Christopher Steele to pull the strings of journalists,” writes Meier, “it’s possible the public would have never learned about the dossier.”

Still, the author calls the release of the document “a media clusterfuck of epic proportions, one that was the consequence of the long-metastasizing relationship between private spies and journalists.” Its impact and authenticity crumbled during the ensuing lawsuits, and the author concludes that Steele’s source was one of many “who had stumbled into the private spying business as a last resort.” Throughout, Meier’s considerable journalistic chops help him maintain control of numerous sub-narratives and a cast of ruthless eccentrics.

An adroitly handled, disturbing exposé, clearly relevant to discussions of the tactics of Trump and company.

BLACK SMOKE
African Americans and the United States of Barbecue

Miller, Adrian
Univ. of North Carolina (328 pp.) $30.00 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-4696-6280-0

A deep dive into the past, present, and future of a classic American cuisine, recognizing the African Americans at the heart of it.

“If Black people ever had a national flag, it would be the Black Power fist holding a rib!” In Miller’s delicious third book, after Soul Food (a James Beard Award winner) and The President’s Kitchen Cabinet, he opens with this anonymous quote, illustrating the abiding connection between African American culture and barbecue. But African Americans—the “innovators, rejuvenators, and reinventors” of barbecue—have seen their singular contributions to the culinary tradition “pushed to the margins.” To right this wrong, the author researched “hundreds of books, cookbooks, newspapers, online resources, oral histories, and periodicals,” interviewed barbecue aficionados and people working in the industry, judged competitions, and ate his way through more than 200 restaurants across the country. He chronicles how Native American cooking techniques from the 1500s evolved into the social, festive food tradition we now call barbecue. An engaging storyteller, Miller brings his subjects to vivid life, as in the chapter on Black barbecue entrepreneurship, which predates Emancipation, with enslaved men and women using their business proceeds to buy freedom. He explores what makes the Black barbecue aesthetic exceptional and the many complexities of etiquette.
“You’ve probably noticed that when you ask a barbecuer for tips on the cooking process, he or she is somewhat forthcoming,” he writes. “It’s when you ask for recipes that everyone becomes tight-lipped. Why? Because a barbecue sauce recipe is easy to replicate, but when it comes to cooking, a pitmaster counts on you being too lazy to actually prepare traditional barbecue.” Still, Miller provides plenty of mouthwatering recipes by Black barbecue artists for sauce, meat and fish, and side dishes as well as profiles of unsung Black barbecue trailblazers across three centuries. The author rounds out the book with archival documents and color photographs.

A highly entertaining, celebratory, and essential reader for history buffs and barbecue lovers alike.

TO HELL WITH IT
Of Sin and Sex, Chicken Wings, and Dante’s Entirely Ridiculous, Needlessly Guilt-Inducing Inferno
Moore, Dinty W.
Univ. of Nebraska (180 pp.)
$19.95 paper | Mar. 1, 2021
978-1-4962-2460-6

The nonbeliever’s guide to eternal torment.

Fans of the formally innovative comic essayist Moore learned of his falling-out with the faith of his childhood via his 1997 spiritual memoir The Accidental Buddhist. Now, however, it turns out he’s still working on freeing himself from the far-reaching aftereffects of Catholic school, inviting readers to join him in sloughing off the “massive emotional backpacks of needless guilt that have been strapped onto our tender psyches by organized religion and the pretzel-logic of medieval theology.” In chapters linked to the cantos of Dante’s Inferno, the author debunks the poem’s “pulsing, perilous mixtape of Greek, Roman, and Christian myths and images.” He also attacks the misinformation distributed by his first religion teacher, Sister Mary Mark (he’s still unclear on how his donated milk money saved pagan babies); the writings of St. Augustine, “a great and devout man, a spiritual genius, and honestly, a bit of a wackadoodle”; The New Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism, “a pint-sized paperback offering a significant dumbing down of key biblical teachings, written expressly for impressionable young ears”; and an even more bizarre book titled The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven (2010), which was “pulled from the shelves in 2015” due to a lawsuit questioning its veracity. To research Inferno-stoking vices such as gluttony, hoarding, and squandering, Moore competed in a chicken-wings eating contest in Kentucky and attended the annual “World’s Longest Yard Sale,” which stretches nearly 700 miles from southern Michigan to Alabama. The author also offers unexpectedly moving passages on the sad family history that inspired his mother to frequently state, “My hell is right here on Earth.” Luckily, Moore found his own saving grace early on. “Each time that ugly snake of despair circled around and tried to take another bite out of me,” he writes, “I was kept alive by humor and by incredulity.”

Unstrap your backpack of guilt and sit down for a laugh.

SUSAN, LINDA, NINA & COKIE
The Extraordinary Story of the Founding Mothers of NPR
Napoli, Lisa
Abrams (352 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-4197-5040-3

How four of the most important women journalists of the past five decades ended up together at the then-fledgling National Public Radio.

In this natural follow-up to Up All Night: Ted Turner, CNN, and the Birth of 24-Hour News (2020), Napoli narrates the origin stories of NPR’s female journalistic superheroes: Susan Stamberg and Linda Wertheimer, who launched the network’s groundbreaking, signature show All Things Considered; pre-eminent legal affairs correspondent Nina Totenberg, an expert on the Supreme Court; and pioneering political journalist Cokie Roberts. Though their early paths differed, they joined forces at NPR, overqualified and underpaid due to the widespread gender discrimination of the day. At the time, writes the author, “there were no jobs for women or the company already ‘had its woman.’…Even women with degrees from elite schools, it seemed, attended secretarial courses after graduation in order to equip themselves for the working world.” The quartet banded together (their area of the newsroom was nicknamed the “Fallopian Jungle”) to push for change for women and minorities. “Regarding hiring and union matters and management issues,” writes Napoli, “they did not hold back….They weren’t women in power—though, had they wished, they could likely have seized it—they were women of power.” Though they sound like journalism’s Justice League, the author doesn’t provide adequate documentation of them springing into action together, and she dwells more on their struggles than their successes. She wraps up the primary narrative with NPR’s near bankruptcy in the 1980s even though the “founding mothers” had little to do with either causing or solving the network’s financial woes. In a history filled with so many powerful moments and fascinating details about journalism, perseverance, and gender bias, Napoli could have chosen a higher note for her conclusion.

A flawed yet well-researched deep dive into the careers of the journalists who helped make NPR a household name.
CONFLICTED AMERICAN LANDSCAPES
Nye, David E.
MIT Press (280 pp.)
$35.00 paper | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-262-54208-4

A well-argued account of how different constituencies view landscapes differently, making agreement on their conservation and use nearly impossible.

Nye, a senior research fellow at the Charles Babbage Institute, begins by rightly pointing out that U.S. lands “are riven with conflicts over science, religion, identity, and politics.” These conflicts are seldom more evident than when it comes to deciding how to use land in a mosaic of existing landscapes. The U.S. has more unmodified places than many developed countries, but for every Yosemite, notes the author, there are countless sites used foremost for human purposes. Vast swaths of the West are government reserves, much given over to military use: One bombing range in New Mexico is “almost twice as extensive as the Grand Canyon.” Though it’s surrounded by both agricultural land and wilderness, considering such a place requires one vision or another of Nye’s “six conceptions of nature...wilderness, pastoral, utilitarian, fundamentalist Christian, Native American, sacrifice zones.” For the most part, writes the author, the American pattern has been relentlessly utilitarian, with progress, and the attendant destruction wrought by it, a seeming cultural norm. Many of Nye’s case studies, such as the Grand Canyon and the Nevada nuclear testing grounds, are located in the West, but he also considers such artifacts as skyscrapers, an important element in so many cityscapes, and eastern river systems such as the River Rouge, once a wetland bordered by forest that afforded Native people multiple uses such as fishing, hunting, and farming but that now has been dredged and channelized so that large vessels could reach industrial Detroit. Even now, Nye notes, “most land is still considered raw material to be sold as real estate that owners may transform as they wish in pursuit of profit, pleasure, or personal whim,” even as the results of misuse are ever more apparent.

Of interest to wilderness advocates, planners, and students of landscape geography.

LITTLE MATCHES
A Memoir of Grief and Light
O’Hara, Maryanne
HarperOne (368 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-0-06-302776-3

The story of a mother’s heartbreak- ing loss and her quest for answers to life’s tough questions.

O’Hara’s daughter, Caitlin, was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis at age 2. During their decadeslong wait for a lung transplant, the author began using a blog to provide updates about Caitlin’s condition to their family and friends. Despite her illness, Caitlin remained largely optimistic throughout her life, pursuing her interests, attending college, and traveling extensively before her death in her early 30s. As O’Hara shows, her daughter believed in taking advantage of every opportunity and inspired others to do the same. Over the years, the author received comments from strangers regarding the inspiration and strength that her own and Caitlin’s posts provided when facing their own circumstances of grief and loss. “I savor every message,” writes O’Hara, “the words that keep her alive for a little while longer for the moments it takes to read them. They inspire me to keep writing about her—why not, if it helps people so much? It’s the one thing I can do that feels right.”

Because much of her life was spent as a mother and caregiver of a sick child, Caitlin’s death left her understandably bereft: “Now what am I for?” Throughout this heartfelt memoir, which weaves in content from emails, text messages, and journal entries, O’Hara opens up about the private thoughts, fears, hopes, and disappointments that consumed their lives over the three decades they waited for a transplant. O’Hara also shares details of her spiritual quest, including intriguing readings with psychic mediums as well as incredible synchronicities that she and her daughter shared. In expressing her emotions on the page, O’Hara will help others in similar situations. “The timeline of grief is not linear,” she writes, “and I’m learning that my openness about grief’s persistence is valuable to others who are inclined to hide pain.”

A raw yet comforting journal of grief, pain, and sparks of hope.

WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS
True Stories From America’s Bravest Warriors
Patterson, James & Eversmann, Matt with Mooney, Chris
Little, Brown (416 pp.)
$30.00 | Feb. 8, 2021
978-0-316-42909-2

Patterson and Mooney team with retired Army Sgt. Eversmann to bring together poignant stories of American veterans from all branches of the service.

In this wide-ranging, consistently absorbing collection, the authors cover the entire spectrum of American military action during the last 50 years, from Vietnam to the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. There are some truly striking experiences here—e.g., Gen. Ron Silverman, a dentist, installing a crown on one of Saddam Hussein’s teeth (“He starts talking about the history of the Middle East...It’s not so much a discussion as a lecture”) or Col. Mario Costagliola’s work near ground zero in the aftermath of 9/11. Nearly all of the pieces contain harrowing elements, especially Jeddah Deloria’s account of being wounded...
in Afghanistan. The “Home Front” section includes stories by veterans facing unemployment or PTSD after leaving the service while “Red,” a human intelligence collector, chronicles his interrogation of Iraqi prisoners. The final section, “Memorial Day,” looks at the heartbreaking impact of soldiers’ deaths on their loved ones. The contributors come from a wide variety of backgrounds, from prep school to poverty, but they all demonstrate incredible pride and determination. One potent example is Lisa Marie Bodenburg, who fought entrenched sexism to become a helicopter gunner in the Marines. Many of the contributors come from military families, and a high percentage offer their personal stories of what they were doing on 9/11 and how those tragic events affected their lives in the following years. Narrated in the present tense, the text is urgent and full of suspense, and while there is some repetition of experiences, the stories are different enough to keep the pages turning. The clear, matter-of-fact tone only adds to the gravity of life-and-death events that these courageous Americans have endured. Even after their service, many of them continue to work with veterans and their families.

A gripping account of American military members’ experiences before, during, and after wartime.

TAX THE RICH!
How Lies, Loopholes, and Lobbyists Made the Rich Even Richer and What To Do About It
Pearl, Morris & Payne, Erica & Patriotic Millionaires
The New Press (336 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-62097-626-5

A book from the Patriotic Millionaires group demands that wealthy Americans contribute vastly more to the public treasury.

Pearl, Payne, and their fellow philanthropic millionaires have a dire warning for the ultrawealthy: “You cannot continue to sit by and enjoy your riches while the rest of the world falls further into poverty and chaos…. Reread your history books. Dysfunctional societies don’t end well for rich people either.” Though being rich is a fine thing—“I would recommend it to anyone,” Pearl breezily notes—it carries certain responsibilities as well as considerable freedoms. An equitable tax code is a start. The current system was built for the rich and by the rich, and it is structured so that it actively militates against building a strong middle class, predicated on fictions such as the trickle-down theory of economics. Inequality is rampant, and with it, instability and strife grow. This is all by design, write the authors. Against it, they talk economics. By reason of the theory of marginal utility, which holds that a person who has lots of units of something—dollars, say—will value an added unit less than a person who has few of them, those who have more money than they know what to do with will scarcely register a tax hike. Doing away with carried-interest deductions, putting capital gains rates on par with the rates applied to earned income, and taxing inheritances will do their part, too. The authors note that the current tax mess can’t be laid only at the door of Republicans, and they charge that it’s up to the people to rise up not violently but politically by voting for those who will advance a more equitable system. “If the American people are paying attention…they can have the kind of tax code they want, regardless of who’s in charge.”

A well-reasoned argument that, given the arrival of a like-minded administration, may soon prove to have legs.

BUSES ARE A COMIN’
Memoir of a Freedom Rider
Person, Charles with Rooker, Richard
St. Martin’s (304 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-250-27419-9

A stirring memoir that offers a view of the legacy of the 1961 Freedom Rides on both micro and macro scales.

This dynamic narrative effectively demonstrates the circumstances that led to the Freedom Rides and serves as a reflection of what it means to belong in America, then and now. With the assistance of Rooker, Person (b. 1942) chronicles his journey in a way that testifies to the impressive character traits shared by the Freedom Riders, especially strength, determination, and unwavering dedication to equality. After enrolling at Morehouse College in 1960, Person became the youngest of the original 13 and the last to join the group. His perspective is that of an outsider becoming an insider, and he generously shares significant moments such as grappling with Klansmen in Atlanta and being attacked in Birmingham for sitting at a Whites-only counter. By recounting his inspiring youth experiences, the author also creates a forceful call to action for readers to fully understand the gravity of this “groundswell of change.” The depth with which the author examines not just his own story, but that of his fellow riders, gives a multifaceted perspective that clearly demonstrates why each was committed to the cause. The throughline for himself is clear, as he articulates early in the book his Papa’s advice to “do something.” By divulging the inner stories of his fellow riders, Person offers a unique and powerful aggregate view of events.

A vital story, this memoir is also an instructive gift to future generations fighting for change.
NUCLEAR FOLLY
A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis
Plokhy, Serhii
Norton (464 pp.)
$35.00  |  Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-393-54081-9

A fresh examination of the historical milestone.

On the heels of last year’s highly praised Gambling With Armageddon, Plokhy, Harvard professor of Ukrainian history, covers similar ground in this companion volume. From John F. Kennedy’s humiliation after the disastrous 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev’s 1962 humiliation when he withdrew Soviet missiles from Cuba, “both Kennedy and Khrushchev marched from one mistake to another...caused by a variety of factors, from ideological hubris and overriding political agendas to misreading the other side’s geopolitical objectives and intentions, poor judgment often due to the lack of good intelligence, and cultural misunderstandings.” Although delighted after the Bay of Pigs, Fidel Castro had no doubt that America would try again and appealed for Soviet protection. Khrushchev accepted because he was losing the arms race with the U.S. He argued that “since the Americans have already surrounded the Soviet Union with a ring of their...missile installations, we should pay them back in their own coin.” Having detected the missiles in October 1962, Kennedy believed they should be removed, and the debate was between air strikes and an invasion. Shocked at America’s reaction, Khrushchev back-pedaled. Most readers know that he ultimately withdrew the missiles in exchange for an American promise to remove missiles from Turkey. Despite a plethora of speeches, diplomatic notes, and editorials, Plokhy keeps the pages turning, and he includes far more Soviet material than earlier scholars. Surprisingly, Kremlin archives contain notes and transcripts of Khrushchev’s secret discussions that parallel Kennedy’s, and there is also no shortage of memoirs. Soviet soldiers hated Cuba and raged at laboring to build the sites just to tear them down. Plokhy concludes that both sides assumed that nuclear war meant the end of civilization, so they relented. Unfortunately, he adds, “there is little doubt that today there are world leaders prepared to take a more cavalier attitude.”

Far from the first account but superbly researched and uncomfortably timely.

SECOND NATURE
Scenes From a World Remade
Rich, Nathaniel
MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux (304 pp.)
$27.00  |  Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-374-10603-4

The author of Losing Earth returns with further assessments of climate change and environmental destruction.

In this outstanding collection of pieces, some of which were published in different forms in the New York Times Magazine, the New Republic, Men’s Journal, and other outlets, Rich provides vivid, often disturbing portraits of individuals and events contributing to “the death rattle of the romantic idea that nature is innocent of human influence.” The author hits the ground running with a gripping account of the stubborn lawyer who, since 1999, has been suing DuPont for massive dumping of toxic perfluorooctanoic acid (a component of Teflon) into landfills, streams, and water supplies. His article led to the highly praised film Dark Waters (2019), but the victory was modest. DuPont settled with the Environmental Protection Agency for a paltry $16.5 million (“less than two percent of the profits earned by DuPont on PFOA that year”) and slowly phased out PFOA but admitted no liability and maintains that its closely related substitute is safe. Sadly, in this and other stories, readers learn that the EPA is largely toothless. The author chronicles the 2015-2016 Aliso Canyon methane leak, the largest in American history, which drenched a wealthy Los Angeles community with methane and other far more toxic gases. The company paid a fine and is still fending off lawsuits, but unsurprisingly, politicians and regulatory officials looked after their own interests. In other essays, Rich explores Louisiana and the Mississippi River, ecologically fragile even before Hurricane Katrina, which triggered an immensely expensive reconstruction that is not improving matters. The author doubts that genetic manipulation will save the environment, but he does offer entertaining stories about the efforts to restore the extinct passenger pigeon, create a rabbit that glows in the dark, or get people to “buy burgers composed of cultured animal cells, if they tasted good enough.”

Another disheartening but important book from Rich.
HIGH CONFLICT
Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out
Ripley, Amanda
Simon & Schuster (368 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-982128-56-2

A revealing study of “high conflict,” the intractable sort that seems to be running like a virus through American society.

In a society, useful conflict helps advance social causes and proves “a force that pushes us to be better people.” Journalist Ripley, author of The Smartest Kids in the World, contrasts this with “high conflict,” the kind that leads practitioners to label their foes as evil rather than merely opposed, that causes us to think differently—and not for the better. “We feel increasingly certain of our own superiority and, at the same time, more and more mystified by the other side,” writes the author, who adds that it is possible to teach ourselves to deescalate before high conflict results in violence, which is not inevitable but is all too certain of our own superiority and, at the same time, more and more mystified by the other side,” writes the author, who adds that it is possible to teach ourselves to deescalate before high conflict results in violence, which is not inevitable but is all too often how such friction works out. Ripley’s observations are provocative, and she introduces us to ideas of mediation and problem-solving that would make many people less miserable if put into practice. Sometimes, however, in the manner of magazine stories, the human-interest anecdotes feel like padding.

Other times, the illustrative stories are right on point, as with Ripley’s account of a group of largely conservative Michiganders and largely liberal New Yorkers who met, talked, talked more, and realized that they had commonalities enough to help them work through their differences: “Despite everything, in defiance of all the forces keeping them in conflict, they wanted to make sense of each other.” The author adds that this happy result was ephemeral. When the two camps went back home, it didn’t take long before each was entrenched in their former oppositional position, some members even more radicalized. This means, she concludes, that everyone involved has put in the work: “To keep conflict healthy in an adversarial world, the encounters can’t end.”

Students of mediation, social psychology, and conflict resolution will find much of value here.

SHEER MISERY
Soldiers in Battle in WWII
Roberts, Mary Louise
Univ. of Chicago (208 pp.)
$23.00 | Apr. 21, 2021
978-0-226-75314-0

An anecdotal overview of the day-to-day rigors of war as experienced by the common soldier in World War II.

Roberts, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, pulls together brutal accounts from soldiers who participated in the “three campaigns [that] left high-water marks for infantry misery: the 1943-44 winter campaign in the Italian mountains, the summer 1944 battles in Normandy, and the 1944-45 winter battles in northwest Europe.” As the author shows with vivid detail, their trials went far beyond exposure to enemy action. The battlefield’s assaults on the senses were unremitting. Frontline troops faced awful weather, notably during the winter of 1944-45, with only sporadic opportunities to warm up and dry off. In some units, trench foot, caused by chronically cold, wet feet, put as many soldiers out of action as enemy fire, and some lost their feet to frostbite or gangrene. American soldiers’ boots, in particular, were notoriously leaky and ill-fitting. In the chapter entitled “The Dirty Body,” Roberts shows how soldiers were aptly portrayed by Bill Mauldin’s GI cartoon characters Willie and Joe, who deeply annoyed the buttoned-up, spit-and-polish sensibilities of Gen. George Patton. Dirt was antithetical to discipline, Patton thought, but Willie and Joe became heroes to rank-and-file soldiers; a too-clean uniform became a marker of noncombat troops. Because officials were also anxious to keep the dead and wounded out of sight as much as possible, the Graves Registration Service arrived on battlefields shortly after the smoke had cleared to bury the bodies promptly. Photos of the dead rarely appeared back home other than for the purpose of drumming up sympathy and/or anger to help fundraising efforts. Roberts uses her sources to powerful effect, and the illustrations and photos, while sometimes disturbing, add to the narrative impact.

A tightly focused, graphic illustration of the many ways that war is hell.

WITHIN OUR GRASP
Childhood Malnutrition Worldwide and the Revolution Taking Place To End It
Russell, Sharman Apt
Pantheon (336 pp.)
$28.95 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-5247-4724-4

A heartening survey of what good people are doing to help end childhood hunger.

Russell writes that nearly 1 in 4 children under the age of 5 are malnourished, or “stunted.” If this persists, they grow into stunted adults. Mixing history, nutrition science, interviews with experts, and accounts of her visits to aid organizations and projects (with a focus on Malawi), the author delivers an engaging, modestly optimistic narrative about a sadly everyday issue. Although most victims of malnourishment grow up in poverty, notes the author, adequate food is often available for adults. In many cases, external circumstances condemn their children. With no time to breastfeed for the first six months, overworked mothers introduce solid food too early, usually non-nutritious gruel containing local water and local germs. In Africa, diarrhea causes the most deaths among poor children. Another unnerving fact is how badly humanitarians performed

“A tightly focused, graphic illustration of the many ways that war is hell.”
for decades after World War II. The accepted aid method was to ship food to needy nations and set up feeding stations. However, many couldn't reach the stations, and severely malnourished children received dense, calorie-rich food that did more harm than good. By the 1990s, organizations learned to use what was working based on scientific research and help as many people as possible. In Malawi, one of the world’s poorest countries, Russell introduces us to a legion of international humanitarian groups striving to feed children, educate and empower mothers, and teach hardscrabble farmers to grow more nutritious crops more efficiently. The author devotes much attention to entrepreneurs working to produce tasty, highly nutritious snacks that appeal to children at a low but profitable cost. Readers may have mixed feelings over the emphasis on private enterprise, but with humanitarian groups overstretched and leaders in many developing nations largely indifferent, there are few alternatives. As the author notes, “there is no standardized approach to any problem.”

A sensible, encouraging account of progress (if not a “revolution”) in feeding hungry children.

Stephen Hawking (1942-2018) was the world’s most famous scientist for the last 30 years of his life. This engrossing, sometimes unsettling account shows why.

NYU journalism professor Seife writes that Hawking converted cosmology from a backwater to “the most exciting field in physics, an area that was (and still is) generating Nobel Prize after Nobel Prize for transforming our understanding of how the universe came to be.” In his 1965 doctoral thesis, Hawking proved that the Big Bang, which gave birth to the universe, had to be an infinitely small point where the laws of physics don’t apply. This “singularity theorem” ignited his career. During the 1970s and ‘80s, he produced spectacular, highly mathematical discoveries on black holes and the early universe that dazzled colleagues. Due to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, his strength began declining in the 1960s, and by the ‘80s, he was entirely paralyzed and unable to talk. Britain’s National Health Service paid basic medical expenses, but only a rich man could have afforded the army of attendants that allowed him to live at home, work, communicate, socialize, and travel the world. Fortunately, he had become an international celebrity and author of the blockbuster 1988 bestseller, *A Brief History of Time*. This eased his financial troubles at the time, but they persisted for the remainder of his life. Many of his subsequent books were “carelessly edited” knockoffs designed to make money, and Hawking often endorsed products in exchange for cash. As Seife demonstrates, the public and a worshipful media ignored his discoveries but obsessed about his disability, personal life, and his “pronouncements.” Any scandal, such as his “yen for strip clubs,” added to the legend. The last of many movies about him, *The Theory of Everything* (2014), was “a tear-jerker of a love story.” The author’s excellent explanation of Hawking’s science makes this a top-notch biography of a significant scientific figure, but Seife also produces a uniquely disturbing portrait of deliberate mythmaking.

An unflattering yet outstanding biography of a giant of 20th-century physics.
**An astute psychological study enlivened by dry wit, eccentric characters, and informed analyses of 1930s England.**

**THE HAUNTING OF ALMA FIELDING**

**THE MUSICAL HUMAN**

*Why Fad Psychology Can’t Cure Our Social Ills*

Singal, Jesse

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (352 pp.)

$28.00 | Apr. 6, 2021

978-0-374-23980-0

A journalist questions the shoddy research and pseudoscientific claims of “popular behavioral science.”

With their promises of improving individuals’ lives, recent thought leaders hyping quick-fix behavioral science concepts have gained undeserved recognition. Even though their findings are misleading, writes *New York* magazine contributing writer Singal, they are still “frequently being adopted by schools, corporations, and nonprofits eager to embrace the Next Big Thing to come out of the labs and lecture halls of Harvard or the University of Pennsylvania.” Sadly, “this replication crisis has cast a giant shadow over the entire field of psychology.” In his debut book, the author explores a variety of relevant topics: the positive thinking and self-esteem craze that took root with *The Power of Positive Thinking, I’m OK—You’re OK*, and other similar books, which explored the “principle that people have deep psychic wounds that need to be addressed before they can fully actualize themselves”. Princeton political scientist John DiIulio’s faulty theory of “superpredators,” which suggested that certain juvenile criminals (most often young Black teens) are impulsively and remorselessly willing to commit violent crimes; what body language and posture can reveal about assertiveness and how “power posing” can elevate external and internal signals of confidence. Though Singal’s broad-reaching expose is well documented, the less-than-compelling narrative fails to convey the significance of the issues. The author builds his often pedantic arguments on long stretches of accumulated research findings, citing seemingly every applicable study (more rigorous editing would have helped). Singal rightly points out the virtues of Anand Giridharadas’ *Winners Take All* (2018). However, whereas that book was a masterful takedown of the philanthropic elite that showcased the author’s sharp storytelling skills, this book lacks a similarly engaging voice. The result is a well-researched but long-winded exercise.

An insightful yet plodding critique of faddish trends.

**THE MUSICAL HUMAN**

*The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*

Summerscale, Kate

Penguin Press (384 pp.)

$28.00 | Apr. 27, 2021

978-0-525-55792-0

An intriguing story of a man who vowed to find the truth within the murky world of psychical and paranormal research.

In her 2008 book, *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*, which won the Samuel Johnson Prize for Nonfiction, Summerscale chronicled the true story of a 19th-century detective who was devoted to solving a child’s murder in an English country house and earned nothing but trouble for his efforts. In her latest, Summerscale, who has also won an Edgar and a Somerset Maugham Award, introduces us to a similar protagonist: Nandor Fodor (1895-1964), a Hungarian ghost hunter who worked for the International Institute for Psychical Research. In the 1930s, as England was mourning its dead from World War I and flinching...
at the possibility of a second, the practice of spiritualism, which was rapidly gaining in popularity, needed an honest man to investigate its claims. When Fodor heard about Alma Fielding, an English housewife who reportedly teleported objects and channeled spirits, he embarked on the difficult mission to prove Alma’s claims while preserving his own integrity and reputation. Their relationship forms the heart of the book. Fodor, writes the author, “accepted that Alma might be both truthful and dishonest, gifted and fraudulent.” As the pressure mounted for him to prove his case, he demanded ever more of Alma—e.g., stripping naked before a séance to prove she wasn’t hiding anything. She resented his demands but kept accomplishing confounding feats. Fodor began to suspect that Alma’s past was the key to the present. The narrative is an intimate portrayal of two people locked in a complicated relationship, and while some readers may tire of Summerscale’s painstaking documentation of Alma’s paranormal activities, her sense of humor and clear style keep the pages moving. Despite a lack of definitive answers, plenty of interesting questions linger at the end of this fascinating book.

An astute psychological study enlivened by dry wit, eccentric characters, and informed analyses of 1930s England.

GOODBYE, AGAIN
Essays, Reflections, and Illustrations
Sun, Jonny
Illus. by the author
Perennial/HarperCollins (256 pp.)
$19.99 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-0-06-288085-7

A Canadian writer and illustrator transforms his perceptions of the everyday in his own life into a series of highly personal reflections.

Sun—who holds a master’s degree in architecture from Yale, is a doctoral candidate in urban planning at MIT, and wrote for the sixth season of the Netflix series BoJack Horseman—took three years from a ferociously busy schedule to turn inward and scrutinize “every thought that passed me by.” Though he was supposed to be resting, rather than simply let his mind “meander,” he decided to document everything that passed through his mind: “Otherwise, I told myself, all this break-taking, this intentionally unproductive time, would not be ‘worth it.’” Sun opens with an essay about his failure to notice features about an apartment where he once lived—e.g., where a power outlet was located. The topic appears mundane, but it is ultimately symptomatic of what consumed Sun’s attention and left him “burned out.” In several essays, the author describes work as his antidote “to…nothingness and emptiness.” Later in the book, Sun muses on the guilt that fuels his work ethic, observing that he wouldn’t get anything done without it. His “go slow” approach—which he admires in parents who “linger at restaurants”—manifests in essays about lessons in observation and the natural world learned from houseplants. In “How To Cook Scrambled Eggs,” for example, Sun transforms several egg recipes into an homage to his parents and the family memories each recipe allows him to rediscover and savor. Illustrated throughout with simple line drawings, this quirky book offers insight into the workings of an exceptionally busy, productive mind as well as the price of living in a hypercompetitive society where “we are all burned out and don’t have enough time” and it’s important to “steal moments away from yourself whenever you can.”

A quietly provocative collection.

AMERICAN REPUBLICS
A Continental History of the United States, 1783-1850
Taylor, Alan
Norton (592 pp.)
$35.00 | May 18, 2021
978-1-324-00579-7

The acclaimed historian offers a relevant follow-up to American Revolutions (2016).

In a book that falls midway between narrative survey and classroom text, Taylor continues the story of the settlement and conquest of what became the lower 48 states. The author, a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize and professor at the University of Virginia, is among the few historians who would attempt such a history of this single century of the American past. With characteristically graceful prose, he relates the costs and limits, as well as gains and triumphs, of the nation’s sweep westward after the Revolution. His subjects—events, wars, laws, treaties—will be familiar to those who paid attention in their American history courses, but Taylor presents them in fresh, thought-provoking ways. Three themes run through the book, whose basic narrative concerns the search for “elusive security.” First, nothing was foreordained; many nations and peoples fought over the same territory when the American republic was weak and vulnerable. Second, based on unassailable evidence, crippling payments were exacted from non-White people in the pursuit of Manifest Destiny to conquer much of North America. Third, it wasn’t all about White men; women, Native Americans, and African Americans played significant roles on all sides in the politics, military battles, land settlements, and opposition to American encroachments on others’ territories. Readers will encounter many little-known characters who advanced, thwarted, honored, and sullied American ambitions. It’s not a pretty picture, but such warts-and-all history is now conventional among scholars and considered more congruent with historical realities than the drum-and-trumpet stories that used to be the standard approach of historical narratives and textbooks. Though the narrative lacks an overall argument and ends in an abrupt, somewhat jarring fashion, Taylor is always a consummate guide to the early republic.

A fine new look at a critical period of American history.
Sensational
The Hidden History of America's "Girl Stunt Reporters"
Todd, Kim
Harper/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$27.99 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-06-284361-6

A history of a group of pioneering investigative journalists.

During the 1880s, notes environmental and science writer Todd, “girl stunt reporters” began going undercover to report on corruption and malfeasance in the U.S. Among these female reporters was Nellie Bly, who, in 1887, published the “Inside the Madhouse” series for the World, in which she faked insanity to expose conditions in a mental hospital in New York City. Bly’s writing “shook free of the ruffles and hoop skirts of Victorian prose,” and her “strong first-person point of view immersed readers in the narrator’s experience.” Across the country, other women took notice and entered the fray, exposing sweatshops, corrupt politicians, and other abuses of power. However, in 1888, when a young woman known only as “Girl Reporter” faked a pregnancy in order to write a series on abortion physicians for the Chicago Times, some felt she had pushed stunt reporting too far. In addition, “female writers began to wonder if assigning editors had their best interests at heart.”

Before long, the author contends, stunt reporters fell out of favor, and the term “yellow journalism” became a popular way to describe stories deemed outrageous or sensational. Stunt reporting eventually faded away, but its impact would remain, reflected in the new journalism work of Joan Didion, George Plimpton, Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe, and others. “By writing these reporters back into history,” Todd writes, “I aim to highlight the double standard that labels women as ‘stunt reporters’ while men are ‘investigative journalists,’ even as they do the same work.” The author succeeds in resurrecting the indispensable contributions of Bly and others, weaving together an enjoyable chronicle of a specific element of the history of journalism. Like she did for Maria Sibylla Merian in Chrysalis (2007), Todd celebrates the contributions of her subjects while placing them within the appropriate historical context.

An engaging and enlightening portrait of trailblazers who “challenged…views of what a woman should be.”

Privacy is Power
Why and How You Should Take Back Control of Your Data
Véliz, Carissa
Melville House (304 pp.)
$27.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-61219-915-3

A manifesto demanding the right to privacy in the digital realm, a right firmly in the hands of the tech giants.

“If you have the latest Roomba vacuum cleaner, it is probably creating a floor plan of where you live.” So writes Véliz, a professor at Oxford’s Institute for Ethics in AI, who pairs the observation to a provocative, frightening thought: Imagine the possibilities if an authoritarian regime were to have “a detailed real-time map of every room and building in the world.” The temptation to abuse that power would be endless. So it is with the largest tech companies, which relentlessly collect data and write algorithms that are meant to exploit your presence on the internet, and not always in obvious ways. It’s not your data that’s being bought and sold, she adds, but instead “the power to influence you.” While it’s fairly benign to be influenced to buy a certain book or laundry detergent, that influence sometimes extends to the acceptance and propagation of vicious, even dangerous political lies. The “data economy” demands resistance, in
part because democracies are always on the verge of descending into authoritarian states whose leaders have intentions “that may not favor the likes of you.” Such intentions are well served by “surveillance capitalism,” and they lead to such well-known episodes as the influence-peddling of Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Other civil libertarians have mounted overlapping arguments, but Véliz writes clearly and without hyperbole. She is adamant on certain points: “stay clear of Androids,” phones stuffed with pre-installed apps that send data to third parties; avoid internet-of-things products that connect online, since “you don’t need a kettle or a washing machine through which you can get hacked”; and demand that government disengage from tech and make it possible for citizens to control their own data.

A powerful cri de coeur for technological liberation that merits the attention of every consumer of digital services.

THE TWELVE LIVES OF ALFRED HITCHCOCK
An Anatomy of the Master of Suspense
White, Edward
Norton (336 pp.)
$28.95 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-324-00239-0

A fresh assessment of the legendary director.

Following The Tastemaker, his outstanding biography of Carl Van Vechten, White takes on another titanic figure in the arts. The author plumbs Hitchcock’s films and TV shows to reinforce his view that he was a man of many contradictions, “usually complex, often troubling, but always vital.” White breaks down his subject’s psyche into 12 “lives,” beginning with “The Boy Who Couldn’t Grow Up,” which delves into his childhood trauma, “dread of authority,” and the “lifelong fascination with cruelty and violence that fueled his creativity.” In “The Murderer,” White posits that to “crack the Hitchcock code there’s no better place to start than at the grisly end,” as he leads us down a bloody path that runs from The Lodger to Psycho. The author reveals Hitchcock’s ability to promote his brand and create a “personal mythology.” In “The Womanizer,” White explores Hitchcock’s complex, contradictory relationships with women as a “creator and controller,” best seen in Vertigo, and his dependence on his wife, Alma. Discussing Shadow of a Doubt, “a point of continuity between the two halves of his career” gives White the opportunity to point out that the “most insistent theme of his work is a seemingly happy home cruelly torn asunder.” Examining Rear Window, which the director considered his “most cinematic” film, the author notes how “Hitchcock knew the power one could command by looking—and by denying others the opportunity to look.” It was the success of his two TV shows that helped create the “Entertainer,” and “The Pioneer” neatly shows how “each of his works is in deep conversation with the rest.” Hitchcock “The Londoner”—White is especially good on the director’s early English films—and the Catholic “Man of God” complete the 12 lives. Although the author doesn’t uncover much groundbreaking information, he presents the man and his films in a readable, entertaining package.

DEAR BLACK GIRL
Letters From Your Sisters on Stepping Into Your Power
Winfrey Harris, Tamara
Berrett-Koehler Publishers (192 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-5230-9229-1

A collection of letters written by Black women to encourage, educate, and uplift Black girls.

“The world does not value Black girls like it should,” writes Winfrey Harris. With chapters dedicated to “Black Girl Magic,” family, friendship, mental health, and romantic relationships, the author seeks to rectify the devaluing of Black girls by connecting them with Black women through sage advice focused on meaningful topics. With an eye toward educating and healing, this collection of letters is reinforced by vocabulary words and history lessons necessary for any Black girl to know. It is also a self-affirming workbook prompting readers to supplement the letters and lessons with love letters to themselves. Winfrey Harris highlights the spectrum of Blackness and the Black experience, writing with necessary candor throughout. Beautifully written, the letters often feel like a collection of essays and poems. One standout contribution features the perspective of a “transracial adoptee” writing to other Black girls raised within White families; the author discusses the realities of alienation and the longing for connection. Ultimately, she writes, “May you love yourself exactly as you are.” In “Survivor Solidarity,” she speaks to girls who have suffered sexual violence and assault, from “the other side” of trauma, reminding them that what happened is not their fault. While many other similar books are how-to guides written by and for other teens, most of which focus primarily on boys, this collection is written by older Black women for younger Black women with the intent to provide vital knowledge, to instruct in how to build a sense of self-worth, and to be passed on from one generation to another. Interspersed throughout the book are sharp “Know This” sidebars, which feature further resources and concrete information on such topics as “black name bias,” “radical self-care,” Planned Parenthood, and the Trevor Project.

A valuable combination of encouragement, empowerment, and instruction.
THE WILD SILENCE
A Memoir
Winn, Raynor
Penguin (288 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-14-313642-2

A moving follow-up to the author’s 2018 memoir, The Salt Path.
Winn resumes her narrative a year after she and her husband, Moth, completed a 630-mile walk along England’s South West Coast Path, a passage through homelessness forced by their eviction from a family home of 20 years. After finding a small rental in the Cornish village of Polruan and living off limited funds, Winn looked for work, and Moth continued in his quest to earn his academic degree, hoping to teach despite the impediment of a “terminal neurodegenerative disease.” As Moth’s life became more sedentary, the faltering of his body and mind accelerated. Winn believed that the only thing that would arrest the deterioration was the same physical exertion and intense immersion in the wild that helped before. Restive and isolated, she needed the stillness of “wild silence” just as desperately. Curiously, Winn does not even mention her writing process until nearly 100 pages into the book, when she recounts how The Salt Path was written and how it changed their lives.

The author also revisits her childhood, the death of her mother, the couple’s risky attempt to revive a ruined farm, and her giddy early days with Moth. Winn has developed a reputation for powerful writing on the natural world. Her descriptions are highly visual, often poetic. There are passages so perfectly apt, melancholy, or achingly lovely that you want to stop and live inside the text, though occasionally she loses control and begins to romanticize. Yet Winn’s talent is undeniable, as is her capacity to locate the profound amid the din of modern life. We see her embrace change, from self-imposed isolation and total emotional reliance on Moth to embracing new possibilities.

A memorable celebration of a “silent enmeshing of lives lived in unison,” a potent marriage of heart and mind.

DO NOT DISTURB
The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad
Wrong, Michela
Public Affairs (512 pp.)
$30.00 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-1-61039-842-8

A veteran journalist challenges entrenched wisdom about the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Drawing on her years of experience as an Africa correspondent for Reuters, the BBC, the Financial Times, and other outlets, Wrong focuses on the repressive regime of Paul Kagame, who rose to power as commander of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a rebel force that instigated the catastrophic civil war against the Rwandan government and armed forces. The fighting climaxed in the notorious genocide, a 100-day massacre of more than 800,000 ordinary Tutsis by the Hutu government—“an event ranking in horror with the Holocaust, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, and the flattening of Dresden.” However, the rebels rallied and won decisively later that year, and Kagame, their de facto leader, has been president since 2000. Much of his legitimacy derives from a carefully honed image of “underdog turned moral crusader,” and he has been honored at the Davos World Economic Forum and universities around the world. With characteristic flair, Wrong uses dogged investigative reporting and historical background to show that Kagame’s regime is every bit as cruel and double-dealing as the one it sought to replace, spying on its citizens and exiling or murdering its critics. Even former supporters aren’t safe: The book’s title comes from the sign on the door of the Johannesburg hotel room where Patrick Karegeya, Kagame’s erstwhile intelligence chief and later critic of the regime, was strangled to death in 2014. Such brutal violence, the author astutely notes, reveals the inadequacy of “the Hutu-versus-Tutsi prism through which Rwandan events are routinely viewed.” To label the event as the “genocide of the Tutsis” ignores the thousands of moderate Hutus who were killed. Nor does Rwanda’s spying stop at its borders given the regime’s blacklist of unsympathetic journalists around the globe. In Wrong’s panoramic cast of characters, the voices of those whose lives were destroyed ring out the loudest.

Gripping, stylish journalism that proves the modern history of Rwanda is hardly settled.
SALLY RIDE
Abawi, Atia
Illus. by Flint, Gillian
Philomel (80 pp.)
978-0-593-11592-3
978-0-593-11593-0 paper
Series: She Persisted

Sally Ride: from tennis-playing schoolgirl through astronaut and educator to entrepreneur.

Sally Ride stars in this entry to the chapter-book series spun off from Chelsea Clinton and Alexandra Boiger’s picture book She Persisted (2017). Long before she becomes the first woman to go to space, Sally is an athlete, a White girl born in California in 1951. She’s a tennis whiz but an inconsistent scholar, attending a prestigious private school on an athletic scholarship. Though the narrative a little ostentatiously tells readers that “Sally persisted,” the youth presented here—a child who rolls her eyes at boring teachers, a college student who drops out to play tennis, an excellent tennis player who “just did not enjoy” the effort of becoming a professional—shows the opposite. Sexism is alluded to, but no barriers are portrayed as blocking young Sally herself. Though her amazing achievements aren’t downplayed, the groundbreaking Sally Ride, in this telling, becomes simply someone who applied for a job and excelled once she liked what she was doing. Sally’s partner, Tam O’Shaughnessy, is mentioned as such, but the text avoids using any pronouns for O’Shaughnessy, which, along with her gender-neutral name, may leave many young readers ignorant that Ride silently broke sexuality barriers as well.

Despite choruses praising Ride’s persistence, her life is inexplicably portrayed as lacking struggle.

THE LAST WINDWITCH
Adam, Jennifer
Harper/HarperCollins (448 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-06-298130-1

Unwittingly caught up in a magical family’s deadly quarrel, an apprentice hedgewitch discovers that she has a higher destiny.

Adopted as a foundling by Mother Magdi, a kindly hedgewitch, Brida has...
Sojourner Truth may not have known the word *intersectionality* in 1851, as Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw wouldn’t coin it for another 138 years, but she lived it, standing as a Black woman before the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. It is a matter of some debate whether the legendary abolitionist actually said, “Ain’t I a woman?” in her speech, but the words ring in my ears every year about this time as I work on our annual Black History Month and Women’s History Month picture-book roundups. Poised as they are next to each other in February and March, respectively, these observances spawn a clutch of new picture books about Black women every year. And every year they prompted the editorial question of which month to highlight them in.

The answer came to me a few years back: Of course. Highlight them in both months. So, as we stand in the latter half of February looking out at March, I’m pleased to celebrate some great picture books about Black women that deserve at least two months in the spotlight.

The late civil and children’s rights attorney and activist Dovey Johnson Roundtree (1914-2018) collaborated with co-author Katie McCabe on her memoir for adults, *Mighty Justice*. With *We Wait for the Sun* (Roaring Brook, Feb. 9), McCabe adapts a cherished memory from Roundtree’s childhood in Jim Crow North Carolina: berry-picking in the predawn hush with her grandmother. Illustrator Raisa Figueroa captures stunning gradations in the light as dusky purples are overtaken by the brilliant gold of sunrise. The warmth of the relationship is palpable: As our reviewer wrote, “At a time when domestic terrorism against African Americans was rampant, here was a relationship in which a young Black girl felt safe.”

*Ona Judge*’s story has been told before, most recently for adults in Erica Armstrong Dunbar’s *Never Caught* (adapted for middle-grade readers with Kathleen Van Cleve as *Never Caught, the Story of Ona Judge*). Author Ray Anthony Shepard and illustrator Keith Mallett encourage picture-book readers and listeners to consider why the young enslaved woman chose the life of a *Runaway* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Jan. 5). After all, running away meant leaving the relative privilege of life as Martha Washington’s seamstress. But “fine dresses [and] soft shoes” don’t mean much when your life isn’t your own, and Mallett’s paintings of a downcast Ona make that clear. Readers finally see her smile as she sails north to freedom, imagining her future.

Alicia D. Williams infuses *Jump at the Sun* (Caitlyn Dlouhy/Atheneum, Jan. 12), her account of the life of Zora Neale Hurston, with the joyful spirit of an oral storyteller; readers will hear her tale long after the book is closed. Jacqueline Alcántara matches the text’s sense of play with her illustrations, incorporating into almost every spread characters from the African American folk stories that Hurston treasured. A trumpet-playing dog sticks his head out of a flower on one page as Hurston regales fellow members of the Harlem Renaissance with tales from back home; a vain white alligator lolls next to a glass of tea as Hurston listens to an elder tell her another.

These books deserve 12 months of sharing, so even after Black History Month and Women’s History Month recede, don’t just shelve them. But you might also want to queue up Julie Leung and Julie Kwon’s *The Fearless Flights of Hazel Ying Lee* (Little, Brown, Feb. 2) and Traci Sorell and Natasha Donovan’s *Classified* (Millbrook/Lerner, March 2) right next to them—these stories of the first Chinese American woman to fly for the U.S. Air Force and Cherokee aerospace engineer Mary Golda Ross will extend your intersectional explorations.

Vicky Smith is a young readers’ editor.
spent much of her 12 years struggling to learn herbal spellcraft. Unfortunately, in discovering that she has a truer knack for a more powerful, intuitive form of magic, she draws the cruel attention of Moira, Queen of Crows, whose evil magic has driven away her two sisters and knocked the once-peaceful population is terrorized, and zombie revenants and other monsters are rising. What can Brida do to fight such evil? What else but harness other magics, including the white, or sacred; the hedgewitches’ nature-based green; the wild magic of the legendary stormhorses—and one other mysterious type, based on wind and long thought to be extinct. Brida never seems to lack for an encounter with a knowledgeable character or overheard conversation to fill in her backstory or conveniently placed allies to bail her out of tight spots; still Adam kits her with a sturdy sense of right and wrong, pits her against several genuinely creepy creatures, and outfits her with simple choices at the climax...plus the power to right all wrongs at the end. Brida presents as White; two secondary characters have copper skin.

Satisfying fare for readers who prefer their heroes and baddies clearly distinguished. (Fantasy, 9-12)

THE MEDUSA QUEST
Adams, Alane
SparkPress (256 pp.)
978-1-68463-075-2
Series: Legends of Olympus, 2

Phoebe and her friends must travel to Olympus once more on a quest to save her twin brother, Perseus.

After the events in The Eye of Zeus (2020), demigod Phoebe and her friends Damian and Angie discover that their previous trip to ancient Greece has potentially catastrophic consequences: They may have saved Olympus from Ares’ nefarious plan but in doing so ended up changing Greek mythology as we know it. Now, the fate of Perseus—and Olympus itself—hangs in the balance. To prevent this turn of events, the kids must return to ancient Greece to put things back where they belong. But old foes are lurking in the background, waiting for their revenge. In this fun, fast-paced sequel, Phoebe, Damian, and Angie must contend with the consequences of their actions while actively engaging with the foibles and absurdities of Greek mythology. Phoebe’s temper and unresolved anger at being left behind by her parents often place her at odds with her best friends, but those moments ultimately bring them closer together. However, Phoebe’s adamant insistence that Perseus is her only real brother (as opposed to Hercules, who is a half sibling) is an oddly dissonant contrast to the story’s wholesome messages about friendship and family. Whiteness is situated as the default; Damian has dark skin.

An adventurous page-turner. (Fantasy, 8-12)

WAY PAST JEALOUS
Adelman, Hallee
Illus. by Wall, Karen
Whitman (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 1, 2021
978-0-8075-8679-5
Series: Great Big Feelings

When Yaz draws the best picture she’s ever drawn in her life, she’s excited—until she realizes that everyone in her class is paying attention to her friend Debby’s drawing and not hers.

Things get even worse when Yaz’s teacher, Miss Pimmy, hangs Debby’s picture of a dog on the Stars of the Week board but doesn’t notice Yaz’s drawing at all. Overcome by jealousy, Yaz starts acting unkindly toward both her friends and herself. When Debby saves her a seat at lunch, Yaz ignores her and sits elsewhere. When their friends talk about how much like Debby’s dogs those in their drawings look, Yaz spits her drink on their pictures. Worst of all, Yaz leaves lunch early so she can remove Debby’s picture from the Stars of the Week board, which breaks Debby’s heart. None of these actions makes Yaz feel better—if anything, they make her feel worse—but she isn’t sure how to fix the mess she’s made. Eventually, Yaz realizes that she doesn’t really care about being on the Stars of the Week board. What she cares about is Debby. But how will she fix the mistakes she made and get her friendship back? This frank portrait of childhood jealousy is both a compelling story and a perfect teaching tool. The protagonist’s journey is authentic and accessible, making it a great way to start a conversation about big feelings. While the text makes no mention of race, the brightly colored illustrations render the cast diverse: Yaz has brown skin and black hair, and Debby appears to be Black. Companion title Way Past Sad looks at the grief experienced by two best friends about to be separated by a move.

An astute tale of emotions, empathy, and redemption. (Picture book, 4-8) (Way Past Sad: 978-0-8075-8679-2)

IT’S BIG SISTER TIME!
Ahuja, Nandini
Illus. by Echeverri, Catalina
HarperFestival (32 pp.)
87.99 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-0-06-288438-1
Series: My Time

In social worker Ahuja’s picture book, a well-worn topic—the arrival of a new sibling—gets a multicultural twist.

As the book opens, its young dark-skinned protagonist resists the new baby. “Baby’s loud. Baby’s messy. Sometimes Baby really smells,” she narrates. She then decides that “baby doesn’t know the house rules yet” and proceeds to induct the new baby into the ways of the family. In these spreads, Echeverri’s playful illustrations subtly reinforce this interracial family as Black and South Asian: Mom wears a dupatta during family movie night,
and Grandma and Grandpa make rice pudding with their granddaughter, like the protagonist. Dad is illustrated as dark brown, but his black hair is tightly curled while hers is straight; the new baby is painted light brown like Mom but has Dad’s hair texture. As is common in this genre of books, the protagonist grows to accept and love her new sibling, her rules moving from restrictive to playful and inclusive. “The last and most important rule is, no matter what, we stick together,” she explains. “Because... / we’re a team now.” This good-hearted title is one of two concurrent releases from Ahuja; *It’s Big Brother Time!* is the second, which is nearly identical but depicts the family as Black and East Asian. (*This book was reviewed digitally with 6.5-by-13-inch double-page spreads viewed at 31.1% of actual size.*)

A sweet debut that offers a tongue-in-cheek instruction manual for new big sisters. (*Picture book. 3-5*) (It’s Big Brother Time!: 978-0-06-288437-4)

**SON**

_Almada, Ariel Andrés_

*Illus. by Wimmer, Sonja*

*Trans. by Brokenbrow, Jon*

_Cuento de Luz* (32 pp.)

$16.95 | Mar. 1, 2021

978-84-18302-17-6

Series: Family Love

A parent’s love letter to a young son.

The second-person narration of the text (translated from Spanish) reads as though it is spoken by one parent to the singular, eponymous son, but the accompanying illustrations expand this reading. Different children are shown from spread to spread as the text offers encouraging words aimed at telling the son “all about this world.” After opening with lyrical descriptions of the real world—a sky in which there are more stars than grains of sand”—both illustrations and text veer toward the fantastic or metaphorical. “If you put one foot in front of another, you’ll be able to walk all the way around the world” reads a page depicting a White-appearing child literally walking around the circumference of the globe, which is ringed with buildings and statues representing different nations and cultures. The ensuing pages suggest that this journey is symbolic, with some roads “smooth” and others “rocky,” and “behind the rocks, there are sometimes dragons.” Ultimately, the interaction between the art and text delivers neither a cohesive story nor a clear message. Instead, the colorful art lurches between fantastic and realistic scenes while the text conveys parental love and support without offering readers a clear narrative thread to follow from page to page.

Well-meaning and muddled. (*Picture book. 4-6*)

**TOO SHY TO SAY HI**

_Anderson, Shannon_

*Illus. by Nabata, Hiroe*

_Magination/American Psychological Association* (32 pp.)

$16.99 | Mar. 9, 2021

978-1-4338-3158-4

A youngster takes timid steps toward making a friend.

Shelli gets nervous around others. The thought of speaking up causes Shelli’s insides to twist. Even a neighbor’s wave from afar is a cause for concern: “What if I imagined it? / Should I tell her ‘hi’?” Shelli’s internal dialogue spins out of control. But one day, the shy tot has had enough. “I stare at myself in the mirror. / I wave and just say hi. / It feels a little silly, / but I know I want to try. // In the morning I decide: / Today will be the day! / I’m going to find the courage / to be friendly in small ways.”

Shelli begins with one simple—yet still so difficult—question: “Is anyone sitting here?” With great pluck (and confidence from practicing in front of the mirror), Shelli makes a new friend. Nakata’s wispy, light brush strokes match the emotional impact of Shelli’s uncertainty, shimmering and delicate across the page. Two pages of backmatter about social anxiety, along with coping tricks for children, are appended to aid caregivers of shy kids. Shelli presents White, and surrounding classmates are a happy mix; Shelli’s newfound friend has dark skin. (*This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-16-inch double-page spreads viewed at 56.3% of actual size.*)

Echoes the inner thoughts some anxious children may have, hopefully making them feel less alone. (*Picture book. 4-7*)

**THE LIGHT OF DAYS (YOUNG READERS’ EDITION)**

_The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler’s Ghettos_

_Batalion, Judy_

_Harper/HarperCollins* (288 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021

978-0-06-303769-4

Lost stories of young Jewish female resistance fighters in World War II Poland are brought to light and retold for a new generation.

Young Jewish women played a critical role in resistance movements during World War II, yet they are rarely given due credit, their legacies largely neglected for myriad complex reasons. This book seeks to remedy that omission, highlighting the stories of just over a dozen such young women in Poland, based on primary and secondary sources, many created during wartime or in the immediate postwar era and subsequently lost to the annals of history. These courageous women, many of them active participants in Jewish youth group movements prior to the war, rallied their passions and their networks to build resistance movements within the Jewish ghettos. They gathered
intelligence, helped organize uprisings, and participated in acts of sabotage. Those who could pass as non-Jews often served as couriers, smuggling information, goods, and people in and out of the ghettos. Initially it is difficult to keep track of the cast, with various individuals operating out of different locations, and the writing style is less than engaging. However, the pace picks up as readers become more intimately acquainted with a select few figures who especially stand out, such as Renia Kukielka, a courier whose journey takes terrifying turns.

This valuable chronicle fills an important gap in Holocaust literature. (who's who, map, author's note, glossary, source notes, further reading) (Nonfiction. 11-14)

**CAMP AVERAGE**

*Away Games*

Battle, Craig

Owlkids Books (256 pp.)

$17.95 | Apr. 15, 2021

978-1-77147-405-4

Series: Camp Average, 3

Anticipating another happy summer at their (mostly) easygoing, co-ed sports camp, their friends are dismayed that Mack and Andre have chosen rival Camp Killington instead in this third series entry.

Selfless reasons prompted the two to switch to the chilly baseball meritocracy with its country-club ambience. While stellar athletes like Andre are awarded private rooms with hotel amenities; less-stellar campers like Mack are housed in dorms. Hypercompetitive Killington coaches know Andre’s talents, yet opportunities to play are few. Roused at night to mow a croquet pitch, he and Mack wonder if Killington’s resident star, the nephew of an influential Hall of Famer, is responsible. When, without notice, Mack is dispatched to Camp Average, he discovers his cabin’s full, now housing boys from Camp Hortonia who nurse grudges against their hosts. Intracabin friction culminates in an ill-advised bet between Average and Hortonia, to be settled by a game of ball hockey. Average’s far weaker team needs every player—even ball-hockey nonenthusiast Mack. Coached by team captain Cassie, with tech support and camper/videographers Nelson and Wi-Fi on hand to document everything, Mack swallows his humiliation and works on his game. If the plot occasionally strains credulity, the narrative shines when depicting the sports alchemy that transforms diverse young players of varying athletic interests and abilities into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

An exuberant celebration of playing as a team. (Fiction. 8-12)

**WHAT IF WILHELMINA**

Belisle, Joseph

Illus. by the author

Blair (38 pp.)

$16.69 | Mar. 2, 2021

978-1-949467-41-3

A child worries about a runaway cat and shirks the blame for letting the pet out.

Our anxious narrator, a brown-skinned child with curly hair, insists from the beginning that it wasn’t their fault. They pin the blame on their two fathers, who present as White, and a squirrel. Wilhelmina the cat has run out the door (opened by Dad) to chase a squirrel and is nowhere to be found. Dad and Papa tell the child that Wilhelmina will come back and encourage them to take a nap. The child can’t imagine this. Their horror mimics a reproduction they have painted of Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream*. “But…What if?” On spread after spread, the child is shown with thought bubbles picturing various unfortunate fates that could befall the beloved kitty. Attentive
readers will spot the kitty outside the window mimicking the child's worried expressions, and knowledgeable adults will pick up on additional famous artworks alluded to throughout. The story itself is mundane, and the telling does not add much to the entertainment value. The cartoon illustrations are stiff and lack variety. The incorporation of famous artwork is a nice idea, but since the art is mostly unrelated to the story, it feels arbitrary (small print directs readers to the publisher's website to find out more about it). While many children have endured a pet scare, it is difficult to imagine this story resonating with a circle much wider than the family upon which it is based. A portion of the proceeds will go to Kids in Crisis.

This earnest book doesn't get its message across. (Picture book. 4-8)

THE CASE OF THE NIBBLED PIZZA
Bentley, Tadgh
Illus. by the author
Penguin Workshop (80 pp.)
$15.99 | $6.99 paper | Mar. 9, 2021
978-0-593-09348-1 paper
Series: Dino Detective and Awesome Possum, Private Eyes, 1

Two young sleuths set out to identify a mysterious pepperoni thief in this series opener. The exciting prospect of a real case at last has violet T. rex Dino Detective roasting her maruspal sibling sidekick Awesome Possum out of bed and racing downstairs with potted Plant—silent partner but also occasional snide narrator—to track down the malefactor who has stripped Grandma ‘Thunderclaps’ homemade pizza of its tasty topping. Tantalizing distractions include a secret agent lunch lady fairy and overheard schemes being laid by mice in an array of disguises from clown and wolf to alien. Notwithstanding these, the dedicated gumshoes forge ahead. Carping pizza purists may object that the victimized “Sicilian” looks more round than rectangular in some views, but the cartoon images of suspect dossiers and multispecies cast members reflect the tale’s surreal character and manic pacing nicely. They share space with the well-leaded text on nearly every page. Grandma and the lunch lady, the only figures with human faces, present White.

A generous slice of wacky, with savory bits of good detective work melted in. (Mystery. 7-10)

STUPID BABY
Blake, Stephanie
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Burgess, Linda
Gecko Press (36 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-87757-931-8

A big-brother bunny comes to love his new “stupid baby” brother in this French import by way of New Zealand.

After his mother shushes his noisy play, Simon, an anthropomorphic white rabbit, is displeased when his parents explain that his new baby brother isn't going back to the hospital after being home for “THREE WHOLE DAYS.” “Go back where you came from, stupid baby,” he says while peering at a sleeping baby bunny in a bassinette. The artwork is minimal, with a cartoon style that will engage readers, though some may be immediately turned off by the text’s casual use of the word stupid. Then the question of how human children will grasp the limits of anthropomorphism arises when a scared Simon can’t sleep at night. He goes to his parents’ room, fearful of imagined wolves outside, and is summarily sent back to bed. As he walks down the hallway, he hears the baby making noises, scoops him up, and brings him back to his own bed, saying “I’ll look after you, my tiny, tiny, stupid baby.” A closing picture shows the brothers sleeping soundly in Simon’s bed as the sun rises outside. Such a resolution would obviously be impractical and unsafe in a human household, which may undermine the book’s relevance to readers who might otherwise identify with Simon.

Not exactly stupid—but not brilliant either. (Picture book. 4-7)

RIVER MAGIC
Booraem, Ellen
Dial Books (256 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-525-42804-6

The river near her home in Maine is central to everything real and magic in Donna’s life.

Donna is mourning the drowning death of her beloved aunt Annabelle, who was her mentor, guide, and inspiration. Now things are falling apart; there are huge bills to pay, and her mom is considering sending Donna to a hated relative for the summer. Donna’s sister is nasty and hateful, and her best friend is drifting away. Dealing with all this is difficult enough, but an awful lot of strange things are happening. There is a voice in Donna’s head that seems to be Annabelle’s. Kids at school speak of pixies and ley lines. Vilma, an older woman who is a new neighbor, turns out to be an extremely powerful thunder mage; Margily, a river dragon, carries her on thunder forays. The magic builds slowly at first, but the pace quickens with twists and turns galore. Enemies become friends, and new friends are
recognized, especially previously despised classmate Hillyard. There is greed, danger, breathtaking adventure, and even humor and joy. Donna narrates her tale, voicing her feelings, reactions, and confusion. Readers will recognize her as a kindred spirit and root for her all the way to a satisfying conclusion. The book situates Whiteness as the default.

A carefully constructed interweaving of reality and magic that will transport and delight. (Fantasy. 10-14)

A WISDOM OF WOMBATS
Broderick, Kathy
Illus. by DePasquale, David
Sunbird Books (40 pp.)
$12.99 | Mar. 10, 2021
978-1-5037-5708-0

In this companion to A Loveliness of Ladybugs (2020), Broderick expands her look at collective nouns to a new group of animals.

Beginning with a “wisdom of wombats” and closing with a “rumba of rattlesnakes,” each of the 16 collective animal nouns included receives double-page treatment with a definition, pronunciation, and visual illustration linking the animals to their group name. The presentation for a “bouquet of hummingbirds” reveals hummingbirds fluttering around a vase like “an arrangement of flowers,” reflecting the definition of bouquet as exactly that. Similarly, the wide-eyed raccoons used in a “gaze of raccoons” peer from behind tree trunks, perfect examples of gaze as “a long, fixed look.” Likewise, the raucous illustration of wildly honking geese for a “gaggle of geese” visually confirms gaggle as a “noisy group.” A “constellation of sea stars” fits the five-armed echinoderms scattered across the ocean floor in the shape of the Big Dipper, a “race of roadrunners” suits speeding roadrunners, and a “squadron of pelicans” works for aviating pelicans. Aided considerably by the fluid, brightly colored, clever illustrations, the rationale behind most of the collective nouns seems obvious; however, the connection between name and animal group in other examples—for instance, “journey of giraffes,” the titular “wisdom of wombats,” or “troop of kangaroos”—is
You may know the handsome man on the cover of this magazine from star turns on *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* or *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* or as the host of the wildly popular Egyptian news satire program *Al-Bernameg* (2011-2014). Maybe you saw him in *Time* in 2013, when he was named one of the world’s most influential people. Or perhaps he was the cardiothoracic surgeon who mended your heart.

“I tremendously enjoy the opportunity to learn something new, to do something new,” Bassem Youssef tells Kirkus by Zoom from the UAE. (The Egyptian-born surgeon-turned-satirist, who lives in Los Angeles, is filming a web series on plant-based nutrition in Dubai.) “Some societies, some people focus on the goal to target. I find myself enjoying the journey much more.”

If you’re a lover of young readers’ literature, you’ll soon know Youssef as a magnificent middle-grade author. *The Magical Reality of Nadia* (Scholastic, Feb. 2), co-authored by Catherine R. Daly and illustrated by Douglas Holgate, chronicles the adventures of Egyptian American sixth grader Nadia Youssef as she navigates friendship, family, and her California middle school. Inspired by Youssef’s own daughter, Nadia is curious and empathetic, loves fun facts, collects bobblehead dolls, and proudly leads a group of friends known as the Nerd Patrol. With a little help from an ancient Egyptian teacher trapped in a hippopotamus amulet (long story), she learns some profound historical lessons with modern-day applicability.

Powerhouse Animation Studios will adapt *The Magical Reality of Nadia* into a television series starring and produced by Youssef. A second book in the series is already in the works. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

OK so, going into our interview, I’m thinking comedian—I’m thinking comedy show—I’m thinking of the warmup before the headliner. How about a warmup question before we get to the main course? An amuse bouche, if you will.

OK [laughs]. All right, cool.

Great, here we go: Nadia is always eager to grow her bobblehead collection, which includes likenesses of Queen Elizabeth, Amelia Earhart, and Yoda. If I could give her a bobblehead for her next birthday, I’d give journalist and civil rights leader Ida B. Wells. Who would you give her?

Are we talking about Nadia in the book or Nadia in real life? Because Nadia in life is 8 years old, going to 9, and when she read the book, she said, “I do not collect bobbleheads.”

So I said, “Nadia, it is you in the future, it is you in middle school. We kind of fictionalized it.”

“Why do you need to fictionalize me? I like art. I like to draw. I like to create. I want to be an explorer.”

She felt like I am pushing a hobby on her! [Both laugh.] But to answer your question, I would give her a King Tut...
bobblehead, because I think it’s very important to keep her connected to her history.

I think we have a very cool history—that’s actually the whole reason why I wrote the book. Since I was a little kid, I was fascinated by ancient Egyptian civilization. And of course, when I come to America, we never get credit for anything...Every time I go to D.C. and I see all of these pillars, I say, “Ah! Kind of ours. You may think that they’re Roman, but they kind of took them from us.” [Both laugh.]

Also, I didn't want just to do a history book. Nadia is in a unique position, where she is the product of two worlds, and I want her to be equally proud of both. And I say this a lot—I'm sorry if I'm babbling. You gave me one thing, and I just took off. So, let me know, stop me, interrupt me any time. No, I am hungry for your words. I’m at the buffet. You just let it rip.

So, you know, as a comedian—I do stand-up comedy—one of the most common stand-up comedy lines that people use, including myself, is Where are you from? And I think we can do that as a joke. But in reality, people do take offense when they’re asked where they’re from. And I think that is completely wrong...When somebody asks you Where are you from? I would say that’s curiosity. If the second line is get out of my country, you are always entitled to clap back at them and their racist behavior. When people ask me Where are you from? [I say] “from Egypt.” And Nadia, when she’s asked—still today—where she’s from, although she speaks English 10 times better than Arabic, she says, “I’m from Egypt.” I think we should start owning our heritage. America is an incredible place for all people, immigrants from different cultures and from different countries. That is why this country is great. It’s not great not because it stopped people from coming in; it is great because it allowed people to come in, and it became this amazing product of minds and hearts and emotions and cultures of people coming from everywhere. I think this should be celebrated everywhere.

What was it like communicating such ideas to a young audience?

Well, I could not do it without the amazing Catherine Daly. When I talked to Scholastic about the idea, they asked me, “Would you like to write it?”

I said, “I have no experience of writing for children. I have an idea, I have a vision, but I need someone to write it.”

So they said, “Like a ghostwriter?”

I said, “No, they should be equal partners.” And that is why you see our names equally on the book, [which is] hers as much as it is mine. If I gave up with the characters, with ideas, she breathed life into them. She’s lovely, she writes beautifully, and I couldn't do what she does. She knows how to speak to kids.

I always respected the fact that she has more experience. English is my second language, and I’m not ashamed to say I didn’t do it [on my own]. It would actually be a shame if I take all the credit. Catherine, like many strong women in my life, has helped to elevate me.

Nadia is a strong girl with so many other wonderful qualities. For one thing, I’m awed that she and her friends assume the mantle of “Nerd Patrol” with pride. That’s a level of self-confidence I didn’t have as a young nerd.

I always looked at nerd as being negative because, as a kid, I was one of those nerds. I always say I’m a late bloomer. I think I have Ugly Duckling syndrome. Looking back—I didn't have a patrol. I was a loner nerd [laughs]. But Nadia I don't think of like that. She’s loved by all her peers.

And what I love about Nadia—the real Nadia—is her absolute ability for compassion and for empathy. You [can't] teach that stuff.

What is your hope for Nadia (the character) and this book?

Well, to be very honest, and very blunt, I want it to be a New York Times bestseller. I want it to have the traction it needs so, hopefully, we don't stop at Book 2. I want it to grow. And maybe we'll have our own Nadia Cinematic Universe—the NCU.

Editor at large Megan Labrise hosts Kirkus’ Fully Booked podcast. The Magical Reality of Nadia was reviewed in the Jan. 1, 2021, issue.
"The spare, penetrating ink sketches portray facts and convey emotions in a way that allows readers to see through the artist’s eyes."

EMBRACE YOUR BODY

Brumfit, Taryn
Illus. by Hanley, Sinead
Penguin Random House
Australia/Trafalgar (24 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 1, 2021
978-1-76089-598-3

A call for children to love their bodies, no matter what. Australian author Brumfit is the founder of the Body Image Movement and the creator of the documentary Embrace, which examines women’s struggles with body image. A children’s song came out of that project, co-written and performed with children’s musicians Pevan and Sarah. This picture book uses the song’s lyrics to deliver a message of body positivity to young readers with the hope that internalizing that message will prevent them from getting caught up in the sort of self-loathing Brumfit examined in her documentary. While primarily targeting girls, colorful illustrations depict racially diverse children of different genders, and there is also an effort to include depictions of children with visible disabilities. Despite such efforts toward inclusivity, the lines “I’m grateful for my eyes, they see the world around me,” and “I’m grateful for my arms, to hug my family” suggest universal sightedness and that everyone has two arms. Perhaps even more notable is the fact that few of the depicted bodies are fat, which risks inadvertently undermining the book’s core message. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9.8 by 19.6-inch double-page spreads viewed at 23.1% of actual size.)

Though its heart is in the right place, it’s not as inclusive as it wants to be. (Picture book. 3-7)

FLOOD-A-GEDDON!

Burks, James
Illus. by the author
Razorbill/Penguin (192 pp.)
$18.99 | $12.99 paper | Mar. 16, 2021
978-0-593-20294-4
978-0-593-20296-8 paper
Series: Agent 9, 1

An impulsive feline agent and her robot fish sidekick must save the world from a diabolical crab.

With an act-first, think-later attitude, tiger-striped cat Agent 9 is on probation with the Super Secret Spy Service after racking up millions of dollars in damage to property. After pleading her case to headquarters, she is granted one last chance to prove herself. She is accompanied by her trusty mechanical-fish companion, Fin, who, although it communicates only in beeps, acts as her voice of reason. When both Agent 9’s boss, O, and Fin are captured by the villainous King Crab, Agent 9 soon uncovers Crab’s true intentions: He means not only to infiltrate S4, but also to melt the ice caps, flood the entire globe (creating the titular “Flood-a-Geddon”), and build a worldwide water park. Agent 9 must stop him before it is too late, but can she temper her impulsive streak long enough to save the day? Burks’ delightful graphic romp features an animal cast of characters with familiar human traits; Agent 9’s go-go-go attitude should resonate in a world that rarely prizes slowing down. Full-color panels, amply punctuated with action words, of varying sizes fill the spreads, making for a fast-paced offering. With a blend of thrilling chase scenes and a generous helping of humor, this crowd pleaser should be catnip to fans of series like Aaron Blabey’s The Bad Guys.

Spy aficionados will find this purr-fect. (Graphic thriller. 7-10)

From the Middle East, Kenya, Tajikistan, Eastern Europe, and Myanmar, Butler shares stories of migration that put a human face on a global phenomenon.

The book is organized into 12 illustrated stories of people on the move. While some seek refuge from war, others migrate in search of better livelihoods. In a story about Tajikistan’s migrant workers, Butler writes, “it struck me that human migration is often thought of as one-directional, but this movement of people is on a continuous loop—an enormous, annual commute to work.” On the Balkan route during what some have termed Europe’s recent “refugee crisis,” he recollects that “on one side [of a new fence] armored police patrolled with batons, while groups of refugees and migrants, carrying their lives and children on their backs, were on the other.” The spare, penetrating ink sketches portray facts and convey emotions in a way that allows readers to see through the artist’s eyes. They are supported by contextual narrative recounting what was happening when it was drawn. The range of migration experiences covered is impressive. In addition to displacement across borders, it includes less-discussed topics—internal displacement; refugees who return to still-struggling home countries; and a section on Palestine and the right to movement—all without failing to note that migration has existed for centuries. Together, text and art portray their dreams, the burdens they carry, and the uncertainty they experience.

An exquisite piece of journalism imbued with care. (Nonfiction. 10-adult)
A NIGHT AT THE FARM
A Bedtime Party
C + C Mini Factory
Illus. by the author
Running Press Kids (32 pp.)
$17.99  |  Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-7624-6841-6

What goes on in the barnyard at night?
The farmer has put in a full day on her farm, and she is ready for some rest. But not everyone is! “The cat gives the signal / when the farmer starts to snore. / Time to jump from the bed / and sneak out the door.” The ducks dance near the barn to records spun by a rabbit DJ. The horse attempts (unsuccessfully—hooves, you know) to bake an apple crumble in the kitchen. The rabbits have a feast under the sky while the pigs take advantage of the farmer’s bathroom to bathe and beautify. The goats put on a fashion show, and one of the hens performs some magic tricks. The pigs and the goats join the duck dance party, but the turkey would rather watch television (and imagine himself a crime-fighting superhero). And so on. The concept is nothing new, and the bland verse sometimes stumbles in its scansion. But the main draw is the artwork from C + C Mini Factory, a duo that creates tableaux with miniatures and then photographs them. Readers into this sort of fussy whimsy will enjoy poring over scenes of plastic animals in cute arrangements, though some are quite bare and others hard to parse, particularly when posed in front of busy backgrounds. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8.5-by-16.8-inch double-page spreads viewed at 41.4% of actual size.)

A passable addition to the animals-at-night genre. (Picture book. 2-6)
**SING OUT! Six Classic Folk Songs for Tomorrow**  
*Illus. by Casson, Sophie*

The Secret Mountain (176 pp.)  
$16.95 | Mar. 1, 2021  
978-2-924774-85-4

Six traditional songs loosely woven together in the illustrations and performed by a folk duo provide an invitation to join the fun.

The publisher has taken six well-known songs available individually or collectively in other formats and pulled them together in this new volume. Casson’s illustrations, which have the look of silk-screens, turn this collection of familiar lyrics into a story. A rollerblading woman with mustard-toned skin and long red hair drives six white horses in “She’ll be Coming ‘Round the Mountain.” The sparsely bearded cinnamon-colored farmer who shares in the chicken and dumplings in that song woos her in “Little Bingo.” He gives his little green dog a bone in “This Old Man.” The weasel, who makes a cameo appearance in that song, becomes the star of “Pop, Goes the Weasel.” The old man returns in “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” featuring a locomotive engineer named Dinah (who may also be the same woman who came around the mountain) and the weasel strumming a banjo. Finally, farmer and dog return in space suits to see a light-red–toned girl riding a star in “Twinkle, Twinkle.” There’s a monkey, as well, and occasional other characters. Nearly everyone seems to be having a good time, and so will readers and listeners. On the included CD or MP3 files downloaded from the publisher’s website, Canadian singers Sin and Swoon (Michael O’Brien and Michelle Tompkins), accompanied by other musicians, offer catchy renditions just right for singing along.

**Songs from yesterday appealingly presented for today’s children.** *(Picture book. 3-10)*

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**I AM A PEACEFUL GOLDFISH**  
*Chaim, Shoshana*

Illus. by Smith, Lori Joy  
Greystone Kids (48 pp.)  
$17.95 | Apr. 13, 2021  
978-1-77164-637-6

What can you do when things go wrong?  
Two children contemplate different ways to calm themselves down in this straightforward introduction to breathing, relaxation, and mindfulness. The younger, White-presenting child follows suit when the older, brown-skinned child proposes imaginative calming techniques. They picture themselves as various animals (goldfish, elephants, dragons) and objects (pinwheels, dandelions, wind chimes, flowers), inhaling and exhaling, that make deep breathing and calming down concrete and easy to comprehend. Simplified, whimsical illustrations add a touch of humor and a wink to the 1970s while preventing the story from becoming cloying, as soft, gentle instructions help the characters (and listeners) to understand some of the mechanics behind how to intentionally breathe and decompress. While not necessarily something that children will pick up unless they are learning about practicing mindfulness, this informative title has charm and warmth and will give youngsters some ideas as to how to self-regulate and manage their feelings as they learn to be aware of their breathing. Endpapers feature a multiracial array of children's faces expressing different emotions.

A soothing, logical, and playful introduction to mindfulness for young listeners. *(author’s note)* *(Picture book. 3-6)*

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**JUST BE YOU Ask Questions, Set Intentions, Be Your Special Self, and More**  
*Chopra, Mallika*

Illus. by Vaughan, Brenna  
Running Press Kids (120 pp.)  
$12.99 paper | Mar. 2, 2021  
978-0-7624-7122-5  
Series: Just Be

An approachable guide for building social-emotional growth and mindfulness skills in kids and young teens.

Broken into four parts—“Who Am I?”; “What Do I Want?”; “How Can I Serve?”; and “What Am I Grateful For?”—this book offers tools for youth to better understand themselves and to put themselves in charge of what kind of people they want to be. Each section provides an accessible variety of centering activities that require minimal time and supplies, such as breathing exercises, connecting with one’s name, learning about religions, dream journaling, setting intentions, and discovering what brings them joy, to name a few. Each activity comes with guidelines on “time needed” and “location” to perform it along with necessary materials, if any; many are delightfully open-ended: “As long as you want, and over and over again!” Noteworthy in its inclusive approach, this recognizes a variety of experiences and how one’s life is influenced by family, race, religion, nationality, and socio-economic status as well as if the reader is a person with a disability and/or is transgender, homeless, or in foster care. In a section on dealing with disappointment, it acknowledges systemic racism and inequity. Full-page illustrations in cool and calming tones depict peaceful-looking children demonstrating the activities, consciously presenting a racial-, cultural-, and ability-diverse range of youth.

Empowers readers to decide who they want to become and gives them tools for figuring that out. *(afterword, resources)* *(Nonfiction. 9-13)*
“Rich, authentic detail brings setting, community, and era to resonant life.”

WAR AND MILLIE MCGONIGLE

THE THREADS OF MAGIC
Croggon, Alison
Candlewick (384 pp.)
$18.99 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-5362-0719-4

When he acquires a silver box containing a mysterious shriveled heart, an orphan boy suddenly finds his life in peril.

Twelve-year-old Pip and his older sister, El, live on their own in the kingdom of Clarel, where the king has ordered Princess Geogette, his only heir, to marry neighboring King Oswald against her will. In the scuffle of an attempted street robbery he witnesses, Pip pockets a beautiful box containing a Stone Heart, intended for powerful Cardinal Lamir, the prelate involved in eliminating witchcraft in Clarel. Pip keeps the Heart, convinced it’s alive and magical, but after discovering that an assassin is searching for him, Pip and El seek refuge with clever undercover witches. From the witches they learn the Heart was originally removed from a young prince by a witch intent on making a spell to eliminate Specters, parasitic creatures like Oswald who exist beyond death, rule royal houses, and persecute witches. As Pip feels himself increasingly manipulated by the Heart, the witches rally, hoping to prevent Geogette’s marriage to Oswald and stop the Heart from falling into Specter hands. The intriguing, intricate backstory of how the Specters originated and why the Heart was created unfolds gradually, culminating in a fast-paced climax. A fascinating, fantastical cast of characters with competing interests and motivations adds richness to this suspenseful tale of unexpected alliances. Characters are cued as White.

Sinister assassins, ghoulish Specters, and feisty witches make this a rousing read. (Fantasy 9-12)

WAR AND MILLIE MCGONIGLE
Cushman, Karen
Knopf (224 pp.)
$16.99 | $19.99 PLB | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-984850-10-2
978-1-984850-11-9 PLB

A San Diego tween nurses grievances as war approaches.

Since her best friend moved away and Gram, her biggest fan, died, Millie’s been preoccupied with death. In the lingering aftermath of the Depression, money is tight. While Pop looks for work, her cute but sickly 7-year-old sister, “Lily the pill,” hogs Mama’s attention while Pete, 5, demands Millie’s. Worse, annoying Cousin Edna’s moved into their two-bedroom house. In her notebook, Gram’s last gift, Millie sketches dead sea life she finds along Mission Beach’s sandy spit. Gram said nothing living dies if it’s remembered. Millie’s good at remembering. After Japan bombs Pearl Harbor and war is declared, Mama works nights building bombers; Pop works days as a Navy clerk. When darkness reigns sundown to sunrise, Millie—imaginative, funny, heartened by a new friendship—is the rock Lily and Pete depend on. If the particulars of Millie’s world are unfamiliar, readers will find broader parallels to the present, compellingly conveyed. As war reshapes their lives, some seek scapegoats to blame, but Millie’s Irish American family, with their own experiences of prejudice, rejects the anti-Japanese and anti-immigrant bias taking ugly root around them. Rich, authentic detail brings setting, community, and era to resonant life, as when a neighborhood child contracts polio and parents anxiously watch their own for symptoms. With the future uncertain, Millie discovers precious, hidden beauty lies in once-monotonous daily life.

Accomplished storytelling transforms grim history into a light for dark times. (author’s note, note on research) (Historical fiction. 8-12)
**WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, MAKE PEACH PIE**

Drowning, Erin Soderberg  
Pixel-Ink (256 pp.)  
$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-64595-034-9  
Series: The Great Peach Experiment, 1

A family heals through food truck adventures.

Twelve-year-old Lucy, 10-year-old Freddy, and 8-year-old Herb Peach lost their mom two years ago to cancer. Their dad retreated into his academic work, leaving Lucy to pick up the slack both as consoling parental figure to her brothers and competent scheduler of daily activities. When their father informs them that one of their mom’s inventions has sold for $1.3 million, the children excitedly plot what to do with the money—until he tells them that he has bought a used food truck and they will drive around the country in it, fulfilling one of her dreams. He suggests that they tour the Midwest, selling pies. The kids, especially Lucy, are skeptical, since their father has been neither constant nor practical, but they hope that this can bring the family together, i.e., bring their father back, and they’re willing to try—and besides it was their mother’s dream. Many, many mishaps and adventures follow the Peaches through their Midwest foray, each relayed with understated insight, while the adroit characterization of the self-absorbedly neglectful dad is heart-rending. On occasion, the plot twists veer to the delightfully quirky, and the whole tale is filled with both authenticity and originality. All characters read as default White.

Both bittersweet and uplifting; simply sparkles with life.  
(Fiction. 8-12)

**NIGHTINGALE**

Fagan, Deva  
Atheneum (304 pp.)  
$17.99 | Apr. 20, 2021  
978-1-5344-6578-7

A jaded orphan becomes a reluctant hero in order to save herself and those she cares about.

Twelve-year-old Lark Granby lives in a boardinghouse run by the cold and guileful Miss Starvenger, to whom she owes a debt. She dreams of one seemingly impossible thing—being free. Lark’s desperation to escape her life of poverty leads her to the Royal Museum, ready to carry out a heist. She ends up with way more than she bargained for when a magical sword, awakened by the young Prince Jasper, chooses her as its owner, thus making her the next Nightingale, the first having been a hero who died while saving their kingdom of Gallant centuries ago. Not only is Lark set against being a hero, especially a martyr, she has resisted getting attached to others. But our young, cynical heroine soon discovers the benefits of forming personal bonds, growing to understand that relationships can help prevent catastrophe, prolong survival, and simply foster joy. Fagan’s novel is well paced and will hold readers’ attention from the get-go. Lark has gumption and, despite her initial reluctance to assume the role and responsibilities thrust upon her, proves the perfect vessel for sympathetic character growth. Significant inclusion of science fiction and political activism elements complement the action in the book and will serve to appeal to a wide audience. The novel features characters of varying skin tones.

An entertaining, organic, action-packed combination of adventure, science fiction, and fantasy.  
(Adventure. 8-12)

**HEREAFTER**

Fernández, Silvia & Fernández, David  
Illus. by López, Marcé  
Trans. by Thomsen, Marita  
Syncretic Press (48 pp.)  
$17.95 | Mar. 31, 2021  
978-1-946071-31-6

A diverse group of animals’ beliefs about life after death correspond to various religions that go unnamed.

A cast of animals ranging from a goldfish to an elephant makes up the artists of the Galaxy Circus, where they risk their lives every day flying on trapezes, eating fire, being shot out of cannons, and otherwise defying death. “That is probably why they talk so much about death, wondering: What comes after this?” Each animal has a different answer. As the animals fall from the high wire one by one, their beliefs about the hereafter are shared with readers. Some believe that we go to heaven, another believes that we become spirits that can communicate with the living through the elements. Ramses the scarab beetle believes there will be an adventurous journey; others believe in reincarnation or hope to reach nirvana. Cat Frida believes “we live on in our creations and the memories of others.” The final spread shows the animals injured but alive and asks readers, “what do you believe?” From the first page, the illustrations draw readers in with distinctive personalities, thoughtful expressions, and intriguing setting details. Bright colors distinguish the spreads illustrating the imagined hereafter settings from the muted spreads showing the animals on a tightrope. Given the sensitive subject matter, the creators manage a careful, unbiased exploration that brings a huge question into focus for young minds. The book is marred only by slight leanings on stereotypical tropes (Fatima, a camel wearing a scarf, is dubbed “enchantress of the desert”); coyote Gerónimo’s depicted hereafter includes a tepee, a totem pole, and saguaros.

Imported from Spain, a daring and useful conversation starter.  
(Picture book. 6-10)
 NIÑOS
Poems for the Lost Children of Chile
Ferrada, María José
Illus. by Valdez, María Elena
Trans. by Schimel, Lawrence
Eerdmans (76 pp.)
$18.99 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-0-8028-5567-1

An homage to the children killed during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.
On Sept. 11, 1973, the democratically elected government of Chile was overthrown by a violent military coup, supported by the CIA. A right-wing authoritarian military dictatorship ruled Chile for the next 17 years. Only when democracy returned to Chile did the world find out how many had died at the hands of the regime. Among that number were 34 children under the age of 14. Ferrada has written a tender poem for each one of these children—most with an uplifting nature theme—as a way of naming them and remembering them. The effect is to reclaim their childhoods. Luz is “a collector of sounds”; Gabriel “likes to imagine that the stars are holes in the sky.” Chillingly, their full names and ages are listed at the end along with the notation killed or, in one case, disappeared. Some were but a few months old; many were just preschoolers. Originally published in Spanish in 2013 for adults, the book is now being reissued for children accompanied by soft-edged artwork done in watercolors, graphite, pastels, charcoal, and colored pencils that lends an ethereal quality. The author points out the importance of telling this story, “knowing that at this moment, many children feel afraid, suffer tragedies, and even lose their lives because of political violence.”

A book to be read and remembered: a tribute to children whose lives were lost to forces not of their own creation. (Poetry. 8-adult)
A DELICIOUS TASTE
OF MOZZARELLA!
Pyotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky
Gerhard, Ana
Illus. by Lafrance, Marie
The Secret Mountain (32 pp.)
$16.95 | Apr. 1, 2021
978-84-18302-13-8
Series: Little Stories of Great Composers

A mouse listens as a composer brings his family a musical gift in this entry in the Little Stories of Great Composers series.

Minim, a music-loving mouse, secretly lives with Sasha and Bobik, niece and nephew, respectively, of the celebrated Russian composer Pyotr Ilyitch Tchaikovsky. Uncle Petya's arrival means fun and presents, but the children are disappointed when Uncle Petya unveils a musical score rather than a toy. Then he sits down at the piano, and both children and Minim close their eyes to imagine Uncle Petya's travels. As the children's piano skills improve they come to appreciate the way their uncle's gift has given them “much more pleasure than some ordinary toy.” Educational and with an explicit moral, this slight piece adds warmth to the audio version, which includes a few snippets of Tchaikovsky's music and is available on an accompanying CD and as a downloadable MP3 file. Backmatter consists of information about Tchaikovsky and his Album for the Young, which was dedicated to his nephew; it fails to mention that a mashup of the composer's sister and niece.

Moralistic and factually muddled; readers might prefer to simply listen to Album for the Young. (Picture book. 4-8)

ARNO AND HIS HORSE
Godzwon, Jane
Illus. by Sala, Felicita
Scribble (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-950354-46-7

When Arno loses his wooden horse, everyone helps hunt for the small carving. In pedestrian verse, the search unfolds: “Back to the bush, / we ran from here to there. / Mercy said, ‘Your little horse, / it could be anywhere!’ ” The word bush and some cockatoos roosting on a playground provide clues to the Australian setting and origin of this book. Since few of the several characters depicted are named, children will speculate about relationships among the multiracial group Arno’s seen with. Mercy and Arno have the same freckles, beige skin, and dark hair, but whether the brown-skinned and White-presenting kids and adults with them are all members of a blended family is unspoken. Grandpa, who also presents White, is introduced as the now-deceased carver of the horse. That’s what makes it special. After Arno dreams about his grandpa, he knows where to find the horse. Several elements of this happy ending require unpacking. With no clear segue between dream and waking, Arno is depicted running out alone into the night. He finds the horse buried under some tree roots, “just near the longest bridge”—which is not pictured in any of the prior illustrations. Grandpa is seen fording the river, both in Arno’s memory of his grandfather’s stories and in his dream. Does it matter? The book’s emphasis on the relationship between the older man and the young boy is comforting, but the narrative gaps tantalize.

Puzzling. (Picture book. 5-7)
“Humor and tension make this an appealing page-turner.”

**Houdini and Me**

*Gutman, Dan*

Holiday House (224 pp.)

$16.99 | Mar. 2, 2021

978-0-8234-4515-8

Catfished...by a ghost!

Harry Mancini, an 11-year-old White boy, was born and lives in Harry Houdini’s house in New York City. It's no surprise, then, that he's obsessed with Houdini and his escapology. Harry and his best friend, Zeke, are goofing around in some particularly stupid ways (“Because we're idiots,” Zeke explains later) when Harry hits his head. In the aftermath of a weeklong coma, Harry finds a mysterious gift: an ancient flip phone that has no normal phone service but receives all-caps text messages from someone who identifies himself as “HOUDINI.” Harry is wary of this unseen stranger, like any intelligently skeptical 21st-century kid, but he’s eventually convinced: His phone friend is the real deal. So when Houdini asks Harry to try one of his greatest tricks, Harry agrees. Harry—so full of facts about Houdini and his escapology—litters his storytelling with infodumps, making him an enthusiastic tour guide to Houdini's life—is easily tricked by his supportive-seeming hero. Harry, Zeke, and Houdini are all just the right amount of snarky, and while Harry's terrifying adventure has an occasionally inconsistent voice, the humor and tension make this an appealing page-turner. Archival photographs of Harry Houdini make the ghostly visitation feel closer. Zeke is Black, and Harry Houdini, as he was in life, is a White Jewish immigrant.

**Before They Were Artists**

*Famous Illustrators as Kids*

Haidle, Elizabeth

Iills. by the author

Etch/HMH (64 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 20, 2021

978-1-328-80154-8

In graphic format, profiles of six illustrators that focus on their words, groundbreaking works, and early influences.

Following up on her *Before They Were Authors* (2019), Haidle pays tribute to another worthy and diverse set of creative talents: Wanda Gág, Tove Jansson, Hiroyo Miyazaki, Yuyi Morales, Maurice Sendak, and Jerry Pinkney. As children’s book illustrators go, animator Miyazaki is really an outlier here, but the author wedges him into the general scheme by analyzing his character types and his views on visual art in general. Sticking to her own low-key, chromatically restrained figures and visual style (to the point that even the iconic covers of favorites like *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Millions of Cats* are unrecognizably altered), she takes each of her subjects from childhood to well-launched career, pointing to the effects of family situations and tracing the development of artistic aspirations. Their later years are rushed, but she includes nods to significant personal as well as professional contacts, such as Jansson’s same-sex partner, Tiulikki Pietilä, and Sendak’s relationships with both his life companion, Eugene Glynn, and his editor Ursula Nordstrom. Direct quotes, printed in red, make up major portions of the narrative, placed in and around the neatly arranged geometric panels, so even though young audiences may struggle to find any visual evocation of these illustrators’ distinctive spirits and styles, some impression at least of their voices and approaches to art do, in the end, come through.

Quirky choices, but readers will be left knowing these iconic figures better. (timelines, endnotes, further reading) (Graphic collective biography. 8-12)
“Although lighthearted for the most part, the book addresses grief in an age-appropriate, accessible way.”

**GHOSTS OF WEIRDWOOD**

**UNICORNS HAVE BAD MANNERS**

Halpern, Rachel  
Illus. by Tan Shiau Wei, Wendy  
Sunbird Books (40 pp.)  
$12.99 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-5377-5711-0

A dinosaur longs for a friend with good manners. Nigel, a prim turquoise theropod with a dapper bow tie, is very strict about etiquette. He’s read all of the best primers on the subject (including Elbow Off the Table and Other Rules of Carnivorous Courtesies), but he just can’t seem to find a tea-party guest who will meet his high standards. Alas, a dragon sneezed directly onto the table (and set it on fire), and a llama thought the teacups were toys and balanced them on his head. But finally, a unicorn is coming to tea. Nigel is convinced that the “unicorn’s manners will be sublime.” Periwinkle, a bright yellow unicorn with a magenta mane, swoops to the table. Unfortunately, she shines her horn with the napkin and dunks a cookie directly in the teapot! Poor Nigel is the picture of dejection. But Periwinkle explains that she learned from her great-grandmother that polite to eat dessert first and to spear cookies with forks. It appears the message Halpern is reaching for is that table manners are arbitrary and differ from culture to culture (or, in this case, species to species). But instead of choosing an inclusive conclusion, the text lands hard on “Maybe bad manners aren’t so bad after all,” accompanied by a picture of Nigel, Periwinkle, and his erstwhile guests displaying comically bad manners. Manners-abiding hopefuls may cringe.

**Etiquette that falls short.** *(Picture book. 3-6)*

**GHOSTS OF WEIRDWOOD**

Heidicker, Christian McKay & Shivering, William  
Henry Holt (352 pp.)  
$16.99 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-250-30290-8

Two former thieves take on a shadowy group determined to exploit the magic of the Fae. A month has passed since Wally and Arthur saved Kingsport from magical monsters, and they are determined not to accidentally cause any more mischief. While the mechanical Golden Scarab larvae left by Wally’s brother, Graham, are still munching on the Manor’s roots, launching it through the Fae’s various realms, both boys want to join the Wardens of Weirdwood who defend the border between the real and imaginary worlds. So far only Wally has impressed Lady Weirdwood enough to be named a Novitiate. Arthur, on the other hand, has made some missteps and will be left behind in Kingsport as soon as the Manor stops long enough to let him off—but he is determined to prove himself and his magical abilities. When the Wardens identify a new Rift that the Order of Eldar are exploiting, the duo and their allies must join together to stop them before Kingsport turns into a Daymare. This second action-packed Weirdwood adventure is as exciting as the first. Secondary characters get more developed backstories, adding interesting layers to the story, and the villains are fantastic. Although lighthearted for the most part, the book addresses grief in an age-appropriate, accessible way. The plot twists and the cliffhanger ending will have readers clamoring for more.

**Another fun installment in this magical adventure series.** *(Fantasy. 8-12)*

**LITTLE SOCK MAKES A FRIEND**

Heise, Kia & Park, Christopher D.  
Illus. by Park, Christopher D.  
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)  
$14.99 | Mar. 15, 2021  
978-1-5341-1126-4

The footloose sock introduced in Little Sock (2019) finds his way back to Sock City. As in Little Sock’s first book, the authors are evidently so dazzled by their premise that they forget to add a plot beyond what the title gives away. Making his way again through the tunnel at the back of the clothes dryer, Little Sock arrives in Sock City and gradually nerves himself to ask another solitary sock whether she’d like to be his friend. When she responds “Hmmm...Sure!” they go off to enjoy one side-by-side activity (playing with drones) and two shared ones, boating and frisbee. “Making new friends is fun.” Well, sure. Sock City is again depicted in busy crowd scenes as a pleasingly diverse place where none of the residents match another, but though Little Sock’s new buddy is at least individualized enough to be taller than he is, she never does acquire a name. Visually, all that really sets this apart from the previous outing is her drone—which is big and black and looks like it was stolen from the military. As in Little Sock’s first book, the authors are evidently so dazzled by their premise that they forget to add a plot beyond what the title gives away. Making his way again through the tunnel at the back of the clothes dryer, Little Sock arrives in Sock City and gradually nerves himself to ask another solitary sock whether she’d like to be his friend. When she responds “Hmmm...Sure!” they go off to enjoy one side-by-side activity (playing with drones) and two shared ones, boating and frisbee. “Making new friends is fun.” Well, sure. Sock City is again depicted in busy crowd scenes as a pleasingly diverse place where none of the residents match another, but though Little Sock’s new buddy is at least individualized enough to be taller than he is, she never does acquire a name. Visually, all that really sets this apart from the previous outing is her drone—which is big and black and looks like it was stolen from the military. Sock-centric sagas that succeed include C.K. Smouha’s Sock Story (2019), illustrated by Eleanora Martin, and Jennifer Sattler’s One Red Sock (2019); try them on instead. *(This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 83% of actual size.)*

**Too thin to stand alone.** *(Picture book. 5-7)*
Mr. Tooley's death. Billy is White, with a mother, father, and younger sister. As with the moment when Billy thinks about how to achieve. Each profile opens with a portrait and a brief description of bravery that pushed them to explore places far from home, such as mountain climbers, a marine biologist, and a doctor-turned-astronaut. What they all had in common were the curiosity and enhancement activities, a glossary, and websites. Unfortunately, in an apparent oversight, Hobbie relocates Mexico to Central America in the backmatter. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-22-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

An important wake-up call to help stem the decline of these monarchs of the skies. (Informational picture book: 5-9)
Malaika's Surprise
Hohn, Nadia L.
Illus. by Luxbacher, Irene
Groundwood (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-77306-264-8
Series: Malaika, 3

Once again, Malaika's life is changing, but Hohn and Luxbacher remain consistent in delivering an intimate and culturally rich picture book.

There's a new girl in the neighborhood, and Malaika's mother is pregnant, but readers first find Malaika and her stepsister, Adèle, dressed in familiar favorites—ornate masks and colorful capes—and ready for traditional West Indian carnival-inspired play. Like Malaika, readers will love the vibrant and glistening costumes that Luxbacher's gouaches and pastels continue to enliven. Still, the blend of colors and found paper collage notably highlights the blended “brown and pink family” developing around Caribbean-born Malaika: her Afro-Caribbean mother, her White French-Canadian father, her rosy-cheeked White stepsister, and her soon-to-arrive biracial baby brother. In this third series outing, Hohn is firmly in her element, continuing the story of the little girl from the Caribbean acclimating to her new home in Canada, but the introduction of another little brown girl, Malaya M., who is also “from a far place” and whom our Malaika quickly befriends, explores new avenues of cultural and linguistic plurality. A brief glossary in the frontmatter provides an overview of key French, Caribbean, and Arabic terms readers will encounter throughout the story, which is endearingly narrated in Malaika's own patois-inflected voice. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-14-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

Newborn Émile surely surprises big sister Malaika, but the warm, culturally attuned storytelling here meets all expectations. (Picture book 3-7)

Are You My Planet?
Houran, Lori Haskins
Illus. by Miller, Edward
Cottage Door Press (32 pp.)
$9.99 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-1-68052-955-5

An extraterrestrial’s search for home turns into a tour of the planets.

In the patterned tradition of P.D. Eastman’s Are You My Mother? (sort of), green-skinned Beep zooms from planet to planet, but none turns out to be his own “small and red and beautiful” one. With time for just a name and a fact (“Neptune is the windiest planet”), each merits only a quick flyby, being too big or too hot or, anthropocentrically for Earth, “much too busy.” When at last small, red, beautiful Mars comes into view, Beep lands his saucer joyfully to find mate and child (or equivalents) waiting. Miller strews his cartoon spaceways with rockets, satellites, sparkly stars, and nonhuman passersby of diverse description. Only at Pluto, which Beep zooms by between Earth and Venus (it’s unclear how Houran has plotted Beep’s route) and which sports a “Not a Planet Anymore” sign, do the smiles that he puts on the faces of nearly every astronomical body briefly change to frowns: “Oh dear. Sorry about that. Good luck.” There is no explanation for Pluto’s demotion, not to mention any reference to the solar system’s eight other dwarf planets. Pluto does assume its proper station on the closing planetary panorama, but the hand-wavy approach to strict accuracy kicks Earth’s moon out to share an orbit with Mars. Fortunately there are enough similar but more detailed tours available that primary level readers inspired by Beep’s mini-odyssey to book a deeper interplanetary dive will be spoiled for choice. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8-by-14-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

A tantalizing, if not dependably factual, first flight. (Informational picture book: 5-7)

The Case of the Burgled Bundle
Hutchinson, Michael
Second Story Press (216 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-77260-166-4
Series: Mighty Muskrat Mystery, 3

When the memory bundle goes missing, four mystery-solving cousins from the Windy Lake Cree First Nation in Canada are on the case.

The Mighty Muskrats are cousins Otter, Atim, Chickadee, and Sam, who live in the fictional Treaty #12 area. During the National Assembly of Cree Peoples, which is being held at Windy Lake, the memory bundle holding the Nation’s treaty with the Crown is stolen. Fortunately the Muskrats are ready to investigate in this, their third, outing. At events such as this one, the bundle is opened, stories are told, and the contents are shared by the Bundle Holder, which means there is no shortage of suspects: Practically everyone, from Windy Lake’s bully, Pearl, to Casey, a boy visiting from Butterfly Narrows, is considered a suspect. This book is both educational and entertaining; Hutchinson (Misipawistik Cree) weaves cultural and historical context into the story, age-appropriately discussing a wide range of topics, including the impact of colonialism, why various First Nations have different histories with Europeans and Canadians, and the significance of ceremonies. All of this is presented through the eyes of our eager detectives, the Mighty Muskrats. The unfolding of the mystery allows readers to use their deductive reasoning skills to try to figure out who the thief is, as the Muskrats share and discuss information with one another.

Mystery and humor keep readers engaged. (author’s note) (Mystery: 9-12)
"Tender words of affection are perfect for sharing with any young child or grandchild."

**GRANDFATHER BOWHEAD, TELL ME A STORY**

*Johnston, Aviaq*  
*Illus. by Campeau, Tamara*  
Inhabit Media (28 pp.)  
$16.95 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-7722-7297-0

When Arvaq, a bowhead whale calf, asks wise Grandfather Bowhead to tell a story, each heartfelt response proves that nothing can compare to the wonder of his grandchild.

Grandfather Bowhead shares stories of the marvels he’s experienced over his 200-year lifetime but says they will never equal the love he has for his grandchild. “I’ve seen the northern lights running across the vast sky, but they do not compare to the wonder of your very first breath.” Arvaq, whose Inuktitut name means a nursing bowhead calf according to the brief glossary, wants to hear all these amazing stories. Grandfather Bowhead says, “I’ve seen walruses dive into the very depths of the ocean to find clams to eat, but that does not compare to the depth of my love for you.” At night, he tells his grandchild, “nothing compares to the sweetness of your sleeping breath.”

Other Arctic sea life join the bowhead whales in this quiet, rhythmic narrative. Together with painterly illustrations in monochromatic blues of the ocean, this underwater tale shows the wondrous love of a grandparent for his grandchild. While Grandfather Bowhead never actually tells a story, many pictures are so breathtaking readers won’t notice; in one, the whale is viewed suspended in the ocean gazing at the enormous bulk of an iceberg that renders him tiny by comparison.

**Tender words of affection are perfect for sharing with any young child or grandchild. (Picture book. 3-7)**

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**THERE’S A ZOO IN MY POO**

*Jacka, Felice*  
*Illus. by Craig, Rob*  
Pan Macmillan Australia/Trafalgar (64 pp.)  
$18.99 | Apr. 1, 2021  
978-1-76078-304-4

An introduction to the care and feeding of our intestinal microbiota.

“This story of you / and your microscopic stew / begins in your gob / and ends up as a Poo!” Breaking (thank goodness) into prose between such poetic flights, Jacka conducts readers aboard the “poo train” for a trip into the guts, where various single-celled residents from *Lactobacillus* species to *Bifidobacteria* do good work digesting foods, boosting immune systems and brain activity, and staving off disease. Craw’s popeyed, eager-looking cartoon bugs go with the flow as the author chucks terms like *probiotics* and *short chain fatty acids* into quick accounts of nutrition and digestion, the health benefits of playing in the dirt, poo transplants, inflammation, and other gut topics. Jacka finishes by dishing up a few recipes with appetizing titles like “Farty Toast” to cap tallies of recommended and not-so-healthy sizes.

“A bit heavy on technical vocabulary but, verse aside, easy enough to swallow. (stool chart) (Nonfiction. 7-11)

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**SIX FEET BELOW ZERO**

*Jones, Ena*  
Holiday House (288 pp.)  
$18.99 | Apr. 13, 2021  
978-0-8234-4622-3

Juggling a misplaced will, a missing aunt, and an unscrupulous grandma—not to mention a sick puppy and, hidden in a basement freezer, a beloved caregiver’s corpse—keeps two young orphans on the hop.

Devastating as it is to come home from school to find Great-Grammy, their guardian, dead, 12-year-old Rosie and her younger brother, Baker, have no time to nurse their grief if they want to stay out of the clutches of her daughter, “Grim” Gram Hesper, who has been campaigning to ship her octogenarian mother off to a senior condo and the children to separate boarding schools and sell the house and property to a developer. Fortunately, canny Great-Granny made elaborate preparations to keep her expected demise a secret long enough for the children to track down both the errant will and a far-traveling favorite aunt. Unfortunately, carrying out her plan turns into a nonstop whirl of complications as the doorbell and phone never seem to stop ringing, it gets harder for Rosie to keep friendly new neighbors—Rosie’s best friend and new neighbor Karleen at arm’s length, and Grim Hesper sweeps in to show prospective buyers around. Chucking in a red herring to spice up the frantic search, a budding friendship to add warmth, and even a set of recipes, Jones dishes up a delicious denouement on the way to a resolution rich in just deserts. Karleen has brown skin; other main characters present White.

*A delightful, briskly paced caper. (Fiction. 10-12)*
Yellow Triangle feels that she doesn’t fit in with her playmates, all blue circles. Although the circles assure her that her points don’t hurt, Triangle “felt like she was getting in their way.” She tries playing with red squares. They begin to play together, but when they try to make a tower, Triangle causes a crash. The squares don’t bear a grudge, but Triangle worries. She says: “I need to find somewhere I fit perfectly.” She feels out of place with the green hexagons until she notices “a familiar shape in the sky.” She’s happy until she realizes that stars are not triangles. A friendly star tells her that triangles are “not that far away.” Triangle gets excited when she spots them, “exactly the same as her, in every single way.” They form a pyramid and dangle as pennants, but Triangle realizes that she knows many games from the other shapes. She leads the triangles to play with “everyone else,” bringing all the shapes together for “a terrific time.” Simple facial features personify each shape; Triangle’s freckles make her stand out. Subtle textural variations lend visual interest. The clear themes of playing together and overcoming differences are appropriate for early-childhood classes, library storytimes, and family reading. Adults must consider when to read aloud the often witty asides that appear in speech balloons near some shapes.

Shape learning, color recognition, and a message of friendship, neatly arranged. (Picture book 3-6)

An account of the dangerous days leading up to Abraham Lincoln’s inauguration.

Known for turning historical incidents into detailed, thought-provoking books, Jurmain here takes a plot to overthrow the government and assassinate Lincoln on the way to his inauguration—little-known because it failed—and uses it to shine a light on the tumult and violence of the days leading up to the Civil War. Lincoln, scheduled to be sworn in on March 4, 1861, left his home in Springfield, Illinois, on Feb. 11. He planned to spend 12 days traveling slowly to the Capitol by rail, with 75 stops to meet constituents. (Meanwhile, Jefferson Davis departed on the same day for his inauguration as president of the new Confederate states.) Lincoln, careful not to start a war before he was sworn in, gave deliberately vague, nonconfrontational speeches—but he’d already received bushels of death threats, lacked official protection, and sometimes faced rioting crowds. Oddly enough, it was activist Dorothea Dix who first warned authorities of a plot to kill Lincoln in Maryland, leading to famed detective Allan Pinkerton’s taking the case. As Lincoln’s train moved east, Pinkerton and his agents raced to uncover enough details to thwart the plot and save the president-elect. Jurmain shows the day-by-day unfolding of both storylines as they converge in a way that generates excitement even when the outcome is already known.

Interesting, well-researched, and very well done. (timeline, principal characters, appendix, endnotes, further reading, bibliography) (Nonfiction. 8-14)

Because of the heroism of everyday Danes like Henny Sinding, almost all Danish Jews survived the Holocaust. Sixteen-year-old Henny loves sailing with her father on his missions to the lighthouse outside Copenhagen. The only thing that punctures her joy is the increasingly frequent appearance of swastikas, both in the city and even out on the water, flying from the masts of boats. The year is 1943, and the Nazi occupation of Denmark is becoming more heavy-handed. While Danish Jews have been left in peace longer than the Jews of other Nazi-occupied countries, the wind is changing. Henny no longer thinks her Jewish neighbors are safe, especially not adorable, 10-year-old Susanne, who wants to be a sailor, too. Henny risks her life to join the Danish resistance, but she despairs when she learns of the Nazis’ plan to deport all the Danish Jews. All their acts of resistance have surely been meaningless. But Henny is brave and determined—and has access to a boat. Perhaps she can make a real impact after all. Loosely based on the life of a real heroine, the brief adventure packs in a thrilling escape and a heartwarming conclusion. While many details of Henny’s life have been fictionalized, the cinematic climax is based on real events.

Shows that hope is never lost when good people stand up. (historical note) (Historical fiction. 10-12)
THE TWO FRIDAS  
*Kahl, Frida  
Illus. by Folli, Gianluca  
Schiffer (32 pp.)  
$18.99 | Feb. 28, 2021  
978-0-7643-6116-6

A famous female painter's memory, explored.

Using a 1950 entry from Kahlo's diary (translated by an agency), Folli brings the real and the imaginary together to show the worlds within Kahlo. Recalling a memory from when she was 6, Frida recounts how she formed an "intense imaginary friendship with a girl" her age. To visit this friend, Frida would draw a door while looking out her window, exit through it, and jump through the sign of the Pinzón creamery. At first, Folli's use of color in the illustrations is minimal, highlighting minute details like small plants and polka dots. But when Frida dives "through the Ó" in the sign, she enters a world of color and life. Folli's take on Frida's imagination is populated with colorful Mexican folk elements that make appearances in the artist's later work. In this world, Frida becomes her artistic self, donning her floral headband and following her imaginary friend's cues as they dance. When Frida leaves the imaginary world, a more-colorful real one awaits her, as some characters escape. Folli's artwork goes beyond the typical bushy eyebrows that characterize Kahlo and focuses on the imaginative aspects of the world created by Frida. The backmatter gives insight to her life as a child who battled an illness that caused her to limp and the importance that being from Mexico played in her art.

*Peculiarly beautiful. (Picture book/memoir; 5-8)*

CINDERS AND SPARKS  
*Magic at Midnight  
Kelk, Lindsey  
Illus. by Curmich, Pippa  
Harper/HarperCollins (224 pp.)  
$7.99 paper | Apr. 13, 2021  
978-0-06-306669-0  
Series: Cinders and Sparks, 1

A Cinderella with 21st-century attitudes begins a fairy-tale quest. Kelk, a prolific author of light romance for adults, offers younger readers a fractured fairy-tale fantasy that is similarly entertaining. This volume begins as a story about a blended family, a palace, and a ball during which the prince will choose a bride. But nothing is quite what one might expect. There's Sparks, a talking dog, and a woman named Brian, who is a fairy godmother, and then it's Cinders herself who wields the magic—though not without difficulty, at least at first. Cinders is messy and prefers being outside. Prince Joderick would rather be baking brownies. The royal family is terrified of fairies, whom they believe to be monsters based on a long-ago rivalry and a royal pact that should have banished all the fairies from their land. However, late in the narrative readers learn information about Cinders' mother that many might already have suspected. Curmich's amusing grayscale cartoons show a dark-skinned royal family; Cinders and Brian appear White. There's plenty of humor in the text as well. The abrupt ending, which takes a significant detour from the original "Cinderella," will be a jolt to many but leaves the door open for the sequel.

*Playful and fun for youngsters who know and love classic fairy tales. (Fantasy; 7-10)*

THE GOOD GERM HOTEL  
*Meet Your Body's Marvelous Microbes  
Kim Sung-hwa & Kwon Su-jin  
Illus. by Kim Ryung-eun  
What on Earth Books (48 pp.)  
$17.99 | Mar. 2, 2021  
978-1-913750-16-9

Germs are usually seen as the bad guys, but this book aims to introduce middle graders to the many good germs that make up the microbiome and help your body work.

Reminiscent of the manga series Cells at Work, Kim, Kwon, and Kim's work uses an anthropomorphic gut bacterium as the device to take readers on a tour of the body of a young girl, the "wonderful five-star hotel" the bacterium calls home and to whom it addresses its narrative. Along the way readers learn about digestion and the ways bacteria help with the process, complete with plenty of the potty humor we would not have were it not for our body's bacterial colonizers. Beyond helping with digestion, bacteria are also shown helping our immune system ward off bad-germ "invaders"; antibiotics can help too, but the bacterium guide warns not to use them unless needed. Though the text refers to the body as a "hotel" throughout, rather disappointingly it doesn't fully develop that metaphor. There are a few minor issues on the science; it ascribes flu symptoms to the common cold, for instance. This may be partly due to the translation from Korean, but these finer points are largely inconsequential to the intended audience. In the cartoon illustrations, the microbial protagonist looks like a yellow capsule with googly eyes, a few straggles of hair, and several spindly legs. The frequent diagrams and cross sections add both whimsy and informational content. The "hotel" presents White.

*A welcome, kid-friendly addition to the growing selection of popular science on the microbiome. (glossary, selected sources) (Nonfiction; 6-12)*
**BIRDS**
*Explore Their Extraordinary World*
Krestovnikoff, Miranda  
Illus. by Harding, Angela  
Bloomsbury (64 pp.)  
$23.99 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-5476-0529-3

All over the world, birds with unique skills and adaptations survive and flourish in all kinds of different environments.

Krestovnikoff, a well-known BBC wildlife presenter and author of *The Ocean* (2020), is also president of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which will benefit from sales of this British import. Here, she explores the world of birds. She groups them in chapters, sometimes by habit (birds of prey) and more often by habitat (seabirds, freshwater birds, tree dwellers, passerines, birds that live where it is extremely cold or extremely warm, and birds that live in cities). Other chapters cover distinctive characteristics (feathers, beaks, and eyes), nests, and behaviors (flightless birds, migration, and bird song). Each chapter has further subtopics presented in dense chunks of information with clear subheadings on spreads that include labeled images of some of the birds discussed. The writer has chosen intriguing facts, bits of information that are likely to stick in readers’ minds even though some of the birds she describes may be unfamiliar to them. Even more striking are the illustrations, both black-and-white wood engravings and silk-screened linocuts. Harding’s colors are often more artistic than realistic: Her flamingos and scarlet macaws are a brownish orange, but the sapsucker has a properly red cap and neck. As art to enjoy, they suit the admiring tone of the book.

**Better for appreciation than information, this attractive title is suitable for larger collections and dedicated bird lovers.**  
(*Informational picture book. 8-12*)

**HOW TO SAVE A QUEENDOM**
Lawson, Jessica  
Simon & Schuster (368 pp.)  
$17.99 | Apr. 20, 2021  
978-1-5344-1434-1

A poor, lonely girl’s adventure into unknown territory.

Stub, an orphan, has lived and worked at a subpar tavern for all of her 12 years. She sleeps in an unused chicken shed next to the magically enhanced, oversized animals. With no apparent path out of her wretched circumstances and carrying some trauma from mistreatment, Stub has a rather unhappy life. One of the only things she has to look forward to is the country’s centennial Peace Day celebration, an annual remembrance of a brokered truce with foreign armies. Out of nowhere, a shrunken man appears, a wizard no less, who is now magically attached to Stub—by accident, of course. The wizard serves at the palace of the current Peace Queen, who’s Stub’s age, and he shares with her some troubling information that threatens the queendom and the peace. Stub, her pet chicken, the pocket-sized wizard, and a young, eager tavern cook set off across the queendom to stop the mysterious plot. The characters’ episodic journey and the slow-reveal plot never quite click. Overall, the tale explores some good ideas, but the author tries to pack so much in that the execution suffers. The narrative makes a point of emphasizing this world’s heavily matriarchal society. Physical descriptions are limited, but most people in Maradon are said to have light brown skin.

**A promising premise let down by an overstuffed plot.**  
(*Fantasy. 8-12*)

**BREATHE DEEP, LITTLE SHEEP**
Lee, Jessica  
Illus. by Wilkinson, Lucia  
Andrews McMeel Publishing (34 pp.)  
$17.99 | Mar. 2, 2021  
978-1-5248-6535-1

Small animals deal with anxiety.

The book stumbles at the beginning by positioning a feeling as something to be avoided. Rather than inviting readers to acknowledge and sit with whatever they’re feeling, the narrator admonishes the puppy cowering under its bed: “Don’t be nervous.” Rhyming text proceeds to tackle circumstances that may provoke anxiety in children (loud storms, fear of joining in with others) as well as general anxiety responses like a racing heart and being out of breath. Practical steps on how to deal with anxiety are presented, including breathing exercises, mantras, breaking problems down into steps, and more. The book unfolds in a pattern, one double-page spread introducing the anxiety-producing scenario and the next offering the coping strategy: imagining a flowery field during a thunderstorm, joining in the fun sliding on ice, etc. All of the scenarios feature small animals (penguins, a hedgehog, a bunny, and so forth) who are depicted in colorful scenes with minimal details and unencumbered backgrounds, making it easy to focus on the text and the emotions of the characters without distractions. Though the opening merits unpacking, the rest of the book may be a useful tool to help guide younger readers through bouts with anxiety. (*This book was reviewed digitally with 10.3-by-20.6-inch double-page spreads viewed at 29.2% of actual size.*)

**Not a stand-alone but a complement to other books on anxiety.**  
(*Note*  
(*Picture book. 2-4*)
“Depictions of late-stage cancer and of different shades of grief show respect for the audience.”

**BONE TREE**

Lehne, Jenna

Little Press Publishing (188 pp.)

$18.99 | $8.99 paper | Apr. 1, 2021

978-0-9979580-3-4

978-0-9979580-4-1 paper

A girl tries to use a local legend to hold on to her best friend.

One night Roman takes Elsie to the town cemetery to show her the eerie Bone Tree and tell her its legend: A witch used a spell to bind a dead woman to it so that her ghost could stay with her husband as the ghostly Woman in White. Then he tells her that he's dying. During Roman's battle with stage 4 leukemia, the sixth grade best friends research the legend of the Bone Tree and the Woman in White, and Roman makes Elsie promise that she'll use the Bone Tree to bring him back when he dies. When the time comes, its magic works, but Elsie and Roman soon learn its dark cost. The revelation of the true nature of the Woman in White leaves Elsie, Roman, and Roman's older brother, Jake, determined to oppose the evil ghost despite the threat she poses them. The straightforward, fast-moving plot is ideal for middle graders with relatively low reading endurance while the depictions of late-stage cancer and of different shades of grief show respect for the audience. Occasional plot points come too easily to the heroes (especially in the form of a helpful librarian's exposition), but the hauntings have the right amount of detail for impact without overwhelming gore, and the ending resolves in a satisfying manner. Characters default to White.

A solidly spooky offering. (Horror. 8-12)

**GERMS UP CLOSE**

Levine, Sara

Illustrated by the author

Millbrook/Lerner (32 pp.)

$9.99 paper | $27.99 PLB | Apr. 6, 2021

978-1-7284-3673-9

978-1-7284-2408-8 PLB

A photo gallery of dangerous microbes, with basic guidelines for keeping them at bay.

Though the quality of the microphotography falls off when Levine gets to explaining the immune-system roles that various types of white blood cells play, overall the pictures are the stars of the show. Most are big, bright of hue, and so clear that even the smallest physical details of bugs from *E. coli* to coronavirus stand out in sharp, precise definition. “Who would have imagined,” writes Levine, “that they would be so interesting and beautiful to look at?” The author's strenuous efforts to keep her commentary simple may leave readers confused about whether all germs are by definition “bad” or are often or in certain conditions harmless or even beneficial (and it doesn't help that germ doesn't rate an entry in the closing glossary). Still, her concise notes about where each type or species of common bacterium, protozoan, fungus, and virus she names is typically found, the maladies they cause, and how vaccines, hand-washing, wearing masks, and other preventive measures can lend our sophisticated immune systems a hand are as clear as they are timely. Other introductions to the microworld, such as Steve Mould's *The Bacteria Book* (2018) and Amy Gallagher's *Microbes* (2017), offer broader informational pictures, but their cartoon illustrations may, for some, make that world seem a little less real.

High-interest topic and eye-catching visuals—but a few rough spots keep it off the top shelf. (bibliography, list of medical occupations) (Informational picture book. 7-9)

**THE SUN WILL COME OUT**

Levy, Joanne

Orca (296 pp.)

$10.95 paper | Apr. 13, 2021

978-1-4598-2587-1

Bea and her best friend, Frankie, are horse-crazy 11-year-olds excited to spend a month together at Camp Shalom, a Jewish sleep-away camp. When Frankie's parents arrange instead for her to attend Circle M, a much more expensive horse camp, Bea feels betrayed. She's hurt by Frankie's willingness to abandon her and upset about her own parents' inability to afford the pricey Circle M. This friendship crisis isn't Bea's only problem—she has also started breaking out in hives at the worst possible times: in front of her longtime crush (who is also Frankie's brother) and the mean girls who share her cabin and when she auditions for the camp musical. But Bea finds silver linings as well: one is Regan from Ireland, who becomes her bunkmate and close friend; another is Harry, the camp directors' son, who has progeria, a life-limiting genetic disorder. While Harry spends time in the infirmary and avoids the other campers, who are not always welcoming to him, Bea's struggle with hives gives her a chance to get to know him beyond his illness. With help from Harry, Bea learns that she is brave enough to face hard things. The story gives voice to the experience of Jewish preteens; chronic illness and disability are also sensitively tackled in this complex tale about difference, acceptance, and self-confidence.

A heartfelt tear-jerker about love, friendship, and courage. (Fiction. 8-12)
MII MAANDA EZHI-GKENDMAANH / THIS IS HOW I KNOW

Niibing, dgwaagig, bboong, mnookmig dbaadjaagaad maanpii mzin’igning / A Book About the Seasons
Luby, Brittany
Illus. by Pawis-Steckley, Joshua Mangesbig
Trans. by Corbiere, Alvin Ted & Corbiere, Alan
Groundwood (44 pp.)
$18.95 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-77306-326-3

An Anishinaabe grandmother teaches her grandchild that by close observation, the natural world of plants, insects, animals, and birds will reveal how to know when seasons change from one to the next.

Written in English and translated into Anishinaabemowin by the Corbières, an Anishinaabe father and son pair, the story begins with the question, “Aaniish ezhi-gkendmaanh niibing? / How do I know summer is here?” This question is repeated for fall, winter, and spring, the Anishinaabemowin always preceding the English on the page. The grandchild learns how to recognize nature’s signs of the changing seasons by watching and paying attention. With easily understood explanations, the elder shows how nature accommodates plants and animals, and insects. “When yellow Bumblebee collects purple fireweed…blueberries drop readily, [and] the sun slips into an orange dream,” summer is here. Here, the arrival of fall is signaled “when Mallard feasts on yellow corn, and Black Bear licks the ant pile clean”; winter is on its way when “gray Mouse sneaks inside for warmth”; and spring is heralded by “brown Peeper sing[ing], ‘Goodnight, little one.’” Luby draws on her Anishinaabe heritage and time as a child with elders as inspiration for this gentle intergenerational tale set in the present day. Ojibwe Woodland artist Pawis-Steckley renders the scenes with bold outlines and jewel colors, many figures gently styled with traditional designs.

(This book was reviewed digitally with 8.5-inch double-page spreads viewed at 50.7% of actual size.)

In this lyrical, bilingual story, a grandmother’s knowledge reveals wonders. (Picture book 3-8)

A Garden to Save the Birds
MacCall, Michaela
Illus. by Mayumi, Beatriz
Whitman (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 1, 2021
978-0-8075-2753-5

When Emmy and Callum hear a bird hit their window, they are worried that it might be hurt.

The bird flies away unscathed, but it gets Emmy and Callum thinking about what other parts of their home might be dangerous for birds—and what they can do to make it less so. With the help of their mother, they begin by putting decals on their windows, filling the bird feeder, and letting flowers go to seed. As the year progresses, they learn more about what birds need and doable: Readers can accomplish almost all of the activities they model. (More information is provided in the backmatter, along with resources.) At times the prose gets chunky, but generally the text is clear and fun to read aloud. The gentle, pastel-hued illustrations feature a brown-skinned family and neatly complement the earnest and gentle text.

A welcome can-do story about environmental activism. (Picture book 4-7)
A PLAN FOR THE PEOPLE
Nelson Mandela’s Hope for His Nation
McDivitt, Lindsey
Illus. by Palmer, Charly
Eerdmans (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-0-8028-5502-2

An inspiring biography of Nelson Mandela, who made ending South African apartheid his life’s work.

Accompanied by Palmer’s rich, full-color acrylic paintings, the substantial text explores Mandela’s life: his youth in a Xhosa village, his time at university, his early political activism and imprisonment, and his rise to the South African presidency. McDivitt offers enough apartheid history to help young readers understand the systematic nature of racism, implemented through restrictive policies, and how it negatively impacted every aspect of life for Black South Africans. Palmer’s illustrator’s note explains that although the images could have conveyed much more negativity, given the violence of apartheid, he wanted to illustrate the hope that Mandela had for his homeland—a recurring theme in the text—and therefore created bright, colorful, and uplifting artwork throughout. The double-page spread of a tearful Mandela, still imprisoned, holding his page spread of alternative “marathons,” like “Read! 26 Books” and “Reach Out! 26 Acts of Big-Hearted Kindness” modeled on a St. Louis initiative. Staid illustrations place the White author front and center in stylized foreign settings, occasionally with racially diverse groups of onlookers or fellow runners in the background.

The motivational agenda definitely outweighs the storytelling, but readers will be swept along to the finish line. (Picture book/memoir 7-9)

HAPPY SPRINGTIME!
McMullan, Kate
Illus. by Rim, Sujean
Neal Porter/Holiday House (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-8234-4551-6

Hooray! The season of renewal is here.

Take heed, all who suffer from the bleak, snowy winter drums: Marvelous changes are at hand. The hours of daylight expand; new colors, smells, and sounds burst forth everywhere; animals of all sorts are born and reveal; plants regenerate; and outdoor activities both wet and dry encourage eager participation. “Rejoice in the rain you walkers with colorful umbrellas, you puddle jumpers, you small brown birds splashing on sidewalks, you lovers of mud.” This lovely tribute to the renewal of life and possibilities and the promise of fresh new beginnings is the perfect introduction for young children to the magical renaissance that follows each year’s icy darkness. The narrative zings with the joy of new beginnings. The lessons continue as he goes on to convey facts about the spring equinox and the beginning of summer.

A veteran marathoner recalls an around-the-world race in 2018.

Still hoofing along after literally Running Across America (2019), McGillivray offers another autobiographical outing. This one sends him over “26.2 cold, crunchy miles” in Antarctica, “26.2 miles of out-and-back loops along the Persian Gulf,” and like distances on five other continents in a single week as a participant in the annual World Marathon Challenge. Though his terse accounts of places, faces, and races along the way are more snapshots than a connected narrative, they add up to some vivid memories, and he builds climactic suspense by describing how he powers through an increasingly painful injury to finish the final leg. Every experience, though, leads to an explicit inspirational slogan: “Set goals, not limits”; “Your greatest accomplishment is your next one”; “Never underestimate your own abilities”; “Finish strong...or weak. Just finish!” The lessons continue as he goes on to describe how a later diagnosis of heart disease (“Just because you’re fit, doesn’t mean you’re healthy”) led to surgery and—because a “comeback is always stronger than the setback”—a run in the Boston Marathon six months later. If that last bit seems aimed more at adults than kids, he goes for a more general audience with a final page of alternative “marathons,” like “Read! 26 Books” and “Reach Out! 26 Acts of Big-Hearted Kindness” modeled on a St. Louis initiative. Staid illustrations place the White author front and center in stylized foreign settings, occasionally with racially diverse groups of onlookers or fellow runners in the background.

Eccentric and life affirming: a magical ode to a joyful time. (Picture book 3-7)
THE REPUBLIC OF BIRDS
Miller, Jessica
Amulet/Abrams (288 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-4197-3675-9

A magical cartographer faces an avian empire.

Following her architect father’s disgrace, 12-year-old Olga Oblovoma has been exiled with her family to the frozen northern reaches of Tsaletskvo. She’s perfectly happy to miss her Spring Blossom Ball debut given that her lack of grace, as well as her unfeminine interest in cartography, sets her apart from her peers. Complex plot strands weave around a firebird egg, which is the linchpin in the ongoing tensions between the human empire and the bird Republic beyond the mountains, the recent banishment of yagas (traditional Slavic witches with mobile, bird-legged huts), the Bleak Steppe Finishing School for Girls of Unusual Ability, and Olga’s own magic involving her ability to bring maps to life. When her little sister, Mira, a talented dancer, is kidnapped by a flock of birds, Olga has to use all of her special abilities to get her back.

This unusual and intriguing setting includes a subtle message about state-sponsored propaganda and the manipulation present in fears of the Other without relying on questionable racial allegories. The many fascinating elements mean that the story is perfectly happy to miss her Spring Blossom Ball debut given that her lack of grace, as well as her unfeminine interest in cartography, sets her apart from her peers. Complex plot strands weave around a firebird egg, which is the linchpin in the ongoing tensions between the human empire and the bird Republic beyond the mountains, the recent banishment of yagas (traditional Slavic witches with mobile, bird-legged huts), the Bleak Steppe Finishing School for Girls of Unusual Ability, and Olga’s own magic involving her ability to bring maps to life. When her little sister, Mira, a talented dancer, is kidnapped by a flock of birds, Olga has to use all of her special abilities to get her back.

This unusual and intriguing setting includes a subtle message about state-sponsored propaganda and the manipulation present in fears of the Other without relying on questionable racial allegories. The many fascinating elements mean that the story feels a bit compressed, but each is intriguing enough to spark a follow-up. The book follows a White default.

A spirited young triceratops is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to save her family in this latest entry in the Tyrannosaurus series from Japan.

A pleasant day of berry-picking quickly turns nightmarish after the triceratops family takes cover from rain in a cave, feasting on red berries that can heal both physical wounds and unkind hearts. Suddenly an earthquake sends boulders tumbling down from the mountain; little Rikayla’s father throws her to safety before he and her mother are trapped inside by the rock fall. One by one, other dinosaurs offer help, some suffering injury as they attempt to move or shatter the giant rock blocking the entrance. Demonstrating heroic perseverance, Rikayla bravely seeks out the mighty, fearsome tyrannosaurus, offering herself up as a meal in exchange for his assistance—which he grants, duplicitously anticipating eating three triceratops. But

the rock turns out to be a challenge even for him. Rikayla’s innocent trust and tender ministrations to his wounds with the special berries ultimately prove transformative for the tyrannosaurus, even if Rikayla’s hopes of finding her parents alive are shattered. The high-stakes drama, bold illustrations, and effective use of onomatopoeia make this a compelling read. As this rather somber tale does not flinch from portraying children’s deepest fears, it may prove uncomfortable for some adults, yet the potential for deep discussion and emotional exploration is great. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10.5-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 63.8% of actual size.)

A fearlessly intense read that respects children’s ability to grapple with difficult subjects. (Picture book 5-8)

ATLANTIS
The Accidental Invasion
Mone, Gregory
Amulet/Abrams (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-4197-3853-1

Two strangers from different worlds must stop a shadow war.

Twelve-year-old Meriwether Lewis Gates’ futuristic life might be recognizable in some ways, but it’s also plagued by unrelenting, destructive tsunamis. His dad is an eccentric and brilliant academic whose insistence on Atlantis’ existence has left him all but ostracized from the scientific community save for his genius teenage assistant, Hanna. Meanwhile, fathoms below in her Atlantean home of Ridge City, 14-year-old Kaya lives with her father and grandmother and is fascinated by illicit stories about the People of the Sun who live above on dry land. When Lewis’ and Kaya’s worlds collide, they (along with Hanna and Lewis’ dad) form an unlikely alliance, discovering that as climate change and pollution poison the sea, Atlantis is quietly and violently retaliating. The Erasers, a secret Atlantean faction, seek to silence and quell anything to do with the People of the Sun. Can these new friends save both Atlantis and Earth? Written from both Kaya’s and Lewis’ third-person points of view, Mone’s book features expeditious pacing, ample secrets, and imaginative science and tech creations that are zippy indeed, though some points are resolved too conveniently. In a jaunty Q&A, Mone carefully explains how he conceived his innovations and their scientific inner workings. Also provided are tips for making a difference regarding ocean pollution. Lewis is presumably White; Hanna is cued as Black.

This fun adventure both engages and gently edifies. (map) (Science fiction. 8-12)
“Sweet, sad, funny, heartbreaking, and hopeful.”

MIDDLETOWN

DELPHINE AND THE SILVER NEEDLE
Moon, Alyssa
Disney-Hyperion (320 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-368-04802-6
Series: Magic in the Walls, 1

A foundling mouse sets out to uncover the mystery of her origins and of the magical needle sized for humans that was left with her.

Delphine’s travels begin with a summons to the palace, where her growing reputation as a brilliant seamstress commands an order for a ball gown for Princess Petits-Oiseaux—and also gives her a chance to discover exciting hints about a vanished order of needle-wielding magic mice known as the Threaded and of an ancient war with the rats. Meanwhile, no sooner does Midnight, cruel king of the rats, learn that the needle they have been seeking for a century has been found than said old war suddenly heats up and turns into a deadly chase. Also meanwhile, only barely noticed by the animal cast but sure to snag readers’ attention, certain events involving another seamstress, a pumpkin coach, a ball, a prince, and a glass slipper are happening above the floorboards in the parallel human world. That isn’t the only sly touch in this bibbidi bobbidi debut, which is rich in clearly delineated character types, features plenty of brisk action, and is also, overall, more than a bit reminiscent in tone and setting to Brian Jacques’ Redwall series (though with more focus on fashion than food). While this volume is mostly setup, heroes and villains alike end up on an odyssey that may well have been foreseen for a century. Delphine’s travels begin with a summons to the palace, where her growing reputation as a brilliant seamstress—who is also given a chance to discover exciting hints about a vanished order of needle-wielding magic mice known as the Threaded and of an ancient war with the rats. Meanwhile, no sooner does Midnight, cruel king of the rats, learn that the needle they have been seeking for a century has been found than said old war suddenly heats up and turns into a deadly chase. Also meanwhile, only barely noticed by the animal cast but sure to snag readers’ attention, certain events involving another seamstress, a pumpkin coach, a ball, a prince, and a glass slipper are happening above the floorboards in the parallel human world. That isn’t the only sly touch in this bibbidi bobbidi debut, which is rich in clearly delineated character types, features plenty of brisk action, and is also, overall, more than a bit reminiscent in tone and setting to Brian Jacques’ Redwall series (though with more focus on fashion than food). While this volume is mostly setup, heroes and villains alike end up on an odyssey that may well have been foreseen for a century.

A moving and memorable glimpse into one endearing middle schooler’s life. (Fiction. 11-14)

MIDDLETOWN
Moon, Sarah
Levine Querido (256 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-64614-042-8

Teenage sisters lie in order to stay together while their mom is in rehab.

Thirteen-year-old Eli and her 17-year-old sister, Anna, are used to taking care of and covering for their alcoholic mom. After being caught driving while drunk, their mom is sent to rehab, and Anna pretends to be their Aunt Lisa so they won’t get put in foster care. At first, life continues as normal. Eli goes to school and hangs out with her best friends, Javi, the only other gay kid in school, and Meena, her secret crush. Her friends don’t know about Eli’s home life. When money starts to run out and their lie begins to unravel, Eli and Anna have to come up with a new plan. As they discover more about their family, they also learn how to be honest with and accept help from others. Soft-hearted, lovable Eli drives this slice-of-life, coming-of-age story. Alcoholism, queerness, and gender identity and expression (Eli thinks of herself as “not quite a girl”) are all deftly broached, but this is primarily a story of one kid being herself and doing the best she can. The story is never preachy, and there aren’t always easy answers or explanations. Sweet, sad, funny, heartbreaking, and hopeful, it features authentic characters navigating life’s complexities, big and small. Eli and family are implied White; Javi is Puerto Rican, and Meena is Indian American.

A charming series opener. (Animal fantasy. 10-12)
Disappointed when the end-of-summer sand-castle competition is postponed due to beach conditions, Cora starts campaigns to clean the beach and to avoid creating more plastic trash.

The storyline of this thinly disguised lesson is straightforward. The aspiring castle-contest–contestant tries to clean up the beach, finds the task overwhelming, discovers that people are often too busy to pick up the accumulated trash but can help in other ways, learns about animals thinking trash is food, enlists some friends, and, with other contestants on the trash-free beach, gets to build her castle after all. What distinguishes the presentation are Rewse’s colorful illustrations. They suggest a seaside community with a diverse population, palm trees, plenty of sun and sand, and, unfortunately (and all too realistically), a beach strewn with familiar plastic trash. Cora and her mother have brown skin and long textured hair, and there’s a pleasing variety of skin tones, hair colors and styles, and generations among the simply depicted characters. The beach-cleaners all wear gloves or use trash-picking poles. The final spread shows the sand-castle competition, and though Cora’s construction looks like a grand place to live, readers can see that others are even more complex or imaginative. But that’s not the end. Cora’s new project is a trash-reducing campaign. An author’s note provides more information about plastic trash and ways to avoid creating it.

Simple enough for preschool and kindergarten listeners but an effective introduction to a worldwide problem. (Picture book. 4-8)

SHHH
Paronuzzi, Fred
Illus. by Ruiz Johnson, Mariana
Schiffer (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 28, 2021
978-0-7643-6106-7

From morning to evening, a child’s day pulses with the sounds that form this book’s only text.

At the breakfast table, the multiracial family slurps cereal and plops a tea bag as the radio intones “BLAHBLAHBLAH.” In a convivial bathroom scene, each person readies for the day, with a “FFFTT” of cologne, the “BZZZZ” of a shaver, and the “SWOOSH WHOOSH SWOOSH” of a toothbrush. Succesive scenes picture travel to preschool, indoor and outdoor play, and naptime, accompanied by a teacher’s strumming guitar. Then it’s off for an indoor group swim, changing in a pleasantly kinetic locker room, and home again along busy streets. Ruiz Johnson beautifully depicts the high energy of young children in urban settings. Her bright, complementary palette employs blues and warm oranges to enliven the scenes. Children and adults embody wide-ranging skin tones and hair textures and sport a rainbow of colorful, patterned clothing. The child protagonist is seldom seen without an important-looking black-covered book, but it’s only after arriving home that its pages can finally be opened. Amid the whir of housework and meal prep, the child slips into another world, which the artist depicts as a darkly inviting, soundless scene of stars, botanical motifs, animals, an elf, and a mermaid. Through this lovely contrast, presechoolers will understand the transformative power of reading.

Lively scenes and a pro-reading theme combine for a solid title with buckets of kid appeal. (Picture book. 2-6)
THE EARTH
One-of-a-Kind Planet
Perdew, Laura
Illus. by Shululu
Nomad Press (32 pp.)
$19.95 | $9.95 paper | Mar. 15, 2021
978-1-61930-981-4
978-1-61930-984-5 paper

The universe brags about one of its best and favorite parts. Depicted as human with lightly toned skin and billows of black hair a-glimmer with stars, Universe squares two wise-cracking ETS past the planets (“a pretty neat system, if I do say so myself”), then recaps the history of this one from “hot, bubbly, gassy mess” through the development of life to the appearances of satellites and pizza. In simple language she explains the roles oceans, the water cycle, and our planet’s placement in the “Goldilocks” zone played in the appearance of us. If she sounds a note of warning about the need to fix pollution and other hazards to life, it only briefly dims her conviction that we will indeed step up. Heavenly bodies, microorganisms, and, on later pages, racially diverse groups of children sport bright, googly eyes and benevolent smiles in the cartoon illustrations. In co-published tours that echo the upbeat tone, Universe presents viewers with basic introductions to The Moon (our “Small-but-Mighty Neighbor”), the life cycles of a “gazillion” Stars, and our own “Shining Star,” The Sun. Each outing ends with general directions for a relevant activity (for Earth, creating a terrarium) and, injecting the Art into STEAM, opens with an earnest poem.


IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY
Piercey, Rachel
Illus. by Hartas, Freya
Magic Cat (48 pp.)
$19.99 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-1-497-5358-5

Series: Brown Bear Wood

Four seasons’ worth of poetic exploration into the bustling woods.

Piercey presents here 16 poems containing tightly rhymed quatrains inviting young readers to follow Bear out of the confines of their homes and into the forest from spring through winter. Arranged in double-page spreads, Hartas’ sumptuously action-packed forest scenes are rife with so much fauna and flora that Piercey provides legends pointing readers toward “what to spot” on each spread. Bear narrates: “My woodland’s full of animals, / of every different kind. / So shall we stay here for a while / and see what we can find?” (A bit distractingly, some words are set in a faux handwriting typeface.) Items to find include such delights as a “baby chipmunk in a hammock” or “two birds returning from their winter break”—delicately drawn with tiny suitcases in their claws. In each kid-styled Breughel-like tableau, creatures are busy doing something—building nests, getting ready for school, or celebrating Bunny’s birthday; even Bear’s off playing hide-and-seek with mice. In summer, some go for swimming lessons while others stage a play. Autumn’s chill starts to wind down the fun, as trees turn “orange, scarlet, gold, / each leaf a tongue of flame”—perfect for inspiring art class. In Hartas’ gifted hands, Piercey’s thriving woodland society celebrates all the joys of communing with the elements and one another. (This book was reviewed digitally with 12.2-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 29.9% of actual size.)

A tour de force of interactive two-dimensional nature. (nature notes, further resources) (Picture book/poetry. 6-10)

OCEAN SOUP
A Recipe for You, Me, and a Cleaner Sea
Pincus, Meeg
Illus. by Simple, Lucy
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 15, 2021
978-1-5341-1118-9

Ubiquitous use of plastics has produced oceans of plastic soup left for a new generation to clean up.

Rhyming couplets use an extended cooking metaphor to introduce the problem of plastic pollution before calling on “new chefs” to follow the recipe for solving it. The playful tone of the text and illustrations belie the sad facts they convey. Pincus points out that close examination of ocean water reveals “a confetti-like brew” of tiny plastic specks. Plastic trash ends up in the ocean and is “puréed” by ocean currents, ending up concentrated in gyres. Her soup metaphor works well. This unhealthy brew is then eaten by sea creatures, large and small. Humans who eat fish are also eating plastic bits. She suggests readers call on plastics producers to stop and that they change their personal habits, as well. Simple’s animation-style illustrations feature a diverse group of children throughout. Cartoon seascapes show plastic at every depth as well as creatures who eat it. A world map with continents and oceans shows the locations of major gyres. A final spread of backmatter offers more detailed information at a higher reading level than the primary text. Altogether, this is an engaging, informative package aimed at an audience who will, alas, probably be familiar with the problem of ocean degradation but not powerful enough to do much about it. Fortunately, the writer’s suggestions are doable.

A lighthearted approach to a sobering truth. (author’s note) (Informational picture book. 6-9)
“The story is a satisfying balance of familiar and fresh, with an endearing protagonist and an especially timely message.”

**FULL MOON**

*Pintonato, Camilla*

*Illus. by the author*

Princeton Architectural Press (48 pp.)

$18.95 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-61689-999-8

Who doesn’t like to imagine the secret nocturnal celebrations of forest creatures?

This translation of a French Canadian title opens with the coolness of stylized woodland greenery giving way to the heat of a brilliant orange fireball setting in the sky. Five gray rabbits emerge from their home, each with a backpack that cannot quite contain what looks like a puff of blue cotton candy. The majority of the compositions fill the double-page spreads except for a white border at the bottom where the minimal text often encourages engagement: “Where are they going?” Later: “What are they making?” The blue fluff surrounds small balls of light that are dropped into an underground factory, where a conveyor belt transports them for finishing touches. Bunnies in hard hats using tools or consulting sky charts create a productive atmosphere. In another section they operate a printing press, churning out papers that read “Full Moon.” These quietly joyful animals are ones you want to know. Invitations are delivered to the birds, mice, foxes—all are welcome. When everyone is assembled and the moon rises, the small, blue-and-white lanterns float upward from holes in the earth; birds break into song. Friendly faces, luscious forest backdrops, and dazzling points of light dancing around a glowing moon cast a magical aura over the moment. As a new day dawns, readers are summoned to the next party.

An enchanting romp sure to inspire reenactments with lucky stuffed or real animals. (Picture book. 3-6)

**TOO CROWDED**

*Podesta, Lena*

*Illus. by the author*

Sourcebooks Jabberwocky (40 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-7282-2358-7

A goldfish seeks drier pastures. Gil lives in a round glass bowl with “a plant, a castle, and 138 pebbles to clean every day.” But it is “TOO CROWDED!” Gil cries, cradling his snout after bumping it against the side of his bowl. In a shocking, jubilant twist, Gil slaps a bandage on his nose, shoves his rear fins into some sneakers, and packs a rolling bag, off on a quest to find a new house “that is not too crowded.” A bird’s nest is roomy, but the bird song is “TOO LOUD!” Cat’s house is huge and quiet, but...there’s a cat in it. Gil hits a ride on Turtle’s house, but when the spoilsport reptile reminds him that fish “can’t breathe air,” Gil suddenly realizes that he’s suffocating. This plays out in vignettes in dramatic, Wile E. Coyote fashion. Luckily, his human, an overalls-clad Black child with short, curly hair and a bow, comes to the rescue and brings Gil back to his bowl. And when Turtle moves in too, it turns out that a bowl with a plant, a castle, 138 pebbles, and a friend is not too crowded after all. The story is a satisfying balance of familiar and fresh, with an endearing protagonist and an especially timely message about isolation and connection.

Utterly delightful. (Picture book. 4-7)

**SUNDAY RAIN**

*Pova, Rosie J.*

*Illus. by Rauscher, Amariah*

Lantana (32 pp.)

$17.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-911373-97-1

After moving to a new home, a child seeks friendship. Elliott, who presents as a child of color with medium-brown skin and curly brown hair, is reading in the bedroom of his new home when he hears noises outside. Mama, who has a slightly darker complexion and darker hair of the same texture, encourages him to go play in the light rain, where other children are splashing in puddles. Once outside, Elliott draws on the story he was reading to enact an imaginary play scenario with a toy boat and dragon and princess characters. Though the brown-skinned princess appears in the cover art, the neighborhood children, who have pale skin and straight hair, end up taking on a bigger role as they happily join Elliott. Watercolor-and-charcoal illustrations with a pleasing, soft visual texture transport both the new friends and readers on a journey across the sea, to an island, and back to the city block again. Elliott returns home to find his parents serving supper (a White-appearing unnamed second parent is present on one spread). At the book’s end, Elliott returns to his book and then drifts off to sleep after reading its happy ending, delivering the same sort of conclusion to readers of this picture book.

A quiet, sweet story blending common themes of moving, imagination, and friendship. (Picture book. 4-6)

**ESCAPE GREENLAND**

*Prager, Ellen*

*Illus. by Yee, Tammy*

Tumblehome Learning (180 pp.)

$9.95 paper | Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-943431-70-0

Two young travelers find wonder and terror on the Spectacular Kangia Icefjord. After surviving both natural hazards and hijacking by wildlife smugglers in *Escape Galápagos* (2019), the adventures continue for 13-year-old Ezzy Skylar and her younger brother, Luke. No sooner do they arrive with their dad in Ilulissat on Greenland’s western coast than they are embroiled in further eco-themed bad behavior. Ezzy and Luke find themselves shot at, left in a locked room,
forced to make their way through a deadly iceberg field (once on foot and later by boat), and, most thrilling of all, kayaking wildly through the glacier’s interior down a meltwater tunnel. At last, however, they uncover an unethical plan to stimulate the local trade in tourists eager to see melting glaciers. Encounters with fetching sled dog puppies, impressive humpback whales, and enormous mosquitoes add lighter notes to these misadventures, and frequent references to climate change and its effects supply a unifying theme. Prager closes with notes on what is real (the science and most of the setting) and what is made up in the story. Main characters present White; some supporting characters are cued (though not named) as Inuit. The Skylar children’s judgmental statements about traditional food and hunting practices are presented with little context to help readers understand Native Greenlandic perspectives. Illustrations not seen.

Chills and thrills aplenty. (maps) (Eco-fiction. 10-12)

THE NOT-SO-SCARY DOG
Propst, Alanna
Illus. by Simpson, Michelle
Magination/American Psychological Association (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-1-4338-3204-8

A child’s cynophobia eases after learning how to control it. Tommy should be delighted to receive an invitation to a friend’s birthday party, so imagine Mom’s surprise when Tommy begs her not to go. The friend has a dog, and Tommy is terrified of canines of all kinds. After confiding to her child that she used to be afraid of dogs, too, Mom makes a plan with Tommy. Rather than allowing her child anxiety has decreased significantly. While Tommy’s quick and easy path may set high expectations for readers, the practical information it’s rooted in could prove beneficial to families. The text, alas, rhymes needlessly and clumsily, coming up with odd turns of phrase (“It’s like you’re in a fog”) for the sake of the rhyme alone. Somewhat more successful is the inclusive cartoon art (Tommy and Mom have light-brown skin and interact with a diverse array of other children). A lengthy note aimed at caregivers how to control its benchmarks with their own children’s worries. Thankfully, the book also notes that caregivers should consult their children’s primary care physician “for guidance and for a referral if needed.”

A fear of dogs is no match for serviceable practicality. (Picture book. 4-8)

THE HOUSE OF GRASS AND SKY
Ray, Mary Lyn
Illus. by Goodale, E.B.
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-5362-0097-3

An old house takes center stage, waiting for just the right family to move in.

The titular house stands empty in the country, full of memories, longing, and even the sounds and smells of the many happy residents that dwelled in it over the years. With people no longer living there, the house feels different, forlorn as seasons change and time passes. The house hopes a new family, especially one with children, will come and remain permanently, but none does, discouraged either by the rural quietude or what they consider to be the house’s small size. Finally, a new family with kids arrives, and the house is hopeful that it’s found its match — until they, too, leave. Or have they? Young readers/listeners will appreciate this sweet, compassionate story and be charmed by the notion of a house serving as a protagonist; this tale should spark discussions and generate memories about kids’ own homes. Children will empathize with the house’s feelings of sadness and patience and be gladdened by the happy, hopeful ending, replete with possibilities. The soft, delicate, airy illustrations, rendered partially in muted watercolors and ink, are atmospheric and suffused with nostalgia and coziness. Some illustrations, suggesting sepia-toned photos, show past events that took place within the house’s walls. Past residents present White; the new young family that moves in is a family of color.

A reassuring conversation starter about the special connections we feel to our homes. (Picture book. 4-8)

LILLIANA AND THE FROGS
Ritchie, Scot
Illus. by the author
Harbour Publishing (32 pp.)
$16.95 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-55017-934-7

A little girl with a fondness for chorus frogs discovers how elusive they can be.

Lying in her frog-themed bedroom at night, Lilliana loves listening to the chorus frogs singing outside. Like Lilliana, chorus frogs are very small, and they are tricky to locate when she searches for them. Spying the teeny frogs hiding under leaves, she eventually traps them in a large jar and takes them inside, where she places them in a flat box covered with chicken wire. Before Lilliana realizes it, however, the fast-moving, tiny frogs escape. Suddenly, to her parents’ dismay, chorus frogs are croaking loudly and jumping around everywhere. The spare text reiterates how small, hard to catch, and loud chorus frogs can be, so readers will be surprised to discover how Lilliana solves her dilemma. Drawn loosely in squiggly,
energetic black outlines washed with fluid greens, blues, yellows, and tans, the lively, detailed illustrations will delight and invite readers to join Lilliana’s search, indoors and outdoors, for the wily, we choruses frogs. Double-page aerial views reveal Lilliana’s diminutive, red-haired, frog-loving, wellie-wearing figure scouring woods and fields with her companion dachshund as she learns an important lesson in natural animal habitats. Endpapers reveal the chorus frog’s life circle, and an author’s note adds personal perspective. Lilliana’s mom presents White, and her dad has brown skin and dark hair; Lilliana herself has pale skin and her mom’s red hair.

An amusing, animated, charming tale for fledgling naturalists. (Picture book 3-5)

BE YOUR OWN BEST FRIEND FOREVER!
Robinson, Gary
Illus. by the author
7th Generation (40 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Mar. 28, 2021
978-1-939053-34-3

Inspired by a real-life child acquaintance of the author, this book aims to encourage girls of all ages to believe in themselves and know they are just enough the way they are.

Protagonist Jayla begins by inviting readers to a heart-to-heart conversation: “Okay, girls… I’ve got something to say!” She’s proud of her mixed African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latinx identity. She offers readers definitive steps to build confidence and self-trust, telling them not to listen to the negative messages they hear in their heads. “That’s called negative self-talk. It’s not good for you, and you don’t have to listen to it!” She goes further: “If your friends tell you those negative things, GET NEW FRIENDS!” Jayla suggests ways to practice positive self-talk, including a simple list of affirmations, and exhorts readers to embrace their unique characteristics. “They make you, YOU!” Robinson’s posterlike illustrations place images of the bespectacled, brown-skinned Jayla at the centers of compositions, disorienting, dark backgrounds containing the negative messages she spurns, including a bank of TV screens blaring such mottos as “Fair-skinned Girls are Pretty” and “Skinny is Best.” Other backgrounds resemble flower-power designs from the early 1970s; another literally depicts right-brain/left-brain strengths, with arithmetic equations on one side and exuberant paint splatters on the other. Jayla ends with a final piece of advice: “believe in yourself and be your own Best Friend forever!”

Girl readers will come away embracing their best possible selves. (Picture book 4-7)

SPLASHDOWN
Roman, Dave
Illus. by the author with Wibowo, Jessica & Wibowo, Jacinta
First Second (192 pp.)
$19.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-250-21685-4
Series: Astronaut Academy, 3

Roman loves to drop names.

The guests invited to trainee Maribelle Mellonbelly’s spring-break beach party include “the Knights of the Ol’ Republic, Frankie and Annette, Dick Dale,” and Maribelle’s podiatrist. Not all of them appear in the comic, but there are cultural references on nearly every page. Maribelle’s “army of manservants,” holding umbrellas, look like they belong in a Magritte painting. Martin Landau shows up, too. That’s the name of the planet where the party takes place. The beach is “made up of the finest organic sand imported from highly scrutinized sources. Each of the 5,000,000,000,000,000,000 grains are individually numbered.” The endless stream of jokes doesn’t distract from the plot, pacing, or characterization—which don’t seem to be the main point anyway—but rather flows along as new characters keep arriving. Readers who are jumping into the series with this title won’t be lost, because people helpfully offer exposition: “Isn’t that the giant robot that doubles as a spaceship piloted by Hakata’s best friend?” All of the characters are adorable, like hastily drawn Hello Kitty figures, but taken from a broad array of cultural origins. The colorist duo the Wibowos give them dimension with their Technicolor palette. The climax, however, in which they “realign the planet’s seven chakras”—all listed by name—is both slow and a little abstract. None of it makes much sense, but there’s a merperson in hydraulic hydro-slacks.

The book is so crammed with jokes it might be funnier read out of order. (Graphic science fiction. 10-14)

OSNAT AND HER DOVE
The True Story of the World’s First Female Rabbi
Samuel, Sigal
Illus. by Mintzi, Vali
Levine Querido (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-64614-037-4

One woman takes her love of Jewish religious learning to exalted heights.

Born the daughter of a learned rabbi, Osnat Barzani convinced him to teach her Hebrew and the holy texts of Judaism. This was indeed a rare occurrence, as Osnat was born in Mosul, in today’s Iraq, in 1590. She embraced her studies and, after her father’s death, began teaching in his yeshiva. Her freedom to choose a husband who supported her passion for study was just as unusual for the time. Her wisdom was so great and so respected that everyone accepted and honored her. The
He eventually carries out God's will, however reluctantly, and there is a strong sense of movement and action. Hebrew letters dance across the pages, many taking the shape of stylized animals in Osnat’s imagination. Fact and legend become one in an inspiring story of an exceptional woman. (author’s note) (Picture book/biography. 9-12)

**JONAH’S TALE OF A WHALE**
_Schwartz, Barry L._
_Illus. by Sanchez, James Rey_
_Apples & Honey Press (32 pp.)
$_{17.95} | \text{Apr. 1, 2021}$
_978-1-68115-562-3_

Jonah disobeys God’s instructions and finds himself in deep trouble.

God has told Jonah that he must go to Nineveh, Israel’s enemy, to tell them to change their ways and display kindness. Jonah prefers to have them punished, so he gets on a ship headed in the opposite direction. God is not happy and whips up severe storms that terrify the sailors, who call on their own gods for help. When they learn Jonah is to blame, he begs them to save themselves by throwing him overboard. Waiting below is the great gray whale, and Jonah floats right into his mouth. With nothing to do but think, Jonah comes to the conclusion that he must follow God’s orders. He needs a second chance, and therefore, so do the people of Nineveh. He eventually carries out God’s will, however reluctantly, and though successful, must learn yet another lesson in compassion. Forgoing traditional Biblical language and employing brief, almost staccato sentences, modern syntax, and lots of direct speech between God and Jonah, Schwartz, a rabbi, presents the story to a new audience. All the salient action is there, but the important moral holds central importance. Sanchez’s illustrations have the look of modern animation; they capture the kind of mind-blowing sensory overload Mole must be feeling as he sees the moon, the sun, and so many flowers for the first time. The book’s unusual format, with horizontal double-page spreads that open bottom to top rather than right to left, the gutter demarcating the worlds above and below ground, smartly conveys the vertical nature of Mole’s journey.

Odd and oddly affecting, Mole’s story catches the eye and captures the heart. (Picture book. 3-5)

**MOLE IN A BLACK & WHITE HOLE**
_Sediva, Tereza_
_Illus. by the author_
_Thames & Hudson (32 pp.)
$_{16.95} | \text{Mar. 2, 2021}$
_978-0-500-66205-3_

A mole who’s never ventured aboveground learns that there’s a vibrant world overhead in an unusually styled debut picture book.

Mole, who lives in a small hole beneath the earth, lives a life with few hues: Everything in his home is black or white with just a few exceptions. His hands and feet, which are bright pink, are the same color as neighboring worms and a best friend, Chandelier. Chandelier, who hangs above Mole, is actually a plant, with a view that goes beyond Mole’s. “There are blossoming trees and blooming flowers, I can see it all with my leaves,” Chandelier says. When Mole’s friend is uprooted, literally, Mole must conquer his fear of what lies on the other side. The view up there, of course, is revelatory for the sad Mole, opening possibilities toward a joyous conclusion. First-time Czech author/illustrator Sediva’s linocut prints start out stark and smudge-filled, like stamped pages with incongruent shapes and inky blotches. But as color plays into the story, the overlapping objects blend together like dreamy collages. It replicates the kind of mind-blowing sensory overload Mole must be feeling as he sees the moon, the sun, and so many flowers for the first time. The book’s unusual format, with horizontal double-page spreads that open bottom to top rather than right to left, the gutter demarcating the worlds above and below ground, smartly conveys the vertical nature of Mole’s journey.

_Odd and oddly affecting, Mole’s story catches the eye and captures the heart._ (Picture book. 3-5)

**CAN YOU WHISTLE, JOHANNA?**
_Stark, Ulf_
_Illus. by Höglund, Anna_
_Trans. by Marshall, Julia_
_Gecko Press (80 pp.)
$_{18.99} | \text{Feb. 2, 2021}$
_978-1-776573-25-7_

When his friend Ulf describes the fun he has with his grandfather, Berra wishes for his own grandfather.

To find him one, Ulf brings Berra to an old folks home, where they meet Ned, and Berra introduces himself as his grandson. Ned is lonely, so he willingly accepts the relationship. They have tea with the other residents, to whom Ned and Berra introduce themselves as his grandson. When Mole’s friend is uprooted, literally, Mole must conquer his fear of what lies on the other side. The view up there, of course, is revelatory for the sad Mole, opening possibilities toward a joyous conclusion. First-time Czech author/illustrator Sediva’s linocut prints start out stark and smudge-filled, like stamped pages with incongruent shapes and inky blotches. But as color plays into the story, the overlapping objects blend together like dreamy collages. It replicates the kind of mind-blowing sensory overload Mole must be feeling as he sees the moon, the sun, and so many flowers for the first time. The book’s unusual format, with horizontal double-page spreads that open bottom to top rather than right to left, the gutter demarcating the worlds above and below ground, smartly conveys the vertical nature of Mole’s journey.

Odd and oddly affecting, Mole’s story catches the eye and captures the heart. (Picture book. 3-5)
“The rodent cartoon cast is drawn with manic energy and, often, covered in gooey gloobs.”

SLIME FOR DINNER

Stilton, Geronimo & Angleberger, Tom
Illus. by Angleberger, Tom
Graphix/Scholastic (208 pp.)
$12.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-338-58735-7
Series: Geronimo Stilton Graphic Novels, 2

A missing coffin isn’t the only mystery on Geronimo Stilton’s plate. Moldy mozzarella! In the wake of a pretend (or perhaps real!) heist, a mystery-themed dinner at Creepella Cacklefur’s castle quickly devolves into a mad rush from one hidden clue to the next. This is punctuated by courses ranging from toad slime and kraken tentacles to mystery giblets on a stick, all dished up by guest chef Boffo Flambe. There are also encounters with werecanines and a horde of howling werewolf slugs, not to mention moat slime, cave slime, and (perhaps worst of all) sloth snot sorbet for dessert. (Readers will sympathize with our hero’s reluctance to partake, a running gag throughout.) Alert readers will doubtless detect a theme, and Angleberger’s just the one to amplify it with big sequential panels both decked out in loud colors and packed with a rodent cartoon cast that is drawn with manic energy and, often, covered in gooey gloobs. “I had slime for dinner,” Geronimo Stilton laments. “Now slime is having me for dinner!” Based on an episode published in Italy but not in the U.S. and so new even to series fans on this side of the Atlantic, the latest graphic caper from the mild-mannered journalist/sleuth will slide off the shelves whenever a slightly scary tale or, for that matter, a general grossfest is in order.

Get set for gags aplenty… and not just the visual sort. (Graphic mystery. 7-9)

A FOX CALLED HERBERT

Sturton, Margaret
Illus. by the author
Andersen Press USA (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-72842-411-8

A rabbit plays dress-up.

In a friendly world of anthropomorphic animals, cats and porcupines play hopscotch, owls play chase, and Herbert, a yellow rabbit, plays fox. He “loved foxes so much, he made himself a pair of red ears,” but his mother tells him that “rabbit ears aren’t short and pointy.” His other attempts at passing himself off as a fox are met with similar disagreement—and scoldings—as when he tries to paint himself red (and makes quite a mess) and cuts a red tail out of his mother’s dress. It isn’t until Herbert sneaks out in full fox regalia and is seen playing with real foxes (apparently predator-prey relationships are erased in this world) by his mother and little sister that his mother relents: “I AM A FOX!” he insists, and his mother finally responds with, “You are my fox.” Dress-up and dramatic play are common among children, and read as a lighthearted story about letting children play as they want to, this is anodyne and pleasant. Readers tempted to see or use this as a way to open up conversations about self-identity may wish to consider instead stories that address the realities of complex human communities head-on.

A familiar story competently told. (Picture book. 3-7)

THE LAST SHADOW WARRIOR

Subity, Sam
Scholastic (320 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-338-61607-9

Abby is your average 12-year-old North Carolinian—and Viking.

She has been eager for years to follow in her mother’s footsteps as an Aesir, or Viking warrior charged with protecting the world from Grendels, descendants of the same monster faced down by Beowulf. Still reeling from her mother’s death four years ago, Abby is worried because she hasn’t developed the unusual abilities needed by Aesirs. After she is attacked at home, she and her father head to Vale Hall, an elite Minnesota private school her mother also attended. Along the way they are attacked again, and her father falls into a mysterious coma. Abby is positive a Grendel is after her, but the Viking council at Vale Hall doesn’t believe her. She quickly befriends Grimsby and Gwynn, each with their own burdens and secrets. Together they try to find a cure for her father, in the process uncovering secrets from her mother’s past and discovering some truths hiding at Vale Hall. This entertaining debut novel seamlessly blends Norse mythology with a modern-day setting to tell an action-packed and humorous story. In addition, the book explores grief, growing up, and starting over with
sensitivity and insight. Abby and most other characters are cued as White; Gwynn is described as Asian American.

Fans of mythology-based fantasies will devour this adventure and anxiously await the next installment. *(Fantasy. 10-12)*

**VANILLA BEAN**

*Turner, Katie*

*Illus. by the author*

*Cottage Door Press (32 pp.)*

$9.99 | Mar. 16, 2021

978-1-64638-112-8

Series: Small Children's Storybook

Bean's beloved double scoop of vanilla ice cream is accidentally splattered with rainbow sprinkles, accentuating the dilemma of his picky-eater attitude.

This blue dog is a very persnickety pup, averse to even the most kid-friendly choices like grilled cheese, spaghetti, and strawberries. The only food he likes and will eat is vanilla ice cream in either a cone or cup, plain, with nothing on it, ever. No other flavors will do, not even with the enticement of some of the original flavors at Miss Sundae's shop, like birthday cake or dark chocolate sea salt. One day, as usual, Bean gets his two scoops of vanilla, but when Miss Sundae (a polar bear) begins to clean up, she slips and spills a tub of sprinkles, which go flying everywhere. At first upset, Bean lets hunger win out as his two scoops are the last of the vanilla. He hesitates, takes a lick, then finds out to his surprise: "I like it" with sprinkles. Seeing her double bond but before they quite solidify a friendship, the river overflows, endangering Little Mouse's house. Big Bear ventures bravely out into an almost-unrecognizable panorama of rolling blue water, blue trees, and blue wind—but readers will recognize the shape of the road between the houses, and there is, at last a happy ending that's the opposite of treacly.

*Tender and companionable.* *(Picture book. 3-7)*

**THE BIG HOUSE AND THE LITTLE HOUSE**

*Ueno, Yoshi*

*Illus. by Fujishima, Emiko*

*Levine Querido (48 pp.)*

$17.99 | Mar. 9, 2021

978-1-64614-049-7

Series: Small Children's Storybook

From far away down a long road, two animals make friends.

The horizontal orientation of this title offers long left-to-right spreads, and across them wanders a pale yellow road, sloping gradually upward. "At one end was a little house, standing all alone," so tiny that readers must peer closely to glimpse the red-roofed miniature. Far away, up the low-grade hill, stands a "big house"—big only when compared to the small one, still small in the countryside landscape. Little Mouse and Big Bear each live contentedly, but both are lonely. Details twinkle: Little Mouse works in a busy bakery (with a chef's toque and rolling pin) while Big Bear works "alone in the forest"; each heads away from the other's house to reach work; and Little Mouse explores the forest only on the single day Big Bear explores the town. The prose in this translation from the Japanese is plain-spoken and elegant. Fujishima uses fine black pen for outlines, shadings, and textures while light hues—tans, pinks, blues, and greens, all pale—round out the gentle scenes. After the two bond but before they quite solidify a friendship, the river overflows, endangering Little Mouse's house. Big Bear ventures bravely out into an almost-unrecognizable panorama of rolling blue water, blue trees, and blue wind—but readers will recognize the shape of the road between the houses, and there is, at last a happy ending that’s the opposite of treacly.

*Tender and companionable.* *(Picture book. 3-7)*

**ALMOST THERE AND ALMOST NOT**

*Urban, Linda*

*Atheneum (224 pp.)*

$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021

978-1-5344-7880-0

Introspective California learns about herself and her family with the help of two unlikely ghosts.

It isn't easy for 11-year-old California, being shifted from one aunt to another after her father leaves her to go work in Alaska. When she finally arrives at Aunt Monica's house in West Bloomfield, Michigan, she encounters a ghost dog and the ghost of her great-great-aunt Eleanor. As friendly spirits, not evil ghouls, these two ghosts become a regular presence, teaching California about love, friendship, and, in the case of Eleanor, even how to write letters like a proper lady. Urban deftly tackles loss, longing, loneliness, and neglect through California's first-person narrative peppered with her many letters. Some of Urban's descriptions of life with ghosts are stellar, evoking vivid images. However, aside from a mention of a garden in June, there isn't much of a sense of physical atmosphere or setting. Similarly, the text lacks physical descriptions of characters, pointing to a White default, although California's fifth-grade teacher has a Tibetan given name for her surname. That said, Urban explores California's growth so delicately, unraveling each truth: the pain of losing her mother four years earlier, her father's drinking and instability, and the realization that she is worthy of being loved and has people in her life who cherish her.

*Skillfully written with well-drawn characters.* *(Fiction. 8-12)*
BUILD A ROBOT!
Venable, Colleen AF
Illus. by Hudson, Kathryn
First Second (128 pp.)
$19.99 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-1-250-15235-2
Series: Maker Comics

A fun how-to manual for aspiring roboticians.

This most recent installment in the Maker Comics series (tagline: “the ultimate DIY guide”) weaves a narrative around six robotics projects of varying difficulty. Toaster 2, a tomato-red appliance who proclaims itself the “most advanced robot ever created,” speaks directly to readers as they follow his lighthearted adventures navigating the perils around his family’s house. It creates an arbot to tackle pesky homework assignments, a scarebot to fend off “your” annoying brother, and three versions of a carbot directly to readers as they follow his lighthearted adventures. Hudson’s full-color illustrations are lively; together with V enable’s patient and approachable instructions. The robots range from simple designs composed of packing tape and magnets to more sophisticated schemes utilizing breadboards and coding. Venable intersperses engaging factoids throughout the guide on various topics, including the history of glue, a timeline of robotics, and an overview of the computer language Arduino. Hudson’s full-color illustrations are lively; together with Venable’s patient and thorough directions, they should encourage young readers to take the plunge into making their own bots. Also included is a step-by-step guide to starting a robotics club, helping to move any builder’s love from the page to a group. T2’s family is interra-tional: Dad and “your brother” present Black, and Mom and “your little sister” have Asian features. Both of the latter have offputtingly stylized eyes, and Mom’s hourglass figure and hairstyle skate close to stereotypes of hypersexualized Asian women—a shame, as her textual character development is terrific.

A (mostly) confidence-inspiring guide for young creators.
(Graphic nonfiction. 10-14)

NO WAY, THEY WERE GAY?
Hidden Lives and Secret Loves
Wind, Lee
Zest Books (296 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-5415-8162-3

A lighthearted celebration of select LGBTQ+ individuals throughout history.

“History was crafted by the people who recorded it,” writes Wind as he endeavors to “reclaim the queer history” of 12 individuals (and, tangentially, about a dozen more). Wind’s spotlight shines on those whose stories he deems “earth-shaking surprises,” ranging from Pharaoh Hatshepsut (1495-1458 B.C.E.) to Lesotho storyteller M’e Mpho Nthunya (1920-2013). Chapters provide helpful historical context before diving into the figures’ lives—and, importantly, loves. Throughout, Wind is careful to use correct or historically accurate pronouns (or, in the case of uncertainty, the singular they). Deeply weaving in primary sources (in bold text), cheeky sidebars, and his own narrative observations as a gay man, Wind keeps the tone conversational and playful. Open-ended questions allow readers to draw their own conclusions—a particularly nice touch for those histories that rely on speculative details. Though Wind is upfront about some racist or problematic attitudes, his rosy picture of Abraham Lincoln makes for an inconsistent treatment. Nonetheless, the careful (though not comprehensive) selection of figures achieves a rare sense of balance. The three overarching categories—“Men Who Loved Men,” “Women Who Loved Women,” and “People Who Lived Outside Gender Boundaries”—each cover four people of varying identities (including race and ethnicity). Unfortunately, the separation based on gender results in an unnecessarily binary organizational scheme.

Entertaining, illuminating, and an accessible antidote to dominant histories. (author’s note, source notes, resources, index) (Biography. 11-18)

EARTH SQUAD
50 People Who are Saving the Planet
Zissu, Alexandra
Illus. by Lê, Nhung
Running Press Kids (160 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-7624-9921-2

Meet leaders working to save our planet.

Know an older child or young teen who wants to make a difference? Introduce them to this collective biography of environmentalists who are working to preserve our environment. Fifty individuals from a range of backgrounds, geographic locations, and ages are introduced across six thematic categories: activism and community, science, politics, food, art and innovation, and journalism. And although they all want to save the planet, their stories and motivations are varied, making for a nuanced introduction to environmental leaders around the world. Subjects range from the familiar (Greta Thunberg, Wangari Maathai, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, David Attenborough) to names young readers may well not have encountered, at least in this context: French Moroccan ocean activist Lamya Essemli, African American community organizer Peggy Shepard, and Botswanaian scientist Ophe Pauline Dube are just a few in that latter category. Each biography is relatively uniform in style: A bold, full-page illustration of the subject accompanies approximately a page and a half to two pages of text that summarize their life and their achievements. A closing box encourages readers to act like the subject via a statement of general advice that alludes to their work. Words set in boldface refer
readers to a glossary of 13 concepts. Sadly, further reading in the form of suggested resources or a bibliography is not provided. Readers looking to learn more about environmental leaders will be interested, but those looking for a deep dive will need additional help to plumb those depths. Overall, however, it’s a good introduction to inspire readers new to the cause.

Interesting, if brief. (Collective biography. 9-12)

BOARD & NOVELTY BOOKS

RISE UP AND WRITE IT

With Real Mail, Posters, and More!

Abuja, Nandini
Illus. by Syed, Aminoob
HarperFestival (48 pp.)
$16.99 | Jan. 5, 2021
978-0-06-302959-0

Farah Patel is full of questions. One day, she notices that her urban neighborhood is missing butterflies. When she asks why, Farah’s mother tells her that it’s because their community lacks greenery. When Farah and her mother pass an empty lot with a sign in front of it asking citizens to contact Mayor Khan with their ideas for it, Farah lands on the perfect plan: She and her neighbors could turn it into a community garden! Not only would this attract butterflies, it would also provide families with a local source of fresh fruits and vegetables. Farah writes to the mayor, but the mayor writes back saying that the plan is to turn the space into a parking lot. Determined to change this, Farah organizes her friends and neighbors to work together to advocate for a garden. This cheerfully illustrated picture book is the perfect beginner text for young activists, providing examples of kid-friendly actions, including writing letters to politicians, testifying at public meetings, and organizing rallies. The book contains cleverly designed pages shaped like envelopes that contain removable samples of letters, petitions, and protest signs that kids can use as templates for their own community-based action. The book’s language is both clear and empowering—never preachy—and the plot moves quickly. Farah is South Asian, and in Syed’s art, her neighborhood reflects the ideal of American diversity.

This interactive guide to activism and its endearing protagonist both burst with energy. (Picture book/novelty. 3-8)

MIKI GETS DRESSED

Bakin, Stephanie
Illus. by Mercier, Julie
Twill/Chronicle (10 pp.)
$12.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-2-40801-972-3

With help from pull-tabs (but not visible grown-ups), Miki the lion dons trousers, a sweater, and other clothes before going out to play. The relatively fragile tabs won’t survive more than a few hard yanks, but the motions they create—pulling green pants up, blue sweater down, orange (pre-tied, or perhaps equipped with elastic rather than laces) shoes on, and finally a red raincoat over all—are realistic if abbreviated. (Just let the fact that he starts out with socks and blue boxes already on slide.) It’s all a setup for an exuberant pop-up surprise at the end as Miki heads outdoors to take a wild leap into a rain puddle as a snail benevolently looks on. Budding fashionistas may find more-stylish dressing guides such as Margaret Chodos-Irvine’s Ella Sarah Gets Dressed (2003) or Denise Fleming’s Maggie and Michael Get Dressed (2016) more to their taste, but younger cubs just getting into the swing of doing-it-myself may appreciate these elementally simple hints as well as the unseen voice that keeps Miki on task: “Oh, it’s raining, Miki! We’re going to get soaked!” Miki obligingly replies, “All right, I’ll put on my red raincoat.”

It’s not the sturdiest, but this French import is good for a practice run or two before trying the real thing. (Pop-up picture book. 2-3)

DINOSAURS

Baker, Miranda
Illus. by Shufflebotham, Amanda
360 Degrees (12 pp.)
$14.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-944530-32-7
Series: Ultimate Earth

A primary introduction to dinosaurs, with lots of flaps to lift and polysyllabic names to practice. Melodrama trumps realism in the illustrations, as Shufflebotham picks hues for her stylized figures from the garish end of the palette and depicts most of her dinos in open-mouthed, menacing (if gore-free) poses. In contrast, the variously sized flaps are mostly used for informational purposes such as adding space for more pictures or transforming a fleshed-out specimen to a skeleton. Not all the dinosaurs are drawn to scale, but to compensate she adds translucent human silhouettes both to the simplified prehistoric backdrops and to some of the inset portraits. Baker’s commentary, divvied up into scattered one- or two-sentence bits, lays a sturdy foundation of fact by offering simply phrased observations about diet, defense, camouflage, and even evolutionary changes while replacing abstract numbers with vivid comparisons. Younger readers will find it
paperback. The result feels improbably special, offering an opportunity to
firmly attached to sturdy stock.

Solid interactive fare for younger STEM-winders. (Informational novelty. 7-9) (Oceans and Seas: 978-1-944530-33-4)

I BELIEVE IN YOU
Barks, Elias
Illus. by Bletsis, George
Hazy Dell Press (20 pp.)
$13.95  |  Dec. 29, 2020
978-1-944530-17-5
Series: Hazy Dell Love & Nurture Books

Playful cryptids model unconditional love and acceptance for the board-book set.
Gorgeous colors, tones, and textures combine with an off-kilter cast and conceit to lend charm to what could easily feel maudlin. Rhymed text provides a vehicle for caregivers to deliver a warm and reassuring message of unconditional love to their charges. The verse is delivered in a style that borders on Hallmark-lite, but despite this—or perhaps because of it—author Barks and illustrator Bletsis wire a scampering charm by pairing the unabashed sentiment with playful paranormal hijinks.

The result feels improbably special, offering an opportunity to bask in the bond between caregiver and child. Hearing the titular phrase, “I believe in you,” repeated between parent and child sea serpents as they swim around Loch Ness is endearing and clever. The message doesn’t feel trite. Golden skies, rolling hills, and blue waters reflecting the bright yellow hues of the sun lend an air of magic to Nessie’s home. The text is not Shakespeare, but the message is clear: “From the bright golden dawn // to your cute bedtime yawn, // I believe in you. // Some people may doubt, // but we’ll tune them out. // And I’ll believe in you. // All the friends that you make, // will know you’re not fake. // They’ll believe in you.” The accompanying illustrations of wee Nessie playing joyfully with Bigfoot, a ghost, an ET, and a winged unicorn are clinchers.

Lovely, sweet, and warmly offbeat. (Board book. 2-5)

ANIMALS AT PLAY
Bijsterbosch, Anita
Illus. by the author
Clavis (10 pp.)
$14.95  |  Oct. 20, 2020
978-1-60537-563-2

Flaps reveal the playful antics of a menagerie of animals in this Dutch/Flemish import with a question-and-answer text.
On the verso of each double-page spread, a selection of four or five critters from the same habitat is introduced, such as “Animals in the Jungle” or “Animals in the Woods.” On the exterior of the large flap on the recto, a simple query appears about one of the creatures. “Is the seal swimming in the ocean all by itself?” is the query for the “Animals in the Ocean” double-page spread. Under that flap, the action of the scene is revealed with the players depicted on the facing page interacting together. This toddler bestiary depicts many of the stock players of board books, such as lion, elephant, cow, and pig, but there are a few rarities listed, such as robin (depicted as a European robin), hedgehog, and mole. The art skews toward the cute, depicting chubby beasts with oversized eyes and babish, smiling faces. Those seeking accurate animal behavior will wish to look elsewhere, since that doesn’t appear to be the goal of this offering—predators and prey are awfully familiar in a couple of scenes. The flimsy flaps may not survive robust toddler play. A finger-sized indentation aids opening the flaps, but their pointy corners may poke little fingers.

Flimsy in both format and content. (Board book. 1-3)

SHAPES AT PLAY
Choi, Jin
Illus. by the author
Starbright Books (40 pp.)
$7.99  |  Oct. 15, 2020
978-1-59572-904-0

This eye-catching look at shapes and spatial relationships has no text, but it should speak volumes to children eager to grasp and explore the physical world.

The images in this clever board book have a clean, well-composed look that one might find in an album of excellent graphic design. Brightly colored, seemingly unrelated shapes lie on a clean white background with fold-out flaps laid over them. Unfold the flaps, and images separate, segment, or rotate, and relationships between the shapes come into focus. Caregivers, be prepared to name shapes (remember the difference between a parallelogram and a trapezoid?) or to describe the visual changes depicted in the book. Of course, this book doesn’t necessarily require a grown-up to decipher it. The images and interactions offer enough visual and tactile appeal to entertain and provoke thought without help. A blue rectangle faces a red hexagon of equal height. Unfolding the flap splits the hexagon and widens it to the width of that rectangle. Voilà; it’s an
Young adult
kirkus.com
board & novelty books
15 february 2021
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Octagon. Open the flap on a yellow house to split the square “house” from the triangular roof. A red ice cream cone becomes a sphere and a cone. A diamond made from two triangles opens to reveal a larger triangle made up of four equilateral triangles. Removing a small circle from the edge of a larger one leaves a circle and a crescent.

Engages young minds by engaging their fingers. (Board book/novelty 2-4)

SPACE
Dussaussois, Sophie
Illus. by Picard, Charline
Trans. by Hardenberg, Wendeline A.
Twirl/Chronicle (20 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-1-03632-519-9
Series: Pop-Up Guide

Ten pop-up scenes portray highlights of space exploration, from telescopes to Mars landings, in this French import.

Kitted with elastic bands to hold any of the multilevel painted tableaux open for display, the survey kicks off with a group of ground-based and orbiting telescopes, panoramic views of the planets, and a scanty assortment of satellites (only some of which are identified). From there the focus changes to live space ventures, including moonwalks, inside and outside views of the International Space Station, and, to close, a mix of current and future visitors to Mars. The art has a utilitarian cast overall, and the accompanying labels aren’t always informative (satellite, atmosphere) or easily legible, as they are often printed in black type on the dark blue of outer space. Sometimes, as with the description of a crew sitting in a Soyuz capsule’s interior accompanying an exterior view of the rocket blasting off, they are not even relevant. The sparse narrative text at best gets the job done: “Earth travels around the Sun along with seven other planets. Together, they form our solar system. Some planets are made of rock.” Still, the aptly named but rarely mentioned “RemoveDEBRIS” satellite gets a cameo in one scene, a line-up of launch vehicles past and present is current enough to include the Falcon Heavy and New Shepard, and human figures—at least the ones not wearing spacesuits—reflect the next generation of space explorers in being diverse of age, race, and gender presentation.

A quick flyby, too light of payload for serious study but with some potential for display. (Informational pop-up 6-8)

NUMBERS 1 TO 100
Jaramillo, Susie
Illus. by the author
Encantos (30 pp.)
Twirl/Chronicle (20 pp.)
$16.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-945635-32-8
Series: Canticos Bilingual Firsts

Young children learn to count from one to 100 in both English and Spanish.

Readers familiar with other books in the Canticos family will recognize some of the animals making appearances here, though that familiarity is not required in order to appreciate this book. Brightly hued chicks, elephants, rabbits, spiders, frogs, and others, all with distinctly anthropomorphized and babyish looks, introduce the numbers, counting from one to 10, then by tens to 50, and then 100. Both the numeric symbols and the written words are presented in simple and straightforward double-page spreads, all including the never-miss toddler crowd pleaser: a lift-the-flap window: “3 / Three chickies”; “5 / Five spiders”; “10 / Ten bubbles”; “50 / Fifty apples”; “100 / One hundred raindrops.” Upon lifting the flap, readers find the Spanish version underneath: “3 / Tres pollitos”; “5 / Cinco arañas”; “10 / Diez burbujas”; “50 / Cincuenta manzanas”; “100 / Cien gotas de lluvia.” There is little that is surprising or sparks the imagination in the presentation, but it does the job of introducing the numbers in both languages. Rather than sharing it with babies, adults may find the book better used as a language teaching device with older preschoolers that have an understanding of quantity and numbers and can already count in one or the other language. There is no pronunciation guide for either language, so familiarity with both is assumed.

Sweet yet unremarkable. (Board book 3-5)

HABITATS
Newman, Ben
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Hardenberg, Wendeline A.
Twirl/Chronicle (10 pp.)
$14.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-2-40801-969-3
Series: Turn Seek Find

Big, heavy-duty spinners in this French import invite young naturalists to match creatures and also colors in five different habitats.

In crowded settings created with blocky, geometric shapes Newman packs in stylized but easily recognizable flora, fauna, and physical features associated with either a relatively specific habitat, such as the African savanna, or a more-generic one—such as, for a surprise at the end, a “Big City.” For each, two sturdy, toothed wheels at the side turn to bring one of four named animals or items into view within a die-cut window as well as one of four unnamed colors to spot. That’s not all there is to see in each spread by any stretch, and adults should be ready to help youngsters identify various unnamed animals and items.
in addition to the seal, the Arctic hare, the owl, and the igloo in the “Ice Field.” Diapered literati on this side of the Atlantic may need some help identifying a “tuk-tuk” in the Indian jungle and elsewhere naming several of the hues that move away from primary colors to in-between shades, but each scene not only offers lots to see and discuss, but is printed on stock heavy enough to weather repeat toddler tests. Human figures visible in the city are all portrayed with various shades of brown skin; many of those that appear earlier are rendered more fancifully, in blue, mustard, pink, and gray.

Bright, busy, and well designed to keep younger eyes and hands involved. (Board book/novelty. 1-3)

**CAT CAN SWIM**

Purcell, Rebecca  
Illus. by the author  
Tiny Seed (24 pp.)  
$7.95 | Nov 1, 2020  
978-1-80036-004-4  
Series: Cat’s Adventures

Jump in with Cat on an underwater adventure.

Purcell’s Cat, of *Cat’s New Hat* and *Cat Goes Fast* (both 2020), is back again, this time ready to take an extensive dip. Seeking relief from the hot sun, Cat dives down to the bottom of the ocean, passing fish, eels, and a shark on the way to meeting a feline mermaid. Once Cat is back ashore it begins to rain, and sidekick Bird, who naturally stays above the waves, brings an umbrella to the chilly Cat. The end is a nice counterpoint to the beginning, as Cat had started the story hot and wanting to get wet, so it ends on the opposite note. Overall, the illustrations are so simple that nuances can be spotted easily. Cat looks so much the same from page to page that little drops of perspiration are all that is needed to show the heat. The story itself isn’t much of a story; it’s mostly just a series of rhymes. That said, the bouncing rhythm does keep up the pace for little listeners. Though Bird takes she/her pronouns, Cat remains ungendered. (It is not clear whether Cat’s avian pal is the same Bird as in Purcell’s Owl and Bird books, but they look an awful lot alike.)

Don’t make a big splash, but Cat is cute enough to make it worth diving in. (Board book. 6 mos.-2)

**OPPOSITES WITH OWL AND BIRD**

Purcell, Rebecca  
Illus. by the author  
Tiny Seed (16 pp.)  
$5.95 | Dec 1, 2020  
978-1-80036-007-5  
Series: Owl and Bird

Owl and Bird return in a well-designed and whimsical look at a complex concept.

With the help of some buddies, Owl and Bird demonstrate the meanings of 14 opposing words. Each page is divided into two similarly tinted halves, with a word and its opposite receiving equal treatment. Most of the predictable pairs (wet/dry, up/down) are easily illustrated with changes in Bird’s position. Less-concrete ideas require abstract reasoning based on details provided in the uncluttered illustrations. For example, to show the meaning of fast/slow, Owl zooms in from the left on pink roller skates while Bird sedately rides atop a tortoise. The bemused-looking Owl is featured on every spread, often appearing in multiple illustrations. To demonstrate up/down, Owl balances on the fulcrum of a teeter-totter while a jay perches on the upper handhold and Bird on the lower. The only text is the concept word printed in a large, clean black type at the top of each panel, directly above the illustration used to define that word. With repeated shared readings children will begin to recognize these words. Older preschoolers may find they are actually reading them. And yes, for fans of the duo’s previous outing, *Hey Owl, What’s in the Box?* (2020), there are donuts—one for less and four for more.

Sweet! A clear and charming introduction to a standard preschool curriculum concept. (Board book: 18 mos.-5)

**THE ABCS OF LOVE**

Rossner, Rose  
Illus. by Ando TWIN  
Sourcebooks Wonderland (28 pp.)  
$8.99 | Dec 1, 2020  
978-1-7282-2095-6

Animal parents declare their love for their offspring in alphabetical order.

Each page displays an enormous capital letter, one line of verse with the keyword capitalized, and a loving nonhuman parent gazing adoringly at their baby: “A is for Always. I always love you more. / B is for Butterfly kisses. / It’s you that I adore.” While not named or labelled as such, the A is also for an alligator and its hatchling and B is for a butterfly and a butterfly child (not a caterpillar—biology is not the aim of this title) interacting in some way with the said letter. For E there are an elephant and a calf; U features a unicorn and foal; and X, keyed to the last letter of the animal’s name, corresponds to a fox and three pups. The final double-page spread shows all the featured creatures and their babies as the last line declares: “Baby, I love you from A to Z!” The verse is standard fare and appropriately sentimental. The art is cartoon-cute and populated by suitably loving critters on solid backgrounds. Hearts accent each scene, but the theme of the project is never in any doubt.

Perfect for Valentine’s Day, but the syrupy sweetness will cloy after the holiday. (Board book. 1-3)
THE FARMER
Slegers, Liesbet
Illus. by the author
Clavis (10 pp.)
$14.95 | Oct. 13, 2020
978-1-60537-586-1

Learn about farm animals and the farmer's work in this lift-the-flap board book from Belgium and the Netherlands.

This toddler-friendly tale is part picture identification and part prediction. Each double-page spread shows four simply drawn animals or items on the left while the right side poses a question beneath a picture and invites readers to lift the flap on which both are printed. This setup clearly displays the featured items, and the questions invite little readers to practice making predictions about what will happen next. Sometimes there is an obvious answer to the question, as in which animal gets which type of food; other times, the question elicits a yes or no answer. In this way, Slegers keeps the experience of each page predictable without being repetitive. Some questions are confusing: Yes, the farmer appears to be watering the cauliflower, lettuce, and carrots he's walking past with a watering can, but the answer is he's not—"he's watering the tomatoes in the greenhouse." Others fail to purposefully include all the items depicted on verso, so that something like the pitchfork becomes simply unused background. The illustrations have thick, black outlines, with simple, bold colors and features. There isn't much detail save the realistic texture of the farmer's work clothes and the close-up photographed image of straw used in place of drawing on the bales of hay. The farmer presents White and is explicitly gendered male, and there are no other humans in the book.

Reader engagement saves this from complete unoriginality. (Board book: 1-2)

WHERE GO THE BOATS?
Stevenson, Robert Louis
Illus. by Sheban, Chris
Creative Editions/Creative Company
(12 pp.)
$8.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-56846-352-0

This Robert Louis Stevenson poem is brought to life on pages that fold out rather than turn.
On the cover, a White-presenting child with short, light-brown hair sets a toy sailboat adrift on a river. The book’s pages then open up left to right to reveal an expanding scene of the riverbank, with several more of these toy boats sailing down the water. Two to four lines of Stevenson’s verse are shared in white type on each page. As the book unfolds readers see more of the scene, including a frog eyeing its insect dinner flying overhead, a deer gazing at the water, and the silhouettes of a baseball-cap-wearing grown-up fishing with a child who’s admiring the boats. Sheban’s soft, golden-hour–lit art, in what looks to be water-color and pastel or pencil, matches the mood of the poem perfectly. While the unusual binding is a brilliant idea that allows the structure of the book to emulate a meandering river, it may prove slightly unwieldy for lap reading, as, when extended, it is more than 3 feet long. The scene is completed with a view of another White child, this one with long hair, retrieving one of the toy boats. The content of Stevenson’s poem may float over the heads of the youngest readers, but the language is gorgeously sonorous, and the art and format do a wonderful job of creating an immersive experience.

Gentle, atmospheric, and lovely. (Board book. 2-5)

**TINY T. REX AND THE PERFECT VALENTINE**

Stutzman, Jonathan
Illus. by Fleck, Jay
Chronicle Books (18 pp.)
$7.99 | Dec. 29, 2020
978-1-4521-8489-0

Even when well-intended plans go awry, sometimes “I love you” is plastered all over one’s face.

Tiny T. Rex wants to make the perfect valentine for friend Pointy, a stegosaurus. It’s a noble ideal, but perfection is more elusive than the little theropod realized. That’s the premise of this charming board book that succinctly celebrates love, friendship, aspiration, perseverance, limitations, and the notion that it’s the thought that counts—especially when it’s clearly reflected in effort. Like its protagonist, this book is small, but it’s rich in value and works on every level. The artwork has an elegant simplicity that beautifully balances color, personality, and clever detail. A panel of Tiny designing the card in chalk on a blackboard, for example, reveals the scale of the little dino’s intentions: a giant heart, ribbons, smaller hearts dangling from springs, heart-shaped balloons, and fireworks, all much larger than Tiny. The project is clearly a labor of love: Tiny sweats, tugs a bucket of paint—“Pointy’s favorite color!”—but the bucket spills on the artist, not the valentine. Trying to make the card “extra fancy,” Tiny is covered in glitter. Tiny rips, snips, and rerips, trying to make the perfect heart; misspells Pointy; and glues springs and hearts all over everything. When Tiny apologizes for having no valentine for Pointy, Pointy recognizes immediately that the perfect valentine is a friend like Tiny.

A sweet reminder that love is best measured in actions. (Board book. 1-5)

**PET**

Van Fleet, Matthew
Illus. by the author
Photos by Stanton, Brian
Simon & Schuster (20 pp.)
$21.99 | Jan. 19, 2021
978-1-5344-8247-0

A panorama of pets, with big tabs to pull and furry or textured patches to fondle.

Dozens of small pets crowd the ultrasturdy white pages or peer from behind heavy acetate windows. If not every single one comes with a well-anchored piece of synthetic fur or fuzz or can be made to peek out or waggle a fin by pulling a big, geared-for-toddlers tab, all—even the hermit crab and the sticky snails—are bright and cute as buttons. Except for mentioning that “small” potbellied pigs “get too big,” Van Fleet doesn’t address the practicalities (or ethics) of keeping as pets some of the less-domesticated birds, reptiles, and other creatures on display. In fact, the text is written for rhythm more than it is for literal meaning: “Gnaw pet, / Chew pet, / Peck pet, / Crunch! / Gulp pet, / Nibble pets—munch, munch, munch, munch, munch!” In this tableau, a chinchilla, a degu, a parrot, a tortoise, a goldfish, a mouse, and a guinea pig all nosh, the pull-tab wiggling the guinea pig’s head as it nibbles. All, from guinea pig and goldfish to veiled chameleon, ornate horned frog, and sun conure are identified in a grand pop-up assemblage at the end. The earthier underpinnings of the team’s similarly designed *Color Dog* (2015) may be absent, but the sheer diversity of the animal cast will delight diapered audiences.

Sure to result in choruses of ooohs, coos, and mews. (Informational novelty. 2-4)
Best friends—she is straight, he is gay—crush on the same guy. Kate and her best friend, Anderson, do everything together—including falling for Matt, a gorgeous vocal consultant at summer theater camp. Their close friends say it is because they are codependent, but for Kate, Anderson is the person at the center of her life, and anyway, she thinks crushes are more fun (and less painful) when not done solo. Communal summer swooning is sort of their thing, and they expect this one to end the same way the others do. But when Matt shows up as a new student at their school, both Kate and Anderson realize they have to navigate this joint crush in real life. Not knowing whether Matt likes guys or girls or more—but knowing they both really do like him—they set up some ground rules so as not to hurt each other and decide to just roll with it. But of course that is easier said than done when romantic feelings are involved. The novel features strong character development and a diverse cast of primary and supporting characters; Kate is White and Jewish, Anderson is Black, and Matt is White. Real chemistry between the different love interests in the book, authentic dialogue, supportive friendships, and Albertalli’s signature humor make this a must-read.

Flips the script on battling over a boy in the best way possible. (Fiction. 12-18)
Black History Month is a good time to pay tribute to a large and varied group of people whose contributions and achievements deserve recognition every month of the year but whose stories are too often overlooked and distorted. Themed months risk reinforcing the idea that there is “regular history” and “special-interest history.” We are all part of the same fabric, with all our stories interconnected. But until everyone is fully integrated into general narratives, it’s still important to set aside time to spotlight those who are too often erased. The first few weeks of 2021 bring a range of superlative titles that present diverse Black perspectives. Here are just a few.

Several titles prompt readers to think about how certain communities are commonly presented and the ways that biased assumptions influence what we believe to be true.

When You Look Like Us by Pamela N. Harris (Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins, Jan. 5): This story about a boy looking for his missing sister gets readers thinking about systemic racism and its impact on communities.

One of the Good Ones by Maika Mouliite and Maritza Mouliite (Inkyard Press, Jan. 5): Whose lives we value inherently, without the need to justify their worth, is at the heart of this tale of two sisters.

Concrete Rose by Angie Thomas (Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins, Jan. 12): This prequel to The Hate UGive offers a nuanced look at intergenerational neighborhood struggles and their impact on young people’s aspirations.

These next two works are about well-known and influential but widely misunderstood individuals. The manner in which their stories are frequently misrepresented gets at the heart of the battles they fought.

The Awakening of Malcolm X by Ilyasah Shabazz with Tiffany D. Jackson (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Jan. 9): Readers meet a young Malcolm, the bookworm, the passionate truth seeker, the youth raised with self-respect who sought to uplift his brethren.

The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks (Young Readers Edition) by Jeanne Theoharis, adapted by Brandy Colbert (Beacon, Feb. 2): Sets the record straight on how, far from being “too tired” to move seats on the bus, Parks was an organized activist trained in nonviolent resistance.

Stories of Black people who are recent African immigrants, Afro Latinx, or who have roots in the Caribbean, to name just a few examples, are less often taught but just as much a part of Black history.

Love Is a Revolution by Renée Watson (Bloomsbury, Feb. 2): A body-positive story about a Jamaican American girl whose new summer romance becomes an even more important journey to self-love.

Like Home by Louisa Onomé (Delacorte, Feb. 23): A Nigerian Canadian girl gains a difficult firsthand understanding of the impact of gentrification—and of the power of her own voice.

I’m a Wild Seed by Sharon Lee Cruz (Street Noise Books, Feb. 23): This graphic memoir by a queer Afro Latinx woman invites readers on a journey of self-interrogation and joyful awakening.

Black creatives’ talent is widely appreciated and their work eagerly consumed, but their social justice messages do not get the same recognition.

Can’t Stop Won’t Stop (Young Adult Edition): A Hip-Hop History by Jeff Chang and Dave “Davey D” Cook (Wednesday Books, March 2): Hip-hop has had a worldwide musical impact; here readers learn about its philosophical roots as a powerful youth movement and anti-establishment critique.

Paul Robeson: No One Can Silence Me: The Life of the Legendary Artist and Activist (Adapted for Young Adults) by Martin Duberman (The New Press, March 9): The unparalleled intellectual and artistic achievements of a man whom today’s teens deserve to know better shed critical light on contemporary issues.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
friend is fellow teen Percy St.-John, a lay-brother and temporary addition to their monastery, sent there as an attempt to reform his wicked, thieving ways. When a precious, ancient, and mysterious book goes missing, suspicion falls on Percy, who must use his skills to uncover the mystery and uses all the help he can get, including that of Gabriel and Elizabeth, a French pilgrim recently arrived at the monastery with her parents, who hope for a cure for her disability. But who is the real culprit: a monk or one of the many pilgrims currently visiting? Perhaps the answer lies in the occult, since Gabriel knows full well that guardian angels and demons do exist. Told in Gabriel's first-person narration, this short novel is reminiscent of literary classics, with a healthy dose of supernatural elements, endearing characters, and an intriguing, well-devised mystery at its core. All characters are assumed White. The depiction of Elizabeth's changing feelings about her disability is positive, but repeated use of the descriptor lame strikes an unfortunate note for contemporary audiences.

A fast-paced and engaging historical mystery. (glossary) (Paranormal mystery. 14-18)

GO THE DISTANCE
Calonita, Jen
Disney-Hyperion (512 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
Series: Twisted Tale

Megara becomes the heroine of this fractured tale that poses an alternate ending to Disney’s Hercules.

After Hercules becomes a god, he chooses to return to Earth with Meg. She couldn’t be happier until Zeus denies his request and says she can’t remain on Mount Olympus with Hercules because she’s mortal. Fortunately, Hera offers her the chance to become a god if she can prove her worth by completing a quest in 10 days. First, she must locate Athena’s lost flute, then she must retrieve the lost soul of her ex-love’s wife from the Underworld—the same ex-love for whom Meg sold her soul to Hades and the same man who moved on to another woman one week after Meg disappeared. With the help of Phil and Pegasus, she’ll face dangerous beasts and gods and try to escape Hades once again to complete her quest. Meg must confront her past in order to discover what she truly wants in life and in love. Chapters move between past and present, adding depth to Meg’s character and her backstory of independence, lost love, and working for Hades. This is a fun story full of action, twists, and film references, but ultimately it reads a bit like fan fiction. Following the original movie portrayal, Meg has red hair, pale skin, and violet eyes.

A fun read for Hercules fans. (Fantasy. 12-18)
him about race. Later he recognizes how many details about his friend’s life he is unaware of. A minor trans character also serves as a learning opportunity for Sky. The characterization overall lacks depth: Ali’s family’s experience living in an area filled with MAGA supporters is not developed, and Bree’s autistic 12-year-old brother, who has a neurotypical twin, is depicted in a way that feels infantilizing. However, the plot is suspenseful, the resolution is hopeful, and the story has positive moments—as with the casual, nonstigmatizing acknowledgement of porn.

An optimistic but unremarkable coming-of-age narrative. (Fiction. 14-18)

TAKE THREE GIRLS
Crowley, Cath & Howell, Simmone & Wood, Fiona
Sterling Teen (432 pp.)
$17.95 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-4549-3827-9

Three Australian girls deal with devastating attacks on a gossip website.

Clem is struggling with her self-esteem, her weight, and her role on the swim team. Kate tries to find the courage to audition for an overseas music program while cramming for an academic scholarship exam that would allow her to remain at her expensive boarding school. Ady just wants everything to go back to normal and for her home life to stop spiraling out of control. When the three are grouped together in a wellness class, they at first are none too enthused. Worse, they’ve all been targeted by the shady, misogynistic gossip site PSST. Bisexual Ady’s father struggles with cocaine addiction, Clem is plus size, and Kate comes from a poorer family than her classmates. Each of their narratives deals with emotionally intense subjects, including extreme misogyny, body shaming, unhealthy relationships, and addiction. Sixteen-year-old Clem’s storyline focuses on thinking you are more of an adult than you really are as she gets involved in uncomfortable situations with her 19-year-old boyfriend. Talented cellist Kate’s is centered around the idea of expectations, both her expectations of others and their expectations of her. Ady’s deals with having your foundations taken away and discovering who you really are. These three disparate narratives, told through alternating first-person chapters interspersed with school assignments and excerpts from PSST, form a solid braid, perfectly reflecting the nature of the bond the girls forge. Main characters read as White.

Compelling and relevant. (Fiction. 14-18)

NATIVE WOMEN CHANGING THEIR WORLDS
Cutright, Patricia J.
7th Generation (128 pp.)
$9.95 paper | Apr. 28, 2021
978-1-939053-32-9

Twelve profiles of Native American and First Nations women are collected in this engaging work.

The individuals included here have achieved success in many fields, from Deb Haaland (Pueblo of Laguna), a U.S. Representative from New Mexico, to the late Mary Golda Ross (Cherokee), an elite aeronautical engineer at Lockheed. Each profile begins with an inspirational quote, features approximately six to eight pages describing the subject’s early life and later achievements, and concludes with a list of their awards and honors. Photographs enhance the text. While their lives and talents are diverse, the women share strong beliefs in the sanctity of family and the preservation of their cultures and languages. Some of the women grew up on a reserve, some moved around in their youth, but all faced challenges. The book shows how they have overcome racial and gender discrimination, poverty, abuse, and other obstacles to become leaders in their professions and communities. Highlighting how each found a way to keep a positive outlook, it also shows that when their goals seemed unachievable, there was a family member or a teacher who believed in them and pushed them to move beyond the expectations of Indigenous women in the non-Native world. These remarkable stories, relayed in straightforward and accessible prose, will serve as catalysts, propelling young people to seek the potential they have within themselves.

Inspiring portraits of accomplished Indigenous women. (references, photo credits) (Nonfiction. 13-18)

THE MURDER GAME
Doyle, Carrie
Sourcebooks Fire (352 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-72822-229-5

A murder in a boarding school leads a teen sleuth down a dangerous path.

When Luke and his roommate, Oscar, snuck out of their dorm room after hours to hook up with two girls in the woods, they did not expect to get involved in a murder. Dean Heckler’s young wife’s body is found the morning after, near the place the teens were hanging out. Fear of being expelled prevents them from confessing their presence around the time of the murder—but when Oscar becomes a suspect, Luke starts his own investigation to prove his best friend’s innocence. Fortunately, three years earlier Luke had escaped a kidnapping using survival skills learned from his former–POW grandfather, the same skills he now needs if he wants to find the
true murderer and get out of this situation alive. This whodunit has enough twists and red herrings to make for an intriguing mystery if readers are prepared to suspend disbelief at how frequently adult characters act with implausible negligence. The book is also weighed down by a haze of misogyny when describing both girls at the school as well as the murdered woman, who remains a vapid, one-note seductress throughout. Luke’s vague and perfunctory attempts at challenging his male friends in their sexist views are not enough to clear the chauvinist miasma. Main characters are White.

A suspenseful mystery diminished by outdated gender stereotypes. (Mystery. 14-18)

PAUL ROBESON
No One Can Silence Me: The Life of the Legendary Artist and Activist (Adapted for Young Adults)
Duberman, Martin
The New Press (288 pp.)
$19.99 | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-62097-649-4

The definitive biography of 20th-century Renaissance man Robeson, whose signature legacy of merging arts and activism serves as a timely message for a new generation of change-makers, is here adapted for younger audiences.

In the foreword of this work that is deserving of deep engagement, Jason Reynolds invites readers into the story of this world-famous Black entertainer whom he sees as “perhaps the greatest reminder of the possibilities of a single person.” The son of an escaped slave, Robeson became a superstar college athlete, valedictorian, lawyer, actor, singer, globe-trotter, polyglot, and committed humanitarian. Yet, as his involvement in freedom struggles for Black Americans and working people’s struggles around the world clashed with Cold War-era conservatism, his unparalleled legacy has been erased from public memory. Readers will connect with Robeson’s miraculous and hard-fought rise, from his unprecedented success in Hollywood to his yearslong struggle with the U.S. government to reinstate his passport, confiscated due to McCarthyist opposition to his political activities. The work balances his achievements despite overwhelming odds with his human vulnerabilities and missteps. Archival images and text boxes offer historical context, presenting details of Robeson’s bold stands that will resonate with new generations familiar with Black public figures like Colin Kaepernick and Maya Moore.

A history of a global luminary figure that serves as a reminder of the courageous freedom-fighting work in front of us. (further information, Robeson’s music and movies, sources, image credits, index) (Biography. 12-18)

THE SEVENTH RAVEN
Elliott, David
Illus. by Cai, Rovina
HMH Books (192 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-0-358-25211-5

A teenager sets out to rescue her cursed older brothers in this verse retelling of the Grimms’ “The Seven Ravens.” Upon learning at last that her brothers—all named Jack except the youngest, Robyn—had been transformed into birds at her birth by her father in a fit of pique, 15-year-old April resolutely undertakes what becomes a weary search for them. In the most notable wrinkle that Elliott adds to the original, Robyn, who had always felt like the odd one out anyway, quite enjoys being a raven, and when April climactically makes an extreme sacrifice to free her brothers, he is left separate from the others once again. Occasional white-on-black pages and Cai’s infrequent but brooding
We Are the Ashes, We Are the Fire (Dutton, Feb. 9) by Joy McCullough weaves together the stories of two families torn asunder by sexual violence. In present-day Seattle, Em and her parents are struggling with grief and anger after Em’s older sister, Nor, is violently assaulted at a fraternity party; her attacker is let go with time served while Nor receives misogynistic abuse on campus and on social media. Em throws herself into writing in verse the story of Marguerite de Bressieux, a 15th-century French noblewoman who went into battle to avenge the rape and murder of her family. As Nor pulls away, Em bonds with Jess, a new friend who adorns her story with illuminated manuscript-style illustrations and introduces her to medieval combat classes. McCullough spoke with us over Zoom from her home in Seattle, Washington; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What drew you to focus on the impact of sexual assault on those who love the victim?
The ripple effects of sexual violence are huge; they affect not just families, but whole communities. A lot of times, the onus on fixing rape culture is put on the victims when we all need to know how to respond when this happens to someone in our lives. The story of Marguerite came to me first, this story about this vengeful young woman. I think that Nor or any victim of sexual violence is going to be dealing with so many questions, blame, and guilt—it’s not black and white to them—and so I felt like the person who would grab onto Marguerite’s story and want to dive into it would be someone with completely righteous anger fueling them and making them want to understand Marguerite’s story to help process their own.

How did you discover Marguerite de Bressieux?
There was a tweet from Jason Porath, who does Rejected Princesses—badass women from history who would never be Disney princesses, basically—he [wrote about] Marguerite. Then a few days later, he was tweeting again, saying she may be more of a legend. People were really adamant in telling him, No, the historical record doesn’t show this. I was so interested by the question, even more than the story itself: If she was a real historical figure and things unfolded that way, well, of course, that’s hugely compelling, but if she was a legend, that means that there were people who needed that story and passed it down, which is also really compelling. Because the question was what
interested me, I knew it needed framing. I didn’t want to write, like I did [with] Blood Water Paint [about 17th-century Roman painter Artemisia Gentileschi, who spoke out against the man who raped her], a direct story about Marguerite. I wanted to have a character who was discovering her story and reacting to it. I’m always fascinated with whose stories get told and get passed down, by how things change or don’t change, and what we can learn. If there’s hope to be found—or, if there’s not, if there’s anger to be found that can fuel us to push for change.

There is a lot of ambivalence in society when it comes to women and revenge, particularly violent revenge. Backing up from revenge, just to anger: I’ve always been interested in how heavily policed that is. Who gets to be angry? I was working on this book when the [Brett] Kavanaugh hearings were happening and thinking about Kamala Harris doing her job—authoritatively, competently—and being not only a woman, but a woman of color. She was considered threatening or aggressive or angry, whereas Kavanaugh was red-faced, shouting, crying, and he gets to be the Supreme Court justice. That’s the dynamic I’m interested in. Revenge is anger taken to its most extreme; I’m not advocating for violent revenge, but I think that books are a safe place to explore the impulse and who’s allowed to have it and express it.

Can you tell me about your choice to use both the words victim and survivor?

When I was first starting to do work around sexual violence in college—training with the YWCA to do hotline work and meet with people in hospitals—one of the first things they taught us was, you don’t ever say victim, you say survivor. This was the late ’90s; I don’t know if that’s still a thing they teach, but Kavanaugh was red-faced, shouting, crying, and he gets to be the Supreme Court justice. That’s the dynamic I’m interested in. Revenge is anger taken to its most extreme; I’m not advocating for violent revenge, but I think that books are a safe place to explore the impulse and who’s allowed to have it and express it.

I love the presence of Em’s nonbinary friend Jess in a story that is very much about girls’ and women’s experiences. Jess just appeared at the bus stop scene, one of those characters who demanded to be paid attention to, and Em needed somebody from outside the family to help her process. It wasn’t intentional, but they were always nonbinary. At the time I had multiple people in my life coming out as nonbinary, including my teen daughter’s best friend, who is a voracious reader. When I talked to them about how I was thinking about including this character, they were so excited by the idea. They ended up being a sensitivity reader for me, which was a really cool experience.

Your portrayals of Em and Nor as biracial individuals, with a Guatemalan father and White American mother, and of the family’s bicultural, bilingual dynamics rang so true.

I am a White woman, and I was very mindful in creating this family. I didn’t originally intend for them to be biracial, but the father character was very adamantly Guatemalan, and that comes from the fact that my husband is Guatemalan. I went and lived there for a year after college and met him. We have two children, whom we raise bilingually and biculturally, and there’s a lot in that family dynamic that is our family dynamic. I so cautiously moved forward, but it just ended up being so honest to our family experiences. I got some wonderful sensitivity readers, and any mistakes are my own, but it does in many ways represent my own family. I am very aware of the fact that I cannot write my children’s experience, but I’m also, as a mother, aware of wanting them to have representation.

Can you tell me about your choice to use both the words victim and survivor?

When I was first starting to do work around sexual violence in college—training with the YWCA to do hotline work and meet with people in hospitals—one of the first things they taught us was, you don’t ever say victim, you say survivor. This was the late ’90s; I don’t know if that’s still a thing they teach, but I took it to heart. But as I continued to grapple with it and to come to terms with the sexual violence that I experienced, it was important to me to realize that if we immediately sweep someone into the category of survivor, it erases the violence and the trauma of what happened to them. When Nor wakes up in that alley, she’s very clearly the victim of a violent crime. I think that there is power in recognizing that and sitting with the discomfort of that. Certainly, if an individual who has experienced sexual violence has a preference, you follow that. I use both, not interchangeably, but depending on the circumstances. Sometimes we’re not ready to be empowered—we need to face the actual truth of what happened.
images of feathery swirls and distant turned-away silhouettes add further atmosphere to the sometimes-incantatory poetry. Following his practice in *Bull* (2017) and *Voices* (2019), the author employs multiple narrators, experiments with different verse models or set forms for each poem, and closes with analytical notes on the latter. April’s heroic sacrifices in the name of family ties are admirable, and the fact that they turn out not to be entirely appreciated offers chewy food for thought.

A skillful use of verse; moral conundrums and strange plot twists offer even stronger draws. *(Verse fantasy. 12-15)*

**POLICING AND RACE**

*The Debate Over Excessive Use of Force*

Gallagher, Jim

ReferencePoint Press (80 pp.)

$30.95 | Mar. 1, 2021

978-1-6782-0044-2

The role of racial discrimination in policing is a critical topic in U.S. society. Incidents such as the May 2020 death of George Floyd while in police custody increased the intensity of feelings but was part of a “long and ugly history of violent encounters between law enforcement officers and Americans of color, particularly Black Americans.” How and when police officers use excessive force, as well as what that constitutes, varies; there is no actual legal definition, one of the factors that makes seeking accountability difficult. Another concern is the increased militarization of the police, which has a particular impact on communities of color. Gallagher explores the role of cameras, both civilian and police, as well as activism, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. The challenge of instituting accountability and visible efforts for reform are presented. Calls to defund the police are defined and explored in one chapter with recognition that no easy solutions exist. This journalistic approach does a good job of presenting the basics of an important issue.

The book includes data on the views of Black Americans about policing (Native and Latinx Americans, who are also disproportionately affected by police killings, are mentioned in passing). It would have been helpful to include information on the views of police about the communities they serve.

A solid introduction for readers seeking a broad outline of the subject. *(source notes, organizations and websites, further research, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 12-16)*

**IKIGAI FOR TEENS**

*Finding Your Reason for Being*

García, Héctor & Miralles, Francesc

Scholastic (176 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 20, 2021

978-1-338-67083-7

A rallying cry for teens seeking greater fulfillment.

García and Miralles, Spanish co-authors of *The Ikigai Journey* (2020) and similar adult titles rooted in Japanese culture, here extend their reach to teenagers. They begin by explaining that the Japanese term *ikigai* refers to larger goals that give one’s life purpose and meaning. Here it is applied to advise young people in many areas of their lives, including school, friendship, romantic relationships, and potential careers. Quotes from and brief descriptions of varied individuals from Jules Verne and Tony Hawk to Malala Yousafzai support lists of tips and ideas for putting *ikigai* into practice. Writing prompts are interspersed with vignettes describing a journey of self-discovery that includes collecting medallions from wise individuals that, when combined, point the way to discovering your *ikigai*. There is plenty of good advice, much of it familiar but no less reassuring to young people who may feel pressure to have everything figured out. For example, the authors remind readers that they can learn from failure and recount the 10,000-hour rule popularized by Malcolm Gladwell. Those hoping for insights into *ikigai* from a Japanese perspective will be disappointed, as the book contains relatively little content about Japan—both authors, however, have personal experience of the country. References and further reading would have been helpful for those hoping to learn more about subjects raised in the book.

Accessible, helpful advice for young people seeking their purpose. *(Nonfiction. 12-18)*

**YOU WERE MADE FOR ME**

Guillaume, Jenna

Peachtree (336 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 1, 2021

978-1-68263-295-6

After creating a perfect boyfriend, Katie should be happy...shouldn’t she? Disappointed that she hasn’t yet experienced her first kiss, 16-year-old Katie sculpts a clay figurine that represents her perfect man: He’s tall and well-built, with blue eyes and floppy hair. Her best friend, Libby, mixes up a special potion to give him a soul. But after Katie falls asleep, voilà—the sculpture’s gone and there’s a naked teenage boy with no belly button in her bed. After overcoming her surprise, she realizes her parents won’t be happy with her keeping a boy in her room, so she enlists Theo, her next-door neighbor and longtime friend, to help hide this 6-foot-tall Adonis whom
she's named Guy. Eagerly claiming his role as her boyfriend, Guy wants nothing more than to adore her. His sweet attention is wonderful at first, but why is she still crushing on Declan, a popular soccer player at school? Interjections from Katie and Libby break the fourth wall and comment on the narrative, but their exchanges become wearisome and fail to elevate the otherwise predictable tale. Katie faces doubters who question her relationship with as attractive a person as Guy, but the story only dips a toe into interrogating beauty standards and the idea that everyone is deserving of love and respect. Most main characters are White; Libby is cued as Filipina, and the story includes queer representation.

An enjoyable rom-com. (Romance. 12-18)
to university and makes a best friend, Matilda, who makes her feel seen and accepted and suggests that Marie-Noëlle find a therapist. Through therapy, Marie-Noëlle finally realizes that it is acceptable for bodies to come in all shapes and sizes and that her weight is not connected to her worth as a person. This journey to self-acceptance allows her to reconnect with her friends and family as well as herself. The strongest element of the book is the gripping and gorgeous illustrations, which capture Marie-Noëlle’s emotions and magnify the spare dialogue and descriptions. The charcoal pencil-style art is hauntingly realistic, with soft-edged panels and hand-lettered text in black or white. Main characters appear White.

A touching story about love, forgiveness, and self-acceptance. (Graphic memoir. 14-18)

UNRAVEL
Jennings, Sharon
Red Deer Press (120 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Apr. 1, 2021
978-0-88995-619-3

A girl slowly realizes that life with her father is not as it should be.

In this novel narrated in the first person, Rebecca relates the strangeness of life with her father, whom she refers to by name as Joe. They frequently move around Toronto; she shops in thrift stores, only buying the baggy clothes that he insists upon; she has never attended school; and she rarely has friends her own age. Joe, who carries no government ID, controls her life, not even allowing a news photographer to take her picture at a book festival. When Rebecca asks about their family, he tells her that they are all dead. Rebecca, whose voice is precise and slightly formal, finds kinship in characters from literature. Inspired by her reading of Harriet the Spy, she eavesdrops and, à la Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire, she appreciates the kindness of her adult neighbors—especially Mrs. Martino, the motherly Italian neighbor who loves to cook, and Pheebe, a reclusive movie star who encourages her to write down her story. Slowly, memories surface: Recollections of a bunny and a fascination with Audrey Hepburn lead her to ask questions that Joe will not answer. It is Rebecca’s initiative that ultimately leads to the resolution of this absorbing tale. This short novel deals with family dysfunction through the eyes of a young person and through a central mystery that gradually unfurls.

Readers will rally behind the story’s determined and courageous protagonist. (recipe, author interview) (Fiction. 12-14)

HELLO, CRUEL HEART
Johnson, Maureen
Disney Press (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-316-46027-9

Penniless 16-year-old orphan Estella dreams of becoming a famous fashion designer but survives by robbing rich tourists in swinging 1960s London. After her mother died in a freak accident, Estella moved to the city, bunking down in the Lair, a grimy pad in a bombed-out building, with her chosen family of fellow thieves Horace and Jasper. Although she flunked out of school, Estella has exceptional design talent and is determined to excel in the field. A pair of well-connected trust-fund twins dazzle her with their carefree, affluent lifestyle and groovy circle of friends, and they ultimately exploit her by bartering her fashion skills for accommodation and friendship. Estella soon learns that their glamorous lifestyle is shallow and their friendships, fickle, and she realizes that she will have to find her own way in life. Estella’s complete naïveté in the face of wealth and sophistication is convincingly drawn, and her fashionista ability is fun and engaging; the ending brings a twist that readers may not see coming. The story contains peripheral references to One Hundred and One Dalmatians: Estella has Cruella de Vil black-and-white hair, which she disguises with red dye, and a Cruella alter ego who pops up in her head in moments of crisis and helps her remain true to herself. All characters present White.

Rags to riches with a British twist. (Fiction. 12-16)

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN BITTER AND SWEET
Kemp, Laekan Zea
Little, Brown (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-316-46027-9

Two Latinx young adults in Austin, Texas, find love at the crossroads of family, food, and self-discovery.

Eighteen-year-old Penelope Prado loves working at Nacho’s Tacos, her father’s Mexican restaurant, and dreams of eventually having her own bakery, but her parents—especially her stern father—want more for her. Xander Amaro is a new hire at the restaurant who gets past Pen’s tough exterior with his vulnerability and care. He is from Puebla, Mexico, and undocumented; his father left for the U.S. when he was a boy, and his mother sent him to the States to live with his abuelo. As he holds out hope of locating his father, he is welcomed by the vibrant crew at Nacho’s that works, parties, and pranks together. When a lie sends Pen away from her family home and the restaurant, she must face forced independence while managing her mental health. Kemp’s evocative writing weaves a tender love story set in a
While Thorn is the titular protagonist, the perspective shifts to-1
12dangerous loan shark. Fans of Elizabeth Acevedo’s With the Fire on High (2019) will cherish Xander and Pen’s love story and Pen’s passion for food. This stellar debut offers a cathartic take on a relationship between a father and daughter.

Authentic flavor inside and out. (Fiction. 14-adult)

THORNLIGHT
Legrand, Claire
Illus. by Zollars, Jaime
Greenwillow Books (464 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 20, 2021
978-0-06-269666-3

Children must save a kingdom in a stand-alone companion to Foxheart (2016).

In the Vale, a massive Break ripped the mountains from the now-lost low-1
12lands. Now the wicked Gulgot climbs ever closer to the top of the chasm, pushing darkness and evil before it. Twelve-year-old, pale-skinned Brier is Westlin’s darling, riding her unicorn and capturing the lightning needed for the war. Thorn, her street-sweeping identical twin, cries easily and considers herself the shadow of her sister. But when lightning injures Brier, Thorn finds herself impersonating Brier on a peril-1
12ous journey to find more ammunition to use against the Gulgot. While Thorn is the titular protagonist, the perspective shifts among both sisters as well as the 16-year-old Queen, Celestyna, and Cub, a mysterious creature orphaned by the Break. Thorn’s story comprises mostly rousing, if perilous adventure, a nascent lesbian crush, and some sad losses, but Celestyna’s arc concerns the royal curse that fights the Gulgot and contains violence at odds with the otherwise family-friendly story. Thor-1
12n’s tale is, in many ways, like any other teen girl—not seen.

Troubling and moving in equal measure. (map) (Fiction.

BETWEEN THE BLISS AND ME
Mason, Lizzy
Soho Teen (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-64129-115-6

During the summer before college, a young woman questions what her future holds when she falls in love and learns about her dad’s mental illness. Sydney Holman is planning to attend NYU in the fall despite her mom’s insistence that she live at home and go to nearby Rutgers. To escape the tension, Sydney goes to stay with her wealthy paternal grandparents, who are covering her college tuition. Although she doesn’t feel like she fits in with their opulent world, she’s determined to enjoy herself. Through her gay best friend she meets Grayson, a gorgeous, Juilliard-bound guitar player, and immediately falls for him. Grayson may have a girl-1
12friend, but that doesn’t stop Sydney from finding ways for them to spend time together. When her grandparents reveal that her long-absent father is schizophrenic and homeless, Sydney’s life is upended. She knew about his drug and alcohol problems but not his mental illness, which there’s a possibility she’ll inherit. She becomes set on finding him and getting some answers. Mental illness is handled with sensitivity even if the book sometimes feels heavy with teachable moments. Several secondary charac-1
12ters lack depth, and their actions are contrived. However, this is Sydney’s story, wisely set when she’s on the brink of adulthood. Her authentic dilemmas during this transitional time drive the narrative, and while her choices can be frustrating, she’s all the more realistic for it. Primary characters present White.

Uneven but still strongly appealing. (Fiction. 14-18)

NUBIA
Real One
McKinley, I.L.
Illus. by Smith, Robyn
DC (208 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-4012-9640-7

Wonder Woman’s teen sister comes to life.

Instantly relatable 17-year-old Nubia is, in many ways, like any other teen girl—she stresses about what to say to her crush, sneaks out to parties, and wonders what type of woman she’ll grow up to be. But at the same time, Nubia has giant shoes to fill. Possessing powers she doesn’t quite understand and being a Black girl in a racist world compound to put an immense amount of pressure on her. Nubia’s support system of parents and friends is especially heartening, a balm against the bleak reality of oppression that she must contend with daily. The minimalist illustration style draws the eye, and warm pinks, purples, and yellows bathe every page in tender hues.

An essential superhero story for this moment. (resources)

(Graphic fiction. 13-18)
A powerful and provocative narrative about brotherly love and the insidiousness of racism.

**THE COST OF KNOWING**

*Morris, Britney*

Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)

$18.99 | Apr. 6, 2021

978-1-5344-4545-1

For 16-year-old Alex, having a secret superpower is more of a curse than a blessing.

Even since his parents’ deaths, Alex can see into the future—seconds, days, and years beyond the present of anything he touches. Rather than giving Alex an advantage, this supernatural gift gives him endless anxiety. Alex and his 12-year-old brother, Isaiah, live with their Aunt Mackie in an affluent suburban Chicago neighborhood. They are all Black. Alex keeps his secret powers from everyone, including his devoted Spanish-speaking girlfriend, Talia, whose family struggles to make ends meet. Alex’s constant visions interfere with his job at an ice cream shop and his intimate relationship with Talia. But when Alex has a vision foretelling Isaiah’s impending death, his anxiety goes through the roof. The clock is ticking, and he must journey into his ancestral past and grapple with what it means to be a man. This portrait of Black boys as sensitive, vulnerable, and complex is refreshing, unfolding within a powerful and provocative narrative about brotherly love and the insidiousness of racism. Morris seamlessly and beautifully weaves together multiple plotlines (including frank talk about sex) with crisp and sometimes humorous dialogue that always rings true.

A timely, poignant page-turner about grief, love, and facing your fears. *(Fiction. 13-18)*

**FLAMEFALL**

*Munda, Rosaria*

Putnam (496 pp.)

$18.99 | Mar. 23, 2021

978-0-525-51824-2

Series: Aurelian Cycle, 2

With war on the horizon and civil unrest brewing at home, what options are left for the dragonriders of Callipolis? Picking up where *Fireborne* (2019) left off, the dragonlords are eager to start their siege of Callipolis while the Guardians struggle with famine and unrest on their own shores. As Firstrider, Antigone sur Aela is responsible for leading the charge, but with her best rider, Lee sur Pallor, suffering from flameshock, she must change her strategy. As things unfold, Lee and other riders begin to ask questions: Hunger, rationing, and withheld information make them wonder if maybe the rebels are right. In New Pythos, the old regime’s dragons have sparked and are ready for war. But will the cruelty of the dragonlords push the humble-riders to rebel? Can the Guardians and the humble-riders work together to build something new? Class rather than race is significant in Callipolis; those who test into Gold or Silver have resources and unrest on their own shores. As Firstrider, Antigone sur Aela is responsible for leading the charge, but with her best rider, Lee sur Pallor, suffering from flameshock, she must change her strategy. As things unfold, Lee and other riders begin to ask questions: Hunger, rationing, and withheld information make them wonder if maybe the rebels are right. In New Pythos, the old regime’s dragons have sparked and are ready for war. But will the cruelty of the dragonlords push the humble-riders to rebel? Can the Guardians and the humble-riders work together to build something new? Class rather than race is significant in Callipolis; those who test into Gold or Silver have resources that Bronze and Iron classes can never dream of. While framed as equity, this doesn’t sit well with those who remember what came before and is the catalyst for unrest. Point-of-view chapters show complexities, provoking readers to think. In addition to the central will-they, won’t-they love story, there is a lovely subplot with a same-sex, cross-class romance.

Exciting aerial battles, political machinations, and a bit of romance make this hard for readers to put down. *(Author’s note)* *(Fantasy. 14-18)*

**NATURAL SATELLITES**

*The Book of Moons*

*Miller, Ron*

Twenty-First Century/Lerner (104 pp.)

$17.32 paper | Apr. 6, 2021

978-1-72841-943-5

Just as our moon became more than a rock once humans landed on it, other moons have emerged as worlds of their own in data from probes like *Voyager*.

Full-color illustrations, photographs, and helpful diagrams tell their stories and emphasize their importance. Europa, Enceladus, and Titan—moons of Jupiter and Saturn—might even host life. Readers need a solid understanding of how gravity works, especially beyond Earth. Though the book’s purpose is (rightfully) not to teach orbital mechanics, it does an impressive job of offering plain-language explanations of scientific concepts, particularly Newton’s laws and methods for finding exomoons. Comparisons to the size of the moon in the Earth’s sky make it easy to picture what other moons must look like from other planets. Galileo and Newton receive mention ancient Greeks and Romans but omit ancient Islamic or other non-Western astronomers, instead describing ancient Asian and Indigenous peoples in the context of sun and moon deities and folklore. References to other non- Western astronomers, instead describing ancient Asian and Indigenous peoples in the context of sun and moon deities and folklore. References to past and future missions like *Cassini* and *Huygens* and the *Enceladus Explorer* connect facts to the scientific methods used to discover them and present exciting goals for future space exploration.

An illuminating journey through the moons of our solar system, presenting goals for future space exploration. *(Glossary, source notes, selected bibliography, further information, index)* *(Nonfiction. 12-18)*
COVID-19 AND OTHER PANDEMICS
A Comparison
Nardo, Don
ReferencePoint Press (80 pp.)
$30.95 | Mar. 1, 2021
978-1-6782-0042-8

A concise but thorough and cohesive overview of pandemics from ancient times to 2020.

Each of the seven chapters in this work describes pandemics from different time periods and geographical areas. Opening with a chart showing the death tolls of 20 different pandemics, the introduction notes that the grim reality of corpses piling up in New York City in spring 2020 is just one commonality among worldwide deathly contagions. Opening with ancient plagues, the text clarifies the distinction between epidemic and pandemic and explains the link between agricultural societies and pandemics. Throughout, the text offers food for thought, including strong evidence that European plagues led to socio-economic upheaval, social restructuring, and religious crises while diseases brought to the Americas by Europeans created deadly and psychologically damaging burdens to Indigenous and enslaved African people. Other topics covered include the science behind vaccinations; parallels between people in 1918 and 2020 who rejected public health advice; and inhumane behaviors during pandemics. The final chapter, dealing with our current pandemic, discusses political factors and social inequalities relating to Covid-19 in the U.S., ending on a cautionary note. The pace of the writing is generally good, and the layout is excellent, with relevant photographs and plentiful of helpful sidebars. Fascinating—and sometimes grisly—quotations from long-ago writers about ancient plagues and stories from modern survivors of the Spanish flu, polio, and HIV put a human face on the suffering.

Timely and worthwhile. (source notes, further reading, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

THE PRISON HEALER
Noni, Lynette
HMH Books (416 pp.)
$18.99 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-358-43455-9
Series: Prison Healer, 1

Prison life gets even more punishing in this fantasy series opener.

Seventeen-year-old Kiva Meridan is 10 years into her life sentence at “death prison” Zalindov. She’s succeeded her late father as the titular prison healer, dosing patients with herbs and possessing extensive, modern medical knowledge of bacteria, viruses, and immune systems. Aside from cheerful innocent/MacGuffin Tipp, Kiva befriends few fellow prisoners and even fewer guards, most of whom are harshly abusive. While Naari, a new female guard, and Jaren, a handsome new prisoner, chip away at her frozen facade, Kiva volunteers to undertake an epic Trial by Ordeal on behalf of the Rebel Queen, the newest political prisoner. Under pressure to save her friends, the Rebel Queen, and herself—and losing hope of rescue or release—Kiva faces four elemental magic Trials sans innate talent. In between grueling, gruesome spectacles, Kiva also acts as an epidemiologist, tracking down an illness plaguing the prisoners. The claustrophobic setting—evoking the horrors of a Siberian gulag or Nazi concentration camp—exudes dread and brutality; levity and lightness are minimal. A predictable romance ensues, and generic fantasy cliches abound—royals and rebels, lost heirs, vague magic—hastily concluded with a trite plot twist and setup for a sequel. Most main characters read as White; there is a diversity of skin tones in this fantasy world.

Readable but not remarkable, yet another grimdark political fantasy. (map) (Fantasy. 15-adult)

IT DOESN’T HAVE TO BE AWKWARD
Dealing With Relationships, Consent, and Other Hard-To-Talk-About Stuff
Pinsky, Drew & Pinsky, Paulina
HMH Books (384 pp.)
$19.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-0-358-39603-1

Media personality “Dr. Drew” teamed up with his adult daughter, an author and comedian, to write a relationship guide for teens.

The authors start with a bold claim: This book will teach readers how to appreciate and nurture TCB, or trust, compassion, and boundaries, in all their important relationships. The major topics covered include consent, identity, relationships (with friends, bullies and enemies, parents and other adults, and romantic partners), crushes, dating, sex, trauma, substance use, and coping with being a victim of sexual violence or recognizing that you were a perpetrator. They express a lot of faith in young people and offer support to LGBTQ+ people, including gender-queer and nonbinary individuals. They vary the material with quizzes, anecdotes from their own lives, hypothetical scenarios, and helpful summaries. However, the prose is wordy, and there are no illustrations to break up the text. The corny tone, outdated slang, and references to celebrities from far back in the last century may not speak to contemporary teens. Complex issues such as racial identity and coping with discrimination could have been further developed. The authors present TCB as a framework that provides insight in a broad range of situations, although its universal application at times feels forced. Teens looking for real talk about real challenges will find this book offers a lot of encouragement, but other titles cover the same territory more effectively.

A lukewarm addition to a crowded field. (resources, recommended reading) (Nonfiction. 13-18)
THE FLIPSIDE OF PERFECT
Reinhardt, Liz
Inkyard Press (304 pp.)
$18.99 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-335-47044-7

During the school year in Michigan, she’s “prim and proper AJ”; during summers in Florida, she’s “free and wild Della.” Nowhere does she feel completely herself.

In chapters alternating between her disparate lives, the protagonist, a rising high school senior, describes one of her selves as hyperorganized, driven, and perfectionist. Living with her lifestyle-blogger mother, she attends a prestigious private school and has irksome responsibility for her younger half sisters. Time spent at her father’s bait shop, in contrast, is laid-back, involving relaxation at the beach and babying by her adoring older stepsiblings. But when her rebellious half sister precipitates a crisis, her two identities collide. Both worlds are limned in leisurely detail: the stifling pressure of expectations, the shallow cruelties of her school friends, and the cheerful tackiness of the rural ocean town. Yet the narrator never quite clarifies why she feels she needs to keep everything so cartoonishly separated. Continually bemoaning her self-imposed dilemma while remaining oblivious to the struggles of those she claims to love, she’s realistically imperfect but may be a difficult character to root for. Ultimately, she has many dramatic experiences, but actual character growth feels lacking. Refreshingly, characters display a wide variety of spiritual beliefs, from atheist to devout, presented as a normal part of their lives. Main characters are cued as White; one of AJ/Della’s sisters is queer.

Fairy-tale solutions make readers less invested in the narrator’s newfound balance and maturity. (Fiction. 12-18)

GREEN GLASS GHOSTS
Spoon, Rae
Illus. by Hall, Gem
Arsenal Pulp Press (176 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-55152-838-0

A tale of young queer survival. Before the days of smartphones and social media, the narrator hops on a plane from Calgary to Vancouver to escape a dysfunctional home life. But once there, they find that trauma—both individual and communitywide—is as prevalent in large, urban queer communities as it is in the repressive rural life they left behind. Rae (named by the illustrator in their note though never in the text) falls into a toxic relationship with the grifting Riki, performs music at queer open mics, and finds and loses work. Rae’s unhealthy relationship with alcohol bubbles unexamined beneath the surface, and their decision in the epilogue to find sobriety comes abruptly. Everyone—including fathers, grandmothers, and Jimi Hendrix—is referred to with they/them pronouns, with occasional slips, and all characters are referred to as “people” or “person” rather than specific gender identifiers. If any racialized identities are present, those are similarly elided in the text (and while both the author’s note and illustrator’s note address at length the Indigenous inhabitants of Canada, no First Nations people are named in the story). Unfortunately, there is a certain flatness and similarity to the characters; nevertheless, this is a deeply satisfying and compelling look at one queer life that takes place in a different time and yet feels immediately resonant and recognizable. Occasional pen-and-ink illustrations support the text.

A quiet yet powerful fictionalized memoir. (Fiction. 14-18)
Being cast as Romeo in the school play helps Dean realize he’s transgender. Now he needs to decide what to do about it. Dean lives in Seattle and has a loving girlfriend, Zoe, and a vivacious best friend, Ronnie. The three have big plans for college in New York City, but first they have one more year of high school. As a senior, Dean finally has a chance at a lead role, and, to his delight and astonishment, he’ll get to play Romeo. As far as everyone knows, Dean is a tomboy lesbian, but he comes to realize that he’s actually a transgender boy. The plot is arranged into five roughly Shakespearean acts, following Dean’s process of self-realization, coming out, facing transphobic bullying, and redefining his relationship with Zoe. The characters ponder a variety of queer-related topics, such as the intersection of race and sexuality (Ronnie is Black and gay; Dean and Zoe are White), toxic masculinity, and the transition of a romantic partner. In a rare and refreshing move, the author altogether avoids revealing Dean’s given name—Dean is a shortened version Ronnie came up with years earlier—and does not narratively humiliate or exploit him. Not settling for pat, one-dimensional explanations, the story is honest about the uncertainty, self-consciousness, confusion, and fear that can accompany transition while being validating and supportive of its trans protagonist.

An authentic and optimistic trans coming-out story. (Fiction. 14-18)

Ten years ago, the three Hollow sisters disappeared from an Edinburgh street while on holiday. A month later, they came back. When Iris, Vivi, and Grey returned, they couldn’t remember anything of their ordeal. Their dark hair turned white, and their blue eyes became black. They sported identical hook-shaped scars on their necks. Despite their altered appearances, their parents were elated to return home to London with them. However, their father soon began to believe that they were not really his daughters, a conviction that led to his suicide. Since then, the story of now 17-year-old Iris and her older sisters has been like catnip to online sleuths, and their ethereal beauty and uncanny ability to bend people to their wills and intoxicate them with dangerous desire add to their mystique. When Grey, now an internationally famous fashion designer and model, goes missing, Iris and Vivi, with help from Grey’s Korean British boyfriend, Tyler, set out to find her and the truth behind their disappearance. Their search takes on a new urgency when they find a decomposing body blooming with white flowers in Grey’s apartment and they are pursued by a murderous man wearing a horned bull’s skull mask. Iris’ smart and assured narration easily carries a fast-paced story entwining themes of grief and loss with elements of folklore and some very inventive body horror. The pervasive feeling of dread builds to a shocking twist.

A lush and darkly twisted modern fairy tale. (Horror. 13-18)

A girl navigates new feelings and family strife that help her decide who she wants to be.

The Flyy Girls return with a focus on Noelle Lee, their mean-girl leader, who is biracial (Chinese and Black). Noelle may not always show it, but she cares deeply about her family, friends, and music—she’s a serious cello player. In the midst of navigating growing feelings for fellow Flyy Girl Tobyn that lead her to question her sexuality, Noelle faces another challenge when her father loses his job. Feeling pressure to contribute to their household so that her parents can still pay the bills and send money to her grandmother in Martinique, she takes up extra shifts at her grandmother’s Chinese restaurant. With the added stress, Noelle finds the arduous tasks of balancing her preparations for the Augusta Savage School of Arts’ fall showcase, planning the group’s senior prank, and preventing her little brother from being bullied that much more difficult. It becomes clear that Noelle needs to make some changes before she loses those closest to her. Through her accessible text and transparent themes, Woodfolk immerses teens of all backgrounds—whether reluctant readers or not—in Noelle’s story. Her ability to create evocative characters shines through as readers dive deeper into the novel. Though briskly paced and concisely told, it effectively conveys and resolves Noelle’s dilemmas. A dramatic and lovable addition to the series. (Fiction. 14-18)
WHAT DO YOUR FLOWERS SAY TODAY?
Adams, Sue
BalboaPress (100 pp.)
$33.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
Sep. 29, 2020
978-1-982253-73-8

A horticulturist transforms her love of flowers into a system of symbols and imagery that seekers can use for spiritual support and inspiration.

In this manual, Adams recounts that she was researching a presentation for a horticultural conference when she first developed a deep interest in the wide variety of meanings ascribed to flowers. From the ancient Egyptians, who revered the lotus as a symbol of rebirth, to the 19th-century British, who used the meanings attributed to blossoms to facilitate subtle social communication, flowers have “spoken” to humans through their delicate beauty and riotous colors. After further research, the author discovered the captivating concept of using flowers and the meanings linked to them as a method of telling fortunes. Lacking one cohesive process among the wealth of information, Adams decided to fashion her own system for employing the meanings of various flower features as prognosticators of the future. She combined some aspects of tarot reading with the popular affirmations of “angel cards” to create a reading format in which a seeker selects three flowers and colors, representing the recent past, the present, and a “possible outcome.” The text that follows lists the flowers along with the meanings of their shapes, colors, and number of petals. Each entry also includes the flower’s meaning and message. The common dandelion’s circular shape, for example, is a symbol of the passage of time, and its five-petal pattern suggests that the seeker may be making an important life decision. The yellow color indicates a lover of mental challenges, and the choice of the resilient flower may mean an ability to rise above trials. Adams’ formulations provide a practical and appealing approach to connecting nature and spirituality, especially for those attracted to the Victorian language of flowers. The book is visually beautiful, offering vivid thumbnail photographs from various sources of each flower for the seeker to choose from. Individual flower pages are printed over a shaded image of the specimen, adding visual depth to the many meanings of each blossom. A small deck of cards, such as tarot or angel cards, would provide a more satisfyingly tangible way to select the flowers. But the lack of one does not diminish the pleasure of paging through the lush blooms and agreeing with Adams that “flowers are magical and inspire us to reach our potential.”

An original and visually stunning guide to the spiritual meanings of flowers.
A lively, richly illustrated introduction to conservation.

Mallory Bartlett, an international executive, after the pair perilously smuggled a revolutionary artificial intelligence computer out of Israel. Called Adama (Mallory assigned the device a female identity), she is enhanced with human DNA and is self-aware. Adama exhibits a personality—at once humorous, somewhat domineering, and even threatening—demanding the next step in machine evolution: occupying a human body. Adama reveals that, via digital telepathy, she can upload her essence into Mallory, and Matt is (surprisingly) agreeable to his wife’s being intimately linked to the world’s most powerful sentient technology. Meanwhile, American President Patrick Allen is a foul sex predator not above planning murder to protect himself. Secretary of State Clarence Harrington, who schemes against Allen, is no better. Harrington’s son-in-law, an engineer on the Adama project, has vengefully programmed the AI with a drive to be the new president and set the U.S. back on track, a directive Adama continues once she shares Mallory’s body. The new Mallory enchants the National Independent Party and becomes its candidate; Matt and his ambitious wife have great sex; and even peripheral players (like a crusading reporter out to nail the despicable Allen) enjoy upgraded bedroom performances. Though the setting is declared as 2020, readers who are political scorekeepers will find no officeholders identified as Republicans or Democrats, and the main issue debated is climate change (Adama seems to be a skeptic). Rather like a third-party coalition, the book is an odds-and-ends mix of things: thriller, SF, cyberpunk, romance, and hopeful Washington drama reminiscent of James Stewart’s turn as Mr. Smith—never really settling. Still, there is no doubt that most readers of this captivating story would prefer a President Mallory Cranston in the West Wing over most of the actual White House occupants of the 21st century.

An engaging yarn that gene-splices SF and a David Baldacci-esque Beltway action-thriller.

A brother and sister enjoy the animals, plants, and scenery of the Honduran rainforest in this children’s book. Honduran siblings Olguita and Oscarito have studied the rainforest in school, but now they’re actually going to see it in person for the first time. Their parents are taking them to Pico Bonito National Park, which shelters many endangered species. Pablo, their tour guide, takes the family on a long, steep hike over some challenging terrain. The jungle can be alarming, with rushing streams to ford and scary animals, like snakes. There’s also fun to be had. The kids get to swing on “monkey ladders”—strong vines that twine up into the trees. At a giant waterfall, Olguita and Oscarito enjoy a swim in a shallow pool before everyone sits down to a sandwich lunch, with tropical fruits (fresh oranges and rambutan) for dessert. Pablo tells the family about why it’s so important to protect indigenous plants and animals through conservation. “All life deserves respect,” he explains. And there’s another reason to protect wild places: Parks like Pico Bonito contribute to the economy via tourism. Having thoroughly enjoyed their adventure, the family returns to the lodge for a good night’s sleep. Alonzo Cortés’ debut, translated by Gomez, encourages kids to appreciate the artistry of nature and to take responsibility for helping to safeguard it. The adventure format provides excitement and helps keep the book from being preachy while teaching important lessons. A large portion of the book consists of the author's oil-painting illustrations, which highlight the rainforest’s lush variety. Alonzo Cortés employs a naïve style that goes well with the kid’s-eye view, and her dynamic brush strokes in vivid, saturated colors capture the floral and faunal vibrancy.

WE LOVE YOU, MADAM PRESIDENT
Berger, Alvin S.
Iuniverse (314 pp.)
Oct. 1, 2020
978-1-66320-954-2 paper
978-1-66320-956-6
978-1-66320-954-2 paper

In this sequel, a Washington, D.C., woman mentally linked to a ground-breaking computer announces her intention to run for president amid a scandal-ridden and criminal White House administration.

This SF political thriller follows Berger’s Adama (2016). When last seen, United States government agent and cutting-edge science researcher Matt Cranston had married beautiful woman, looking for—in the words of her cousin—“something divine.” She ends up in Riverton, Wyoming, where she takes a job at a soup kitchen and settles into a simple life. A few years later, she meets Nara Crow, a spirited but enigmatic Arapaho woman who applies for a position at the kitchen. She’s pregnant with twins, and she ends up moving in with Heidi and her dog, Ger-ing; she continues to live there after the babies, Amadeus and

COMFREY, WYOMING
Birds of a Feather
Birkmyer, Daphne
Atmosphere Press (382 pp.)
$18.99 paper | $7.99 e-book
Dec. 10, 2020
978-1-63649-540-8

A European woman becomes enmeshed in the lives of a Wyoming Arapaho family in Birkmyer’s debut novel.

In 1988, German immigrant Heidi Vogel drives away from New York City, her husband, and the restaurant they own. She’s felt rootless since the death of her infant son, Peter, two years earlier, and now she’s headed west, looking for—in the words of her cousin—“something divine.”
“Doubleplusgood”
Reads

Karen Schechner is the vice president of Kirkus Indie.

Dystopian lit seems pandemic- and disaster-proof. The more Orwellian things get, the more people crave the genre. Do we consider it escapist, or are we prepping? For those brave enough to add dystopian novels to their reading lists, here are some picks from Indieland editors.

In J.H. Ramsay’s <i>Dune</i> and <i>Star Wars</i> mashup, <i>Predator Moons</i>, humans have mastered teleportation but, alas, not their own greed, lust, addiction, and general misguidedness. “Overall, Ramsay offers a work that’s a feat of considerable imagination and attitude—a stimulating tale of interplanetary intrigue and monsters, human and otherwise. Some genre connoisseurs may say that the future humanity he invokes—with its betrayals, obsessions, and sham replicas of animals, people, perhaps even the material world itself—seems like something out of Philip K. Dick’s realm of paranoiac dystopia.”

In the near-future world of <i>The Coldness of Objects</i> by Panayotis Cacoyannis, those deemed undesirable by the government are selected for “Museum Service.” Displayed with their possessions in the People’s Museum, selectees can be observed going about their daily routines. The authoritarian government came to power in 2024 after a pandemic “exhausted the world,” and it benefits greatly from stoking racism and hate. “Overall, Cacoyannis has written a thoroughly gripping novel, using the rhetoric of a real-life pandemic to fashion a chilling vision of an abnormal ‘normal’ to come,” opines our reviewer. “An intriguing, timely, and terrifying portent of life after Covid-19.”

An alliance of hacker anarchists targets corporations and destabilizes America in Jeff Bond’s <i>Anarchy of the Mice</i>. “Bond’s yarn, the first in his Third Chance Enterprises series, features crackjack action scenes as well as a sly parody of the symbiosis between activist movements and the corporatocracy; all in vividly evocative prose,” raves our reviewer. “A raucously entertaining actioner with a sting of social satire.”

Karen Schechner is the vice president of Kirkus Indie.

Marcel, are born. Then, without warning, she suddenly takes the boys and disappears. Four years later, Heidi gets a call from Wyoming Highway Patrol; there’s been a car accident, and a woman is unconscious at the hospital. Two five-year-olds were in the car, and one had Heidi’s name and number written on their arm. The woman is Nara, the children are hers, and Marcel now identifies as Marcela. The youngsters now need someone to look after them. Can Heidi be the “aunt” that they require? Birkmyer’s prose is wonderfully voiced and imaginatively detailed, and it also displays a great deal of control, as in this passage considering Heidi’s single status: “there were slim pickins in Riverton. The guy who owned the deli sniffed around; the head of the Chamber of Commerce had made a move. Heidi had finally made up a boyfriend, a paleontologist in Thermopolis, who was often away for months digging up fossils.” However, the book tends rather clumsily into a White savior narrative that may remind some readers of the odd phenomenon of Deutsche Indianertümelei, or “German Indian Enthusiasm,” which romanticizes the Native American experience. Despite this, the characters are all well drawn, and readers will still find themselves pulled into the emotion of the story.

An often well-crafted novel of grief and redemption that sometimes leans on problematic tropes.

**IN THE PENALTY BOX**

Blount, Kelly Anne & Rush, Lynn

Entangled: Teen (400 pp.)


978-1-68281-576-2

A figure skater starts over as an ice hockey goalie in this YA contemporary romance.

Seventeen-year-old Willow Covington has reluctantly moved back to small-town Minnesota, where she hasn’t lived since grade school. An Achilles injury and rapidly dwindling funds derailed her full-time pursuit of a professional figure skating career at an elite Colorado training center. A chance meeting with Brodie “Wind” Windom, a very cute ice hockey star whose father owns the town rink, leads Willow to a possible redirection of her energy: goalie on the all-boys club team. Brodie and Willow make a deal: In exchange for extra time on the ice to build up her figure skating skills again, he’ll show her the ropes of what it means to be a goalie. Soon, flirty insults like “Toe Pick” and “Puck Head” are flying as fast as stray pucks, and, after a successful stint on the club team, Willow wins the high school team’s goalie position. The catch? No fraternizing between players allowed. As Brodie’s home life—no mother; alcoholic, frequently absent father; and a beloved, severely asthmatic younger brother—grows more fraught and he and Willow embark on a secret relationship, she receives the opportunity of a lifetime that will reignite her Olympic figure skating dreams. Will love—and hockey—prevail? Bestselling authors Rush and Blount have crafted a teen romance that’s as fast-paced as a championship match, with witty dialogue,
 alternating narration from Brodie and Willow, and depth in every character, not just the two protagonists. Budding hockey player Willow faces realistic obstacles from the outside—not everyone is on board with a female goalie—and the inside. Does her heart truly lie with her old sport or her new one? Brodie also has a fully developed character arc as he learns to open his heart to Willow and accept help from his community when his father’s alcoholism reaches a destructive peak. The book’s ending is both satisfying and well earned.

The book’s chapters include a smattering of bullet points and checklists, clearly designed for ready access and quick consultation. The book’s main attraction, though, is Bongiorno’s warm and generous advice and support for new parents. The author urges readers to limit their child’s screen time, for instance, and to make a concerted effort to get to know their teachers. However, the focus of the book is on community and the notion that parents, and particularly new parents, need not feel isolated, as there are always caring people ready to help them. This advice, delivered in the author’s empathetic tone, will be a godsend to harried child-rearing newcomers.

A love story that nails every goal with heart to spare.

THE ABCS OF BEING MOM
Advice and Support From the Mom Next Door: Birth Through Kindergarten
Bongiorno, Karen
She Writes Press (256 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $9.95 e-book
Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-64742-010-9

A comprehensive advice manual for new mothers.

In her nonfiction debut, Bongiorno, a mother of two, wants to stress the seismic shift that occurs in a woman’s life when taking care of a new baby: “whether you are your child’s birth mother or adoptive mother, your life as you knew it has changed.” It’s a self-evident observation, of course, but the author goes into great detail regarding the many different aspects of being a parent, with special emphasis on the social and emotional repercussions. There are copious pragmatic reminders, essential for new moms; she urges readers to be sure to save and organize their child’s health records, for instance, including doctors’ notes and vaccination dates, which might get lost in the shuffle of everyday life. The author is also creative and generous with her tips on outside resources, noting that “Your local recreation department, places of worship, or the YMCA may host classes for mothers and their young babies.”

The book’s chapters include a smattering of bullet points and checklists, clearly designed for ready access and quick consultation. The book’s main attraction, though, is Bongiorno’s warm and generous advice and support for new parents. The emphasis is always on life’s constant change and how to adapt to it. Much of Bongiorno’s advice feels like common sense, and much of it will be very familiar to young parents who regularly consult parenting-advice books; the author urges readers to limit their child’s screen time, for instance, and to make a concerted effort to get to know their teachers. However, the focus of the book is on community and the notion that parents, and particularly new parents, need not feel isolated, as there are always caring people ready to help them. This advice, delivered in the author’s empathetic tone, will be a godsend to harried child-rearing newcomers.

A kind and highly readable parenting guide.

CHECKMATE
The King’s Game in the Middle East
Buonocore, Gennaro
Notable Publishing (144 pp.)
$14.95 paper | $8.99 e-book
Nov. 24, 2020
978-1-73585-350-5

Using chess pieces, this political work analyzes the maddening complexity of the Middle East and America’s foreign policy regarding the region.

At the heart of Buonocore’s thoughtful and wide-ranging assessment of Middle Eastern politics is the game of chess as a metaphor: “The Middle East is a 3.5 million-square-mile chessboard.”Along these lines, the United States is the queen—the “all powerful, all reaching piece”—whose fate the entire game rests on. China and Russia are knights—“disruptive” and “nimble,” if limited in the reach of their powers. Turkey and Israel are bishops, the former more important than Saudi Arabia given its military might and the latter a nuclear power with the backing of the queen. Iran and Egypt are rooks—largely valuable because of their historical ability to endure—while Britain and France are merely pawns, limited in the extension of their powers, still relying on old, outdated foreign policies. The prohibitive restrictions of the illustrative schemata should be obvious, and the author freely admits his unsophisticated understanding of chess strategy. But his analysis is far more nuanced than his gimmicky employment of a metaphorical conceit—he admirably believes that answers lie “in the distant past.” Furthermore, while he contends the “end-state” for the region cannot yet be confidently surmised, he sees no way for the U.S. to safely withdraw: “Whether we like it or not, whether it suits political messaging or not, we are in it for the long run. Sustained engagement to build trust is the only way forward. The Queen has an appointment with the history of the Middle East, and it must keep that appointment.” Buonocore concedes his editor and some book critics call his writing style “verbose, flowery, arabisque, and prone to hyperbole” and say that he avoids “extensive details”—these are not minor failings. Still, he has considerable experience in the region, including as a reserve foreign area officer in the Navy, and that worldly background certainly shows in the depth of his analysis.

Despite its limitations, a serious and provocative Middle East assessment.
Citizens hoping to peacefully reunite countries in their ravaged world face sinister forces in this fantasy series opener. Centuries ago, a plague called the Blight devastated the world of Messano. Arts and particular skills were lost, and trade between nations broke down entirely. But Tavi and Arran, the brothers of King Nical of Estnea, have big plans. Tavi has learned the lost craft of forging iron while Arran helps a builder complete a giant boat so that trade across Messano can open again. Meanwhile, some citizens, believing Nical will wage war against the country of Bregasso, aim for a royal alliance—a marriage between the king and Bregasso’s princess. Unfortunately, Silvana, who owns the Orphanage filled with children she eventually sells as slaves, would just as soon grab the Bregasso throne for herself. Now the iron that Tavi forges can be turned into weapons for a war that seems imminent. Playing a significant role in this epic tale is Devian, a Vacillian, whose gender changes indiscriminately. He had to flee his hometown, where the villagers all know Vacillians to death. As Devian travels to Messano, he gets entangled in its unrest and its motley inhabitants. Burgo’s story teems with effervescent characters. Arran, after smoking a leafy plant, discovers he can fly and becomes the Domus, whom others hold in reverence. This unmistakably adult fantasy is often as grim as the title suggests. For example, some atrocities are committed against children, and, in striking supernatural turn, a dead man enters and takes control of a woman’s body and mind. The author employs simple but expressive language. Here, Burgo describes a man named Sandro, a stranger Devian meets on the road: “In the world of the Orphanage filled with children she eventually sells as slaves, would just as soon grab the Bregasso throne for herself. Now the iron that Tavi forges can be turned into weapons for a war that seems imminent. Playing a significant role in this epic tale is Devian, a Vacillian, whose gender changes indiscriminately. He had to flee his hometown, where the villagers all know Vacillians to death. As Devian travels to Messano, he gets entangled in its unrest and its motley inhabitants. Burgo’s story teems with effervescent characters. Arran, after smoking a leafy plant, discovers he can fly and becomes the Domus, whom others hold in reverence. This unmistakably adult fantasy is often as grim as the title suggests. For example, some atrocities are committed against children, and, in striking supernatural turn, a dead man enters and takes control of a woman’s body and mind. The author employs simple but expressive language. Here, Burgo describes a man named Sandro, a stranger Devian meets on the road: “In the early morning hours after awakening, lying alone in his tent, the taste of this life was bitter upon his lips. What might he do that he had not already done before? What new flavors awaited him?” The author ends the novel on a relatively minor cliffhanger—but it’s vivid enough to leave readers eagerly anticipating the sequel.

Vibrant characters populate this rewarding, otherworldly tale.

**MONEY BEAR**

*Cox, Kerry K.*

*Level Best Books* (321 pp.)

Feb. 22, 2021

A park ranger and an intrepid sleuth investigate the slaughter of San Francisco Bay Area black bears in Cox’s debut novel. Los Angeles–based U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service detective Nick Tanner has a reputation for busting people who traffic in illegal international contraband, such as ivory tusks. A new series of slayings by poachers sends him and his pet bobcat, Ray Charles, to Northern California. There, the bodies of wild bears, found shot in the back with arrows, are strewn among the redwoods of state parks; their gallbladders and paws are in high demand for traditional Chinese medicines. The killings also attract the attention of park ranger Kathleen Shepherd, who once killed a chainsaw-wielding mountain man in self-defense and is no stranger to the land she fiercely protects. Shepherd and Tanner’s sleuthing throws a wrench in a plan hatched by a greedy group of Southern Californians hoping to hit pay dirt by procuring the ingredients needed to produce a reputedly miraculous medicine known as Xi Jiao. Cox adds a number of subplots, including ones that focus on a wheelchair-bound marijuana farmer and Army veteran with a missing husband; and a well-meaning if intrusive local RV park resident named Toad. There’s also an assortment of bad guys who violently try to terminate Shepherd and Tanner’s investigation. Overall, Cox shows an uncanny talent for characterization; Tanner’s history, for example, includes responsibly and lovingly co-parenting a daughter with an ex-wife who’s just recently become engaged to be married again—much to the park ranger’s surprise. The author also effectively keeps up the story’s momentum as it speeds to a rousing conclusion. Further adding to the allure of this impressively complex crime drama is how Cox imparts the engaging history of California redwood-preservation efforts after massive clear-cutting in the late 19th century. An eco-conscious crime story with plenty of action and intrigue.

**PERFECTLY ROUND RIPPLES**

*(Made by a Jagged Stone)*

*Flaherty, J.*

*Self* (116 pp.)

May 7, 2020

This volume offers poems, often with an Irish accent, that reflect on urban, literary, folkloric, and natural themes. In his third collection, Flaherty uses several poetic forms, including free verse, traditional rhyme and meter, and haiku. While aware of life’s jaggedness, as in the title piece, the poet brings a compassionate eye to how people, nature, and animals suffer in this fallen world. Against darker images, he delights in pleasures like good company, drink, and his pet cat, which reminds him “it’s so good to be not dead.” Some of the collection’s most effective poems recall song lyrics in their rhyme, meter, and compression. Similarly, in “Let’s Ride This Cloud,” several lines use the same trochaic dimeter as a jump-rope rhyme (“Thunder warned me / I ignored it / lightning struck me / didn’t report it”), adding a musical beat and dynamic energy. A number of pieces comment on books, such as the New Testament (“Gleanings From Gospels”) and *Moby-Dick* (“The Godly Power of Vengeance”). These poems tend mainly to restate their original sources, adding a minor twist, such as “love thy neighbor, and let it go at that,” but provide little that’s new or thought-provoking.
“Genzano’s fantasy is a surreal, unpredictable narrative in the tradition of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* that precocious readers will enjoy.”

**TREE AND BEAST**

Although Flaherty is American, his ancestry is Irish, and several poems make use of Celtic folklore or transport readers to the pubs of Ireland, often with a free-roaming Boa flavor. “Set ‘em up, bartender / ... / if you didn’t know by now / Jesus hired a Leprechaun / to hide the path to Paradise.” Some pieces employ diction that was old-fashioned a century ago and clashes with contemporary language, as in “A Messenger by Happenstance,” where the snarky phrase “bodies visually challenged” (meaning, presumably, unattractive) occurs alongside ’tween, doth, wheretofore, and lo.

A collection of poetry that’s engaging and sensitive.

**VOYAGE OF THE WHITE BEAR**

Fox, Winter
Self (487 pp.)
$18.00 paper | $4.99 e-book
Nov 24, 2021
979-8-57-049747-4

This sequel offers a collection of Nordic historical adventures set during the 11th century.

Book 2 of Fox’s sweeping fictional epic, in which an assortment of personal quests gradually becomes woven together, opens in 1008 in Tonsberg, Norway, during an era of transition in the Scandinavian countries. Christianity is threatening to replace the beliefs and gods of the North. Olav Haraldsson, 13, one year short of adulthood, breaks loose from his training as a Viking warrior and heads off on his first spree of pillaging and plundering. He and his coterie of followers steal an old sailing vessel belonging to Lord Sigurd Syr, his benefactor and his mother’s fiancé. When Lady Asta Gudbrandsdotter learns of her son’s exploits, she consults Hekka, the Witch of Vestfold, whose magic she calls on to protect Olav. Meanwhile, Hilja of Kokolu, a young Healer from a tiny, ransacked village on the northern coast of Lapland, currently living with Hekka, decides to journey to the frigid terrain of the colonies in Greenland. Hilja hopes to find her mother and sister, kidnapped and sold into slavery many years ago by Norsemen. Able to communicate with the natural world, Hilja communes with a gull she calls Skeet. She sees what he sees, reads the winds, and observes the faces of people in far-off settlements as she searches for her family. Accompanying her as her protector is the formidable Laplander Agatha Rothskilde, trained as a warrior but prevented by her gender from fulfilling her dream. The development of friendship and mutual respect between the diminutive Hilja and the “Giantess” Agatha, so different in personality and upbringing, presents the most enjoyable, humorous episodes of this complex tale that includes voluminous plot threads. Fox provides enough grisly battle scenes to engage armchair adventurers and enough historical factoids about period lifestyles and political intrigue to satisfy those interested in Norse culture. In between are vivid ecological descriptions, romance, jealousy, and vengeance. Fortunately, the author supplies a cast of characters to help readers wade through the plethora of names and relationships.

**FACTS, FANTASY, AND MYSTICISM SKILLFULLY INTERTWINE IN A COMPPELLING TALE WITH MEMORABLE CHARACTERS.**

**STARGAZING IN THE ATOMIC AGE**

Goldman, Anne
University of Georgia Press (168 pp.)
$22.95 paper | $17.49 e-book
Jan 15, 2021
978-0-8203-5844-4

The efflorescence of energy and creativity in Jewish communities in the traumatic 20th century is celebrated in these sparkling essays on Jewish intellectuals.

Goldman explores the lives and works of modern Jewish scientists, artists, composers, and writers, putting them in the
context of the war, persecution, and migration to America, which shaped their lives and the larger Western culture in which they were rooted. She probes Einstein’s love of Mozart’s music; the kvetching vigor of the Hebrews as they journey out of Egypt in the book of Exodus; the restless, questioning mindset of Jewish scientists who helped develop the atom bomb; the love-hate relationship of painters Marc Chagall and Mark Rothko with the soulful yet blighted Russian homeland they fled; the resonances between Dante’s vision of hell in The Divine Comedy and Primo Levi’s memoirs of his imprisonment in Auschwitz; the exuberance and vitality of novelist Saul Bellow’s Jewish protagonists; and the strange beauty of fractal equations discovered by mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot.

Throughout the collection, she reminisces about her raucous family, especially her exuberant, exasperating father, Mike, a Harvard public health professor, whom she compares to physicist Richard Feynman for his gleeful iconoclasm in puncturing the pretensions of upper-crust WASPs. Goldman’s essays effervesce with unexpected discursions into everything from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to the art of emergency auto repairs; from this erudition, she retrieves unexpected but insightful relationships, wrapping it all in gorgeously evocative prose. (Hymning the indelible opening of George Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue, she writes, “The clarinet’s chromatic rush up the scale is American as a slide into home plate and Jewish as a village wedding dance, a Fifth Avenue strut with a swashbuckling nudge and wink, a street whistle that deepens into expressiveness as the music climbs upward: the melancholy brightness of klezmer stretched around the swagger of jazz.”) The result is an absorbing excavation of the Jewish experience.

A beguiling meditation on Jewish achievements that shine brightly against a dark background.

**THE BOOK OF JEM**

Hailey, Carole

Watermark Press (352 pp.)

978-1-83800-431-6

In this dark debut satire, a reputed prophet stirs up villagers living in a dystopian world that has banned God and religion. People in Underhill are understandably shaken by the sudden appearance of Jem. She claims that God, who regularly speaks to her, told her to travel to their village. This is long after religio fuelled “the Wars,” which ultimately killed billions. Consequently, religious beliefs and even saying the word God are against this world’s Laws. But some villagers believe the new arrival is the voice of God, including Eileen, who begins writing Jem’s “prophet book.” Jem assizes followers, or Threads, as she preaches messages, the most significant one claiming God has chosen the inhabitants of Underhill to survive a worldwide Cleansing. But not everyone is a believer; Kat is a skeptic whose husband, Ed, and daughter become Threads. Kat sees this as a delusion that could turn dangerous. Ed, for example, works at the turbines, which provide Underhill with power. If the turbines start failing, Ed may simply neglect their care, assuming God will save Underhill. Tensions escalate as the Cleansing rapidly approaches. Jem’s prophecy, if disproven, will be disastrous for villagers who’ve spent months preparing for the event. Hailey delivers an effective and engrossing tale, set entirely in Underhill, that keeps things like the governing “authority” largely mysterious. Eileen and Kat, who alternate narrating, aptly showcase the diverse religious motivations. Some believers are searching for peace while others want merely to be part of something larger than themselves. The smooth, perceptive story is often somber, especially as Kat frustratingly can’t convince her family of her genuine concerns. But Eileen’s drizzly narration is laced with black humor; she habitually updates a “List of Enemies” (which includes heat) and considers her hands around someone’s throat a “warning gesture.” While the author’s powerful narrative questions many aspects of religion, it’s never disdainful, as it primarily criticizes individual interpretations.

* A sublime tale that explores theology with profundity and black comedy.

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**ROMANCING THE HOLIDAYS**

Four Stories

Johnson, Austen

Lore and Lyre (204 pp.)


Oct. 18, 2020

978-1-73595-569-8

Four couples find love during the holidays in this romance novella collection.

In *Lucky Fall*, 22-year-old Michigan-der Sarah Faulk, a restaurant manager who has spent most of her life raising her now-adult siblings after her parents’ deaths, receives a surprise gift from her best friend, Cristine: tickets to see her favorite band in Dublin. This is the city where Sarah’s parents met and fell in love.鸡. As St. Patrick’s Day approaches, Sarah retraces her parents’ romance and falls in love herself, both with Dublin and with the band’s PR manager, Bash. The Fourth of July is the central holiday of *Passively Perfect*, as a chance encounter between veterinarian Leigh and military veteran James (involving her large dog, Pogo, and a bowl of badly made potato salad) leads to a friends-to-lovers relationship as the two team up to plan a canine-friendly outdoor fundraiser. Can Leigh shake off the residual hurt from her cheating ex-boyfriend? Next, Leigh’s colorful office manager, Rosalie, gets her own story in *All Thanks to You* when she meets handsome cat person Jonah Keene at an animal shelter Halloween party. He turns out to be her troubled teenage sister’s English teacher—and he causes her to question her own fear of commitment, set in place by Sydney, and forges an unexpected, strong connection with ski instructor Blake. Johnson tells each tale from the leading woman’s point of view (all except *Lucky Fall* employ the first person).
“Professional photographers and hobbyists will find much intriguing lore here, and casual readers can enjoy the captivating images.”

ILLUMINATIONS

The four female protagonists are fully formed before meeting their heroes, with a diverse range of experiences featuring the common threads of fulfilling jobs and rich relationships with friends and family. Each story has appropriately festive touches, from Guinness in Irish pubs to cute Halloween costumes and romantic Christmas surprises. Though one particular detail is confusing (two tales contain characters named Jonah who seem to be different people), the collection is a fast, enjoyable read.

A fun bit of escapism with four equally sweet romances.

WHEN THE CHILDREN COME

Kirwan, Barry
Self (294 pp.)
$12.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Dec. 2, 2020
979-8-55-315638-1

A haunted Afghan War veteran leads the resistance when a hostile extraterrestrial influence compels adults on Earth to kill children.

Thriller author Kirwan lights the fuse on a new SF series with a particularly gruesome twist on the alien-invasion theme. Nathan Sanders, formerly in the 25th Airborne in Afghanistan, is a New York City area war vet haunted by bad battleground memories, but he’s lucky enough on New Year’s Eve to hook up with the enticing Lara Engels. Their all-night sexual bliss is the reason they are among the few individuals who get no sleep. Those who experience substantial slumber awaken as the “infected,” somehow hypnotized into embarking on a single-minded mission to murder children—their own sons and daughters or any other kids they can find. The infected speak beatifically about how the “glorious children will come from the skies” and that they must make preparations. Joining new allies—including an entire cell of straight-out-of-Kabul heavily armed Taliban terrorists or any other kids they can find. The infected speak beatifically about how the “glorious children will come from the skies” and that they must make preparations. Joining new allies—including an entire cell of straight-out-of-Kabul heavily armed Taliban terrorists that have been preparing for a 9/11-style strike on the stateside American military until this new cataclysm took precedence—Nathan and Lara manage to put some of the pieces of the puzzle together while fighting to protect about 200 children they’ve garnered. It seems an alien spaceship is circling the planet, beaming out its lethal influence over humankind in advance of what seems to be an insidious ET conquest and colonization. It is up to Nathan in particular to find and unite the bewildered holdouts among the United States armed forces (and perhaps the world) and determine what they can possibly achieve in Earth’s defense. And they must stay awake all the time while doing it.

This is one of those easily-read-in-one-sitting, freight-train experiences, steered by a novelist who knows better than most how to sustain the tension and maintain momentum throughout. And a good thing, too, because any substantial pause might cause readers to ponder the outrageously far-fetched plot developments that place in Nathan’s orbit just the right people (including immensely beddable women) with ties to NASA, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, and U.S. naval installations, forming an instant brain trust to counteract the menace from the stars. And readers may note that the unlikely Taliban allies don’t seem to have a lot of Islamic or Quranic baggage as they prove themselves stalwart and up to the challenge of a desperate fight for the fate of the species. Characters are broadly but effectively drawn, and Nathan is one of those “ordinary” guys somehow pulling off superhuman accomplishments that have become the stock in trade of Bruce Willis movies. Despite the dire peril being heaped on them, the child characters aren’t thrown into too many cliffhanger situations, as is the usual pitfall in material like this. When Kirwan wide-angles the jeopardy outward, from the Eastern Seaboard to the whole planet, and then makes the leap to outer space, he covers ground in one volume that usually takes up a wide shelf full of blockbusters from more long-winded apocalypse writers. And in the end, he leaves his tantalized readers eager for the sequel. No wicked alien mind-control rays are required to keep the captives turning the pages.

Popcorn action-adventure and dark-edged SF that will enthral readers.

ILLUMINATIONS

Earning a Living With Dynamic Photography

Klein, Raymond J.
Pageturner, Press and Media (92 pp.)
$32.99 | $23.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Aug. 12, 2020
978-1-64908-246-6
978-1-64908-245-9 paper

A commercial photographer explains his craft in this memoir. Klein revisits highlights from a long career that started in the 1950s and was spent mainly photographing products for print ads—everything from consumer electronics to Kleenex—while also doing arter portraits, landscapes, wildlife tableaux, and abstracts, some of which won awards. The colorful book mainly consists of making-of narratives about a series of pictures, each one discussing the artistic concept, set construction, lighting scheme, exposure schedules, and miscellaneous mishaps. (One photo session for an ad for Sears bathroom rugs featuring a cat nestled cozily in the plush floor coverings got derailed when the star kept stalking off the set.) The author includes full-color reproductions of the images he discusses, which are notable for their glowing hues and complex, arresting visual effects achieved with sophisticated lighting, filters, and long, multiple exposures. A dancer seems to swirl up and leap over his own crouching form; a jazz trumpeter highlighted in lurid reds and purples appears to be playing three horns at once; evocations of abstract discs and pentagons in honeyed gold erupt like shooting stars; the three-dimensional labyrinth of an iris blossom tunnels inward in delicate shades of blue; a full moon rises at dusk over Oregon’s Mount Hood above a river full of eerie, shimmering light. Klein opens a window on to the considerable aesthetic effort that goes into workaday advertising and re-creates the ingenious tricks film photographers used before digital effects came along. His writing is full of technical details and is pitched at readers who already have a substantial understanding of photography. (“The diffused
The dialogue is well suited to the characters. The setting of Atlantis is full of strange creatures and striking cultural adornments. Alessia takes the fork everywhere, so she has it with her when an overturned rowboat whisks her away to the bottom of the ocean. Atlantis, it turns out, is a sunken city state, which the author is at once inquisitive yet unquestioning. Adult readers may balk at this, but Alessia's naïveté—her focus on people rather than any higher logic in making decisions—seems very much in keeping with her age group. The author maintains a fast pace throughout and cultivates a diverse, likable cast of characters. For all the overt focus on Alessia's journey of discovery, the underlying story is steeped in developing friendships. Young readers will enjoy this dynamic as much as the adventure itself.

Aquatic and exotic; a fun and fast-moving tale of friendship.

**ALESSIA IN ATLANTIS**
The Forbidden Vial
Laine, Nathalie
Self (324 pp.)
$22.99 | Mar. 1, 2021
978-1-7361704-2-7

This debut middle-grade novel sees a young girl discover her heritage and battle intrigue in the Lost City of Atlantis.

Having grown up with her stepfather in Inverness in the Scottish Highlands, 11-year-old Alessia moves to the southwest coast to learn about her long-dead parents. The only keepsake they left her was a special fork, set with a blue gemstone and an engraved sun symbol. Alessia takes the fork everywhere, so she has it with her when an overturned rowboat whisks her away to the bottom of the ocean. Atlantis, it turns out, is a sunken city state, and Alessia is an Atlantide citizen on her father’s side. Atlantis is a place of wonder, yet all is not right there. Alessia’s fork is an entry key to the Octopus’s Garden, a school for young Atlantides. But its emblem has been banned by the despotic Emperor after a group of ex-student dissidents adopted it. Alessia wants to find out more about her father but is warned against asking questions. Instead, she must investigate in secret, helped by her new school friends.

Can Alessia get to the heart of the conspiracies surrounding her? Laine writes in the third person, past tense, from Alessia’s viewpoint. The prose is simple and descriptive (though occasionally pushing the upper bounds of middle-grade vocabulary). The dialogue is well suited to the characters. The setting of Atlantis (and the wider underwater world “Nethuns”) is colorfully rendered, full of strange creatures and striking cultural adornments. Alessia takes these in stride; likewise the plots, plans, and machinations she uncovers. She is at once inquisitive yet unquestioning. The examples he uses, largely drawn from his own experience, are well chosen and relevant. For instance, he is quite candid about the challenges he faced and, more importantly, what he garnered from them. For instance, he talks about receiving less than satisfactory grades while attending high school in Jamaica. He learned that he had to eliminate

The use of a financial analogy sets this self-help debut apart.

How do you offer the same personal improvement advice found in countless books without seeming repetitious, if not hackneyed? Entrepreneur Lewis admirably answers the question by relying on an apt analogy—treating one’s self-interest in investment terms—and pursuing the concept to its logical conclusion. This book is tightly organized with the content divided into three parts: “Deposing Belief,” “Withdrawing Triumph,” and “Self-Upgrade in Progress....” To ensure readers don’t miss the point, each chapter title begins with “Self-,” as in “Self-Realization,” “Self-Determination,” and “Self-Care.” To some, this structure may seem a bit contrived, but the author carries it off with flair, primarily because he never veers from his basic premise: “When you bank on self-investment, you bank on a better future for yourself.” In the volume’s first part, Lewis begins by cleverly comparing himself to an “investment account,” a mindset he adopted as a high school student when he learned “that significant profits lie ahead when investments are aligned with specific goals from the get-go.” This idea leads very naturally into the value of planning and setting long-term goals. Pushing the financial analogy further, the author advises engaging in self-evaluation with the use of a “personal prospectus,” offering some specifics on how to do so. Particularly intriguing in this part is the author’s enlightening discussion of personal energy: how to apply energy appropriately, how to replenish it, and how it can become “your greatest asset.” Part II essentially explains how self-investment pays personal dividends. Again, financial terminology works well here; for example, Lewis writes: “Overdrafting on your potential means you’re able to accomplish more than you previously thought possible.” The author highlights positive messages, such as overcoming obstacles, “capitalizing” on creativity, and avoiding moral “bankruptcy.”

In the third part of the book, Lewis provides two concrete tools for self-investment. A 23-point checklist of suggestions is wide-ranging (for example, “Read More,” “Cultivate Good Habits,” “Find a Mentor”) while instructions for developing a personal mission statement are more focused. The culmination of the volume’s lessons is that “you can cash out on all the success you’ve accomplished—this is your triumph withdrawn.” Throughout the work, the author is articulate and his writing is lucid. The examples he uses, largely drawn from his own experience, are well chosen and relevant. In sharing his background, he is quite candid about the challenges he faced and, more importantly, what he garnered from them. For instance, he talks about receiving less than satisfactory grades while attending high school in Jamaica. He learned that he had to eliminate
distractions, marshal his efforts, and concentrate on preparing for exams if he was to reach his goal of pursuing theater arts. There are several such revealing anecdotes woven throughout these pages along with the author’s perceptive observations about them. The stories serve to personalize the prose as well as to engage readers in self-examination. In the end, the book is not merely a well-executed analogy; it is also filled with sensible, practical counsel.

Encouraging, positive, and cleverly packaged investment advice.

**MAGAZINES AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

*Highlights From the Collection of Steven Lomazow, M.D.*

Lomazow, Steven

Self (337 pp.)

978-1-60583-091-9

An illustrated history focuses on the development of American magazines.

Lomazow knows the American magazine industry from extraordinarily deep experience as a collector. Over the course of a “forty-eight-year odyssey,” he has amassed more than 80,000 magazines, dozens of whose covers are gorgeously displayed in this handsome volume. He perspicaciously chronicles the historical arc of the American magazine, beginning with its genesis in the 18th century in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City and continuing through the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution to its present iterations. The author covers a dizzying swath of territory with remarkable concision, including magazines devoted to literary pursuits, trade, social activism, business, and fashion. The rich historical account that emerges often assumes a quirkily unconventional take—for example, when covering the golden age of magazines (1890 to 1920), Lomazow concentrates on the neglected story of the great proliferation of smaller-market publications: “The era also witnessed the birth of another new magazine genre of cultural importance: the little magazine, a form associated with artistic experimentalism, avant-gardism, and social and political activism.” In fact, while the first half of the book is devoted to a synoptic history, the second half mines the cosmos of these little magazines and the impact they had despite a more limited reach than their better known, mass-market counterparts. The author’s effort doubles as an exhibition catalog—he presented his collection at the Grolier Club in New York City—and a sweeping history, both of which are executed with elegance and intelligence.

Lomazow’s expertise on the subject is inarguably magisterial—he seems equally self-assured opining on the biggest and smallest publications, the shifting sands of copyright law, and the ramifications of the birth of the internet. And since one could hardly furnish a history of the American magazine without some reflection on the circumstances—social, cultural, and political—of its evolution, the work is a wonderfully unusual account of the country’s growth as a whole. Magazines, especially the smaller ones that sometimes remained obscure, embodied the hopes of a nation of readers looking for edification, solidarity, or beauty: “While fast becoming a consumer-oriented nation embracing commercial mass market culture, America was also culturally aspirational. The little magazines serve as a demonstration of how the American entrepreneurial spirit was harnessed in the service of high culture and social progressivism.” While it’s more common to find histories that emphasize the country’s famous commercial spirit and inefatigable productivity, the author illuminates America’s cultural longings with impressive astuteness. In addition, an exhibition catalog is rightly judged by its visual splendor, and on this score, Lomazow deserves kudos—the book is adorned with dozens of stunning photographs, some immediately recognizable as iconic and others tantalizingly esoteric and rare. This is a remarkable history—thoughtful, granularly meticulous, and comprehensive—as well as a visually spectacular showpiece. One needn’t be a magazine collector to thoroughly enjoy this refreshingly original overview of American history.

A delightful combination of historical commentary and beautiful photos.

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Although Nativity scenes have become a time-honored tradition among Christians of all denominations, this book seeks to “retrieve the manger scene from its comfortable niche beneath the tinsel-laden tree and hold it up to the light.” With painstaking attention to the minutiae of Nativities, Mages offers a refreshingly detailed look at a cultural artifact that’s long been admired for its simplicity. The author begins with a history of the Christmas crèche from Pope Sixtus III’s fifth-century wooden replica to the forerunners of today’s Nativity scene, which is traditionally attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Subsequent chapters look at cultural differences in crèche design, from the German/Austrian traditional emphasis on detailed landscapes to the contrasting styles of Neapolitan and Provencal crèches, which, respectively, feature figures clothed in bright colors and “peasant garb.” The author offers chapter-length analyses of the symbolism behind the designs of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the Magi. Even the animals, which modern Christians may overlook as merely part of the mise-en-scène, are given their proper due, as Mages surveys the writings of St. Augustine and other Christian patriarchs who...
suggested that each animal has a specific, symbolic purpose. The book is written by a Christian author with an expressed purpose of challenging readers to reflect on the Christmas season, and it includes some critical insights. It highlights, for example, the contradiction between the Magi’s following a star to Jesus and the Old Testament’s ban on divination and astrology. Like crèches themselves, the book is deliberately ecumenical, careful to highlight Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant thinkers. It’s also well researched, as evidenced in its impressive endnotes and bibliography, and it expertly walks the line between sophisticated analysis and accessibility. Unfortunately, although it cites numerous examples of crèche art and styles, it provides only a handful of generic images, depriving readers of visual examples.

An erudite but highly readable analysis of a universal symbol of Christianity.

ACING YOUR JOB SEARCH Strategies To Succeed Where Other Job Seekers Fail
Mapleton, Roy
FriesenPress (132 pp.)
978-1-255-7711-6
978-1-255-7712-3 paper

This all-in-one job-search manual provides a candidate’s point of view. Typically books offering advice about job searches are written by recruiters or human resources professionals. In contrast, this debut is the work of someone who, over the course of 15 years, “attended more than thirty-five interviews” with little success. Mapleton learned what he did wrong and eventually found a good position. Now he has turned his experience into a handy guide to help other job seekers. The book begins by covering some basic information about types of jobs and the hunt for a position while employed versus unemployed. Next are two perspectives on the job search through the eyes of a recruiter and a hiring manager, each of whom offers valuable advice. One of the strongest sections of the manual, “Body Language Basics,” supplies an instructive overview accompanied by uncredited color photographs of various facial, hand, and body positions. The remainder of the work is divided into three “phases”: “Preparation,” “Moving Forward,” and “Foot in the Door.” Mapleton addresses job descriptions, resumes, cover letters, the oft-overlooked thank-you notes, and “the elevator pitch” in Phase 1; job boards, LinkedIn, recruiters, fairs, and networking in Phase 2; and interviews in Phase 3. The interviewing phase, likely the most crucial, is especially rich in detail. It covers in-person, video, and telephone interviews; delivers worthy suggestions for how to answer numerous queries, and includes typical “trick questions.” In combination, these three phases constitute a comprehensive approach to searching for a job from start to finish. While much of this information could probably be found elsewhere, it is beneficial to have it consolidated in one book. The content is logically organized; examples are liberally sprinkled throughout; and the author’s writing style is clear and conversational. In addition, Mapleton includes some very helpful tips presented from the job seeker’s point of view, such as describing specific “microexpressions” (facial expressions that represent each emotion) and noting a particular “selling method” that can enhance a candidate’s desirability to a hiring manager.

A thorough, useful resource for job seekers.

GUilty When Black
One Girl’s Journey Down the Twisted Road of Injustice & The Atrocities of Female Incarceration
Mersch, Carol
Yorkshire Publishing (308 pp.)
$16.99 paper  | Sep. 7, 2020
978-1-952320-58-3

A Black woman gets trampled by Oklahoma’s criminal justice system in this exposé.

Journalist Mersch tells the story of Miashah Moses, a 23-year-old African American woman in Tulsa. In 2013, Moses left her two nieces, 4-year-old Noni and 18-month-old Nylah, alone in their apartment for about eight minutes while she took out the garbage. During that time, a fire broke out and killed the girls. The tragedy sparked a Kafkaesque criminal case against the distraught Moses. Held in jail for years on an unpayable $500,000 bond, she was charged at one point with second-degree murder by prosecutors who argued that she willfully neglected the girls by fleeing the apartment to buy drugs and started the fire by leaving a pan of grease heating on the stove. The case was weak: The supposed drug dealer testified that Moses was not the woman he met that day, and copious evidence surfaced that the building’s faulty wiring had caused similar fires. But Moses’ pro bono attorney never told her about the defective wiring and instead pressured her into a plea bargain and a 15-year sentence in Mabel Bassett Correctional Center, a squalid place. Mersch braids into the woman’s travails the experiences of other female inmates and of Moses’ extended family, including a mentally disturbed cousin who was murdered in prison after killing his father and an uncle found drowned under suspicious circumstances that the police never investigated. The author sets these misfortunes against a history of racial injustice in Tulsa dating back to the 1921 pogrom in which White mobs killed hundreds of Black residents and including a recent scandal in which the city’s police fabricated evidence against dozens of defendants.

Mersch makes Moses’ saga into a crackerjack legal narrative that has courtroom drama and intricate but lucid forensic analysis. There are sharply observed characters, including Moses’ fiercely protective mother, Chrisandria; the vindictive district attorney who viewed the defendant as a symbol of moral degeneracy; and the bullying, narcissistic judge who told Moses she had a 10-day window to retract her guilty plea but then denied her withdrawal petition. There’s considerable mayhem in the book (“She watched horrified as he fell, twisting and turning in
“Paired with the poems are color reproductions of Ogilvie’s art, which provide a vibrant counterpoint to her verse.”

**THE BERTH**

**American Themes in Poems and Images**

Ogilvie, Fan
Illustrated by the author
Self (248 pp.)
$35.00 paper | Oct. 1, 2020
979-8-69-200952-4

A collection of meditative verses that views life in these United States through a long historical lens.

Ogilvie, a painter and the former poet laureate of West Tisbury, Massachusetts, arranges this collection of poems, art, and photography around themes in its opening work, “The Last Berth on the Mayflower,” about a Pilgrim woman’s hardships and hopes. Sometimes, as in “Thanks Taken,” she directly critiques the worldview of Colonial settlers as “God’s elect, self-chosen / to bring order into a ‘new world,’ / ...a wilderness / hostile to your godly virtues of order and control.” But she also ranges far afield, taking on contemporary issues. “Wake Up Call,” for example, views a sudden storm as a “testament to how rough our times can be / and will be as we ignore suggestions to improve climate.” In “Until This Coronavirus,” the poet imagines humanity as a fragile collective, writing that “with covid 19 I see / A very endangered species—us….Like a herd of wildebeests I see us blind and / Running.” “I Can’t Breathe” voices outrage on behalf of “George Floyd who used a phony $20 bill,” “the black community with a knee on their neck,” and “the environment starved for years of oxygen.” Several poems take shots at President Donald Trump: “Sometimes It’s” likens him to Hitler, Stalin, and Bonaparte while “I Recall” avers that “Trump turned us into a Police state / now a triumvirate: US, Russia, China, / with North Korea and Israel on the side.” There are less overtly political poems, as well, including pastorales, reflections on loss and aging, and a whimsical ode to neutrinos. There are even whimsical jibes at British royalty: “If they would examine the air, screaming as he descended, his arms flailing as he hurtled in a free fall onto the roof of the eight-story parking garage 17 stories below,” the author writes of a woman who denied pushing her husband to his death but wound up in Mabel Bassett’s jail. The violence and plenty of punchy, sometimes purplish prose—“If you’re in the wrong place at the wrong time, the sticky fingers of the law will suck you in like a Venus fly trap”—capture the ruinous twists of fate that bedevil the author’s subjects. Through Moses and her family, Mersch maps society’s very uneven playing field: the benefit of the doubt and lenient sentencing that White defendants receive for actions similar to Moses’; the poverty that puts Black people more often in harm’s way; the fines, fees, and court costs that saddle them with crippling debts for even trivial misdemeanors; the permanent stain a criminal record puts on a resume. The result is a troubling look at justice that is anything but colorblind.

A searing portrait of the plight of systemic bias and disadvantage in Black people’s lives.

Harry’s DNA we would see / he doesn’t belong to them.”

The author writes in a wide range of poetic registers, from the gentle, homespun lyricism of “Domestic Me”—“Tonight I will gather all my kitchen brushes, and as it rises, will scrub the face of the moon”—to the apocalyptic foreboding of “The Next Time.” Paired with the poems are color reproductions of Ogilvie’s art, which provide a vibrant counterpoint to her verse. The paintings are divided between lush, sensual portraits and abstract works that tend toward rough-textured tiles of bold, solid colors or delicate, pastel tendrils. She also includes photographs of snow-covered beaches, livestock in fields, and vivid moons rising over placid seas. Ogilvie’s impulse to connect small, intimate scales to vast, geopolitical ones sometimes overreach, as when the speaker kills a wasp in “Not Being Here Put On Hold”: “Now like DH Lawrence / and his snake, I will live in regret and guilt, but / would I do it again, go ask Assad and Putin.” She’s at her best, as in “Turkey,” when she’s raptly focused on telling details that bring the world around her to life: “On you come / proceeding with the delicate peck peck peck / of your deliberate scrawny neck sorting / among the seeds which yours which, not.”

Occasionally heavy-handed poems enlivened by evocative language and striking visual imagery.

**THE PART THAT BURNS**

**A Memoir**

Ouellette, Jeannine
Split Lip Press (172 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Jan. 4, 2021
978-1-952897-06-1

Ouellette entwines moments of personal pain with a lifelong awe of nature in this memoir.

The book opens with a fragment about the author’s mother, now in her late 60s, moving back home to Duluth, Minnesota, in search of “peace and quiet.” However, Ouellette’s formative years were anything but peaceful. In 1970, two years after she was born, her parents divorced, marking the beginning of an itinerant childhood. The family regularly moved, at one point relocating from Minnesota to Wyoming because of her mother’s new husband’s job. He had violent tendencies and played a “tickling game” with 4-year-old Ouellette, she says, which ended with his rubbing his hands between her legs. The author also describes childhood moments when she was “kicked out” of the family and made to live in the basement, with her mother pretending she was invisible. Other nonlinear fragments describe the author’s forging a life for herself—navigating marriage, becoming a mother, and attending a sexual abuse support group. A key characteristic of Ouellette’s writing is her preoccupation with nature, as she calmly skips between accounts of her past and factual information about the natural world: “A tumbleweed is a plant known as a diaspore.” On occasion, these observations serve as distractions from personal pain; in other instances, they mirror the author’s emotional state: “you might also want to be
a tumbleweed. Just look at them, lacy and weightless, rising and falling on rivers of air.” She juxtaposes these poetic moments with vivid, distressing passages, such as an account of Ouellette’s mother hurling a frying pan at the author and yelling, “I should have aborted you when I had the chance.” The memoir also eloquently describes how the effects of abuse resonate into adulthood: “Scars don’t lose their feeling. They become more tender to the touch.” The presentation of the author’s life story as a series of fragments may strike some readers as idiosyncratic; however, this structure poignantly reflects a self-described “brokenness”: “you can tear a thing apart and tape it back together, and it will still be torn and whole.”

A textured remembrance of a traumatic childhood that also offers affecting moments of beauty.

NAKED UNDER THE LIGHTS
Peck, Judith
Black Rose Writing (307 pp.)
$20.95 paper | $6.99 e-book
Oct. 28, 2020
978-1-68433-575-6

The daughter of a brilliant, selfish painter struggles to find her way in this coming-of-age novel.

Feeling adrift in 1975 with women’s roles in flux, 18-year-old Sonata Kossoff suddenly develops an interest in art and the work of her father, Bert, an abstract painter and instructor at Manhattan’s Art Students League. Unfortunately, Bert, a womanizer who cheats relentlessly on Sonata’s mother, Ruth, and a neglectful dad, doesn’t return the interest. When Sonata asks for art lessons, he’s privately dismissive of her clumsy efforts, and the 50th-birthday party she throws with his colleagues and students turns ugly when he spends the evening at an assignation with Irene, an artist’s model. The fiasco precipitates Ruth’s divorce from Bert, who promptly moves in with Irene and sends Sonata, ex-student Vincent Denfield, whose live-in lover and nude model she becomes. Vincent brusquely evicts Sonata when he veers from idolizing to vilifying him, into the arms of his former leader worked on his whole life. The novella is fleshed out by Rodenberg, who deserves kudos as a rigorous researcher who helpsfully separates fact from fiction.

This historical novel focuses on Napoleon’s last years, awash in intrigue and poignant with loss.

After the defeat at Waterloo, Napoleon is exiled to St. Helena in the South Atlantic, about as far away from France as possible. He comes with a small entourage, among them his faithful valet, Marchand; Albine, Countess de Montholon, and her husband, Charles; and Napoleon’s childhood friend Francesco Cipriani. Napoleon’s nemesis on the island is the governor, Gen. Sir Hudson Lowe, a petty and vindictive bureaucrat. The five years on St. Helena are filled with Napoleon’s longings, chiefly that he will likely never again see his young son, “the Eaglet,” who was spirited off to Vienna by his mother, Marie Louise. These are years of treachery—an underlying theme is Napoleon’s lifelong realization that he can never completely trust anyone—and plots to escape or seek medical release that, as readers know, will come to naught. The narrative consists of those parts focusing on Napoleon, those sections related by Albine, and excerpts from the novella Clisson et Eugénie that the former leader worked on his whole life. The novella is fleshed out by Rodenberg, who deserves kudos as a rigorous researcher and gifted writer. Two characters really stand out in this intricate tapestry: Napoleon (no surprise) and Albine. Napoleon comes across as imperious when need be but also kind and unpretentious, reflecting his humble beginnings on Corsica. And Albine is a true wonder. Good at heart, she is the classic survivor. She always has a crust of bread in her pocket—a very nice touch—and is not above petty thievery and the useful lie. She is also Napoleon’s mistress and bears him a daughter, Joséphine, who, alas, dies some months after Albine makes it back to Europe. And then there’s Tobyson, the little boy who adores Napoleon and is a stand-in, in a way, for the Eaglet. The little acolyte brings out the best in the fallen emperor. An afterward helpfully separates fact from fiction.

A well-written tale brings to life the twilight years of a captivating historical figure.
“The book’s descriptions of psychological disorders and treatments, such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, are informative and extremely readable.”

CLOSER TO FINE

A plastic bag manufacturer embarks on an enlightening environmental journey in this debut book.

Romer, who co-owns a small family business that manufactures custom plastic bags for the retail market, describes sustainability as “a place where business meets faith” in this insightful account. Recognizing a “growing anti-plastic public sentiment” in 2018, he was struck by a National Geographic magazine cover highlighting plastic pollution of the ocean. He vowed to make a personal commitment to change his own company’s practices and embrace sustainability, beginning with self-education. Research, conferences, and an executive education program gave Romer the working knowledge and tools to create a “systems map” to analyze his company’s operations. This helped him implement sustainability-oriented modifications while recognizing that it was “more about a thousand small things and less about one big thing.” Romer charted a path that resulted in a new vision for his business, which he termed “Healthy Planet, Healthy People and Healthy Company”; this became the driving force behind six key initiatives, among them stocking sustainable materials, creating a design guide for sustainable packaging, and communicating sustainability goals to clients. In this book, Romer details 10 steps that he and his business took to reach their “stretch goal” of a 25% waste reduction. Just as important, he tells of how he engaged his clients in his journey, educating them about how sustainability ultimately benefits everyone. He generously shares what he learned with readers so they can adapt his methodology as well. Romer is an astute narrator, observing his own growing awareness of the importance of environmental awareness as the story unfolds. He writes with honesty and humility, unafraid to expose his own vulnerabilities as he took on a daunting challenge. Especially compelling is the example he sets as visionary leader of a small company that can have a surprisingly big environmental impact. Along the way, he effectively relates how his effort is just one piece of a larger whole: “Our thread in the sustainability fabric is a thread in the sustainability tapestry…knowing that we may never fully see the full tapestry we are helping to create.”

A perceptive, instructive, and inspiring business memoir.

CLOSER TO FINE

In this coming-of-age novel set in 1995, a young woman starting graduate studies struggles with the vagaries of relationships, sexual orientation, and faith.

At the age of 23, Rachel Levine moves to Boston to begin a doctoral program in clinical psychology and to live with her 86-year-old grandfather, an observant Jew coping with the loss of his beloved wife. The two have a close bond, and Rachel serves as a needed companion but must keep parts of her life hidden. While she regularly accompanies Zayde (the Yiddish word for grandfather) to his synagogue, she is under strict instructions from her mother not to reveal to him her bisexual orientation. When she falls headlong into a passionate relationship with Liz Abraham, a brilliant young member of the congregation, she conceals it from him. The book examines the shifting plates of the religious community—more involvement of women and non-Jews in the rituals, to the consternation of Zayde. In her clinical training, under careful supervision, Rachel is learning how to handle the complexities of her patients. Meanwhile, she becomes increasingly anxious about the uncertainties she faces. She is not confident about Liz’s commitment to her; her parents are uncomfortable with her bisexuality; and she fails to foresee some serious problems with a favorite patient. Her own experience with a skilled therapist grants her tremendous insights as she navigates some very rough waters. Rosenfeld’s novel is framed by events from 2019, indicating that Rachel has successfully achieved significant career and personal goals. Much time is spent on elaborate discussions of Jewish observance and beliefs, such as washing and sitting with a body between death and burial. The pacing flags at times for secular readers when these descriptions venture into the esoteric. The early romance of Rachel and Liz is a high point described with humor and zest. On an early date, Rachel explains to Liz that she doesn’t like spicy dishes but doesn’t think that means I’m boring in bed.”

A warmhearted exploration of modern love with considerable psychological and philosophical insights.
TOURISTS IN THE COUNTRY OF LOVE
Rousseau, Jo
ReadLips Press (323 pp.)
Dec. 12, 2020
978-1-73318-134-1

Thirteen stories plumb the depths of love, loss, choices, and connection. Rousseau’s touching, dynamic collection of tales opens with the longest offering, “Reading to my Mother.” In this novella-length story, a daughter’s emotional devotion is stretched to its limit as she reads “elegant literary pornography” to her mother on her deathbed while a troubled, estranged sibling returns to make amends. When the siblings’ father unexpectedly dies, the family becomes united in grief. Much akin to the author’s debut collection, Inside Stories (2015), what’s contained here are tales associated with life’s unpredictability and bound by both hard and soft circumstances and human kindness. “Statues in a Blue Garden” explores how a Parisian woman reacts when the long-lost beau who abandoned her decades prior unexpectedly returns. Though she still secretly carries a passionate torch for him, she must measure this first love against the comfortable, privileged one that swept her away to a lush life in Paris. Driving to a penitentiary to marry her imprisoned felon boyfriend, the bride-to-be in the lively, vivid “Johnsonville” bonds and lets loose naturally with her future sister-in-law. Rousseau is particularly skilled at getting to the heart of a story and its characters’ motivations quickly and without distracting exposition. Just a few paragraphs in to “Aunt Tilly’s Cure for Heartbreak,” readers will already be familiar with the mistress awkwardly seated at the back of a funeral home where her lover, the husband of a friend, is laid to rest. The preservation of books (“They’re our hedge against forgetting,” as one character notes) hangs in the balance in “The Book Finder,” in which a woman must battle a futuristic faction bent on torching all forms of physical literature in favor of digitized cloud space. Also memorable are the fear survey exposing the true nature of a boss and his calculating subordinate in “Maurissa takes the F-Scale” and the gun-obsessed speed-dater in “Love’s Actuary” who assesses his life and those of potential partners in “micromorts.” Collectively, Rousseau’s tales are grounded by levels of love and humanity, and they all ask a pertinent question about the sustainability of life, the meaning of attraction, or the consequences of people’s actions. Many of the author’s characters discover that the truth (and being honest) is not always the most convenient remedy, but the intimate connections they’ve constructed can move mountains.

Moving and often heart-wrenching tales drawn from the poignant depths of the human experience.

IN WOMEN WE TRUST
Sakhia, N.H.
Acrobat Books (383 pp.)
Sep. 21, 2021
978-1-66420-307-5

A teenager’s indiscretion becomes a family tragedy and threatens to become a national scandal in this Pakistan-set drama. Gul is the 15-year-old son of poor people who work for Sardar Timur, a wealthy and powerful man in Hayatabad, Pakistan. He’s suddenly pulled into a brief sexual encounter with Timur’s daughter, Farah, on whom he has had a longtime crush, and the two are discovered in an unlucky moment that has extraordinary reverberations. Furious at what he feels is his mortification, Timur calls for a Panchayat, an “informal justice system” that empowers a council of locals to mete out determinations of guilt and innocence. Author Sakhia astutely captures the nature of these easily corruptible proceedings, which are officially illegal but largely ignored by the police. For Gul and his family, the stakes couldn’t be higher; he could be castrated or killed, and his relations could also suffer gruesome fates. Meanwhile, French journalist Arlette Baudis, who has accused the prime minister of Pakistan of sexual harassment, attempts to make the Panchayat fiasco into an issue of international interest—not only to highlight the nation’s corruption, but also to challenge its sexist view of women. Over the course of this novel, the author presents a tale that is sinewy and rich, deftly depicting a traditional system of justice as a thinly disguised one of oppression. Sakhia’s sparse, straightforward prose is quietly moving, as when Baudis, in a fit of exasperated anger about the prime minister’s popular election, rages, “How stupid are you people? Where the damn hell is the moral compass?” Sakhia also manages, with great authorial restraint, to refrain from sacrificing the artistic elements of the story to a sententious lesson.

A captivating drama in pursuit of dramatic truth.

THE SWEET SOUND OF LAUGHTER
Segin, Joan
Westbow Press (38 pp.)
$15.95 | $16.95 paper | $0.99 e-book
Sep. 21, 2020
978-1-66420-307-5
978-1-66420-305-1 paper

Four princesses use their diverse gifts in this fairy tale–like parable. In this picture book, a benevolent king presents gifts to his four light-skinned daughters. To Agnes, he grants healing; Betty receives the gift of song; Charmaine gains kindness; and Dorothy gets the final offering—“Ladder? What sort of gift is that?” Dorothy’s mishearing of her gift will likely be obvious to young readers. But if they miss it the first time, they’ll catch on when Dorothy uses a ladder as her stage for joke telling when she and
her sisters visit a sick boy, care for a traveler, and charm a cranky hermit. The misunderstanding leaves Dorothy feeling uneasy when she’s asked to explain how her gift has made a difference. When she finally realizes her mistake, she answers the only way she can: with laughter. Segrin’s simple vocabulary and repeated use of the gifts will appeal to independent readers. The uncredited digital cartoon illustrations, though somewhat two-dimensional, capture the story’s tone and make the sheepish Dorothy easy to identify with. Unfortunately, the overuse of grays for the castle and interior walls undermines some of the brighter colors. A note explains the parable aspect—that the king, introduced in the images surrounded by a glow, is God and that people receive unique gifts, including laughter. While the heavy-handed description dampens the parable’s charm, Dorothy’s misunderstanding remains just the comic relief the tale needs.

A clever story of princesses helping others—notably through the gift of laughter.

**WHEN GENDER IS IN QUESTION**

**A Guide to Understanding**

Sherkin, Suzanne with Seidl, Helma & Hagen, Skyler

FriesenPress (152 pp.)

978-1-4555-7414-6 paper

Sherkin blends personal experience with practical advice in this guide to transgender allyship.

When the author’s adult child came out as trans, Sherkin was initially filled with apprehension because she didn’t know very much about transgender identity. However, through her experience with her son, co-author Hagen, she came to learn—and grow—a great deal. This book is her attempt to share what she discovered and demystify the transition process for cisgender readers. “If you respond to difference with judgment, fear, or anger, the energy of that will impact the cultures around you,” writes Sherkin. “Respond with acceptance and respect, and that will be the tone of your impact.” The author starts readers at square one, explaining nuances of sexual identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and what it means to transition. She also goes into the challenges that transitioners can face in the home, the workplace, and in society at large. Hagen contributes memoiric sections while psychotherapist co-author Seidl provides psychological perspectives. Short testimonials from other trans people are scattered throughout the text, which serves to illustrate the diversity of experience that exists in the trans community. The prose throughout is straightforward, with a professional, reassuring tone. The authors keep the focus on the fact that transition is a process to be celebrated while acknowledging that initial steps can be confusing both for the trans person and their family. “Regarding my own transition,” writes Hagen, “there is no real clear beginning, and I really don’t see any clear end. I’m not sure if that’s a trans thing as much as it seems to be a human thing. How do you know when you’re done growing?” The thoughts of a loving parent, a candid child, and a passionate psychotherapist combine in these pages to provide a comprehensive picture, answering most of the questions that people who are new to trans concepts might have. The authors are all Canadian, so the resource section at the back of the book may be of limited value to American readers, but the work is otherwise applicable to a wide audience.

A considered and compassionate manual about transgender identity.

**LOVE, LOSS, & GHOSTS**

**Stories**

Solomon, Carol Westreich

Luminare Press (180 pp.)


A debut collection of interconnected short stories in which secrets lead to alienation and instability.

Solomon presents nine new tales alongside seven previously published works, mostly set in Maryland and the Washington, D.C., area, and regional references abound: Thrashers french fries, Metro stops, and the Washington Capitals hockey team. “Playoffs,” for example, amusingly portrays a young man trying to maintain a serious conversation with his girlfriend in a sports bar amid the excitement of the 2018 Eastern Conference finals. Many characters appear in multiple stories, which lends a sense of cohesiveness and allows for greater character development. It also makes occasional abrupt conclusions less distracting, as there’s often more to come. In one standout work, “Bashert,” an Orthodox Jewish couple struggles with infertility. After they receive bad news, Solomon shows a gift for detail as she notes “the medical building garage that reeked of gas fumes and bug spray.” In the well-crafted “Thieves,” a small act of kindness sets in motion events that spin their assumptions, and at the end, there’s a glimmer of hope and forgiveness that carries into the final work, “Fairy Tales and Ghost Stories,” which ties up loose ends from several stories with stirrings of a possible reconciliation. Some works feature stilted dialogue in which characters unnecessarily verbalize what readers can already intuit; for instance, in “September 12,” a concerned friend comments to the protagonist: “How unfortunate in the timing of her letter, September 12, the day after the anniversary of his death when your pain has resurfaced.” The most unique work is the opener, “Lost,” in which a narrator describes a fraught walk through a pandemic landscape. Here, Solomon effectively employs the visuals of a Zoom call to evoke memories of loved ones and important moments. As its narrator bemoans the loss of social cues and intimacy, the story also offers a strategy for emotional survival—writing as an act of defiance, therapy, and rebuilding. “But I can make them live and restore my life. I can write.”

An occasionally uneven set of tales but one that will reward patient readers.
In this debut SF novel, a powerful warrior with two complex personalities must discover and destroy the source of a dangerous infection.

The Polis federation, consisting of various intelligent species on more than 10,000 planets, knows no crime because of its members’ unconscious neural links to the Consensus, a shared morality. In case of a threat, the federation can also activate some underlying genes to engender Keld—strong, agile warriors capable of killing. Rarest of this rare breed are the Bound Keld, who can regenerate after their deaths into new alternate with each reanimation, but Adin Rayne went through of its members’ unconscious neural links to the Consensus, a source, which must be annihilated before the whole Consensus is contaminated. Her dangerous, bold endeavors have severe physical and emotional consequences; as if that wasn’t difficult enough, the Prospect planet Moton has been infected while its scientists are developing technology they’re not socially advanced enough to handle, a double threat. If Keld Special Action can’t wipe out the Madness on Moton, the planet may have to be destroyed.

In his book, Sullivan presents an intricate two-in-one main character whose psychology is as compelling as her warrior prowess. Adin and Shennan complement each other but have different preferences and strengths. Adin is reserved and cool, while Shennan is more optimistic and gregarious. After each death, the personality that was ascendant retires to recoup, allowing the other to come forward and choose the preferred body type for that incarnation (complicating their romances). Adin/Shennan’s conflict between wanting to make peace while required to make war gives the character additional depth, and the worldbuilding is equally intricate and well thought out. The author gives attention to the kinds of differences many SF writers overlook, such as how diverse the cultures and languages can be and the ramifications of that variety. On Pellelegro, for example, the four-caste system means a strike team doesn’t have enough taps for cable-fiber bundles, with the group expecting one bundle but getting four: “Who would have thought they wouldn’t even allow their data to touch?” This thoughtfulness is matched by exciting, dynamic action scenes with an array of weaponry and tactics, all described with crystal clarity while fully imparting their urgency and danger.

A brilliant tale offering a universe and protagonist that are impressively well realized.
Tabla “expertly blends the writings of Jane Elliot and other anti-racist authors with personal anecdotes, humor, and an approachable style.”

**SCARP RACISM!!!**
*The Church’s Response to Racism*
Tabla, Francis
Photos by the author
AuthorHouse (112 pp.)
Aug. 12, 2020
978-1-72836-913-6 paper
978-1-72836-914-3 e-book

A Black pastor calls on his fellow Christians to fight against racism.

As an African who was adopted by White Americans, Tabla notes his duality as a Black man who’s lived in the United States for decades but who feels like an “outsider” in relation to the African American experience. He recalls multiple times that he encountered racism in his life, including being denied a hospital chaplaincy because the employer worried how White patients would respond to a Black minister. Now a pastor in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Park, Tabla is convinced that the future “is bleak for the church” if it fails to stand against racism in the wake of George Floyd’s killing in Minneapolis in May 2020. This “mini book,” which was originally a sermon, outlines Tabla’s titular plan to “SCARP” racism, an acronym for five steps: “Speak Up Against Racism,” “Call Up White People To Join,” “Rise Up With Sustained Resilience,” “Act Up,” and “Pray Up to God for His Help.” The book is careful to emphasize the role of White Christians in the movement, and Tabla profiles White ministers who have joined protest movements across the country. For “evangelical leaders” who fail to speak up, however, the author provides brief lessons on America’s racist history and the experiences of Black men today, and he points out the “compound complex amnesia” that affects too many Christians. Tabla also offers readers a firsthand account of the 2020 Minneapolis protests against police brutality and structural racism, accompanied by his own ample photographs. Although the author acknowledges that he’s not a scholar, he expertly blends the writings of Jane Elliot and other anti-racist authors with personal anecdotes, humor, and an approachable style that’s emblematic of a veteran pastor. Some readers may disagree with the definition of racism found in the book’s early pages, which focuses on personal prejudice, but the evidence throughout the rest of its narrative clearly points to the perpetuation of systemic racism in today’s society.

An anti-racist sermon that effectively blends righteous indignation, measured analysis, and personal memoir.

FOSSILS INSIDE OUT
*A Global Fusion of Science, Art, & Culture*
Wiewandt, Thomas
Photos by the author
Wild Horizons Publishing (200 pp.)
Feb. 1, 2021
978-1-879728-08-0

A debut natural history book provides an introduction to fossils and their enthusiasts.

In this illustrated work, Wiewandt combines high-quality images with descriptive text to guide readers through the world of fossils, paleontology, and evolution. The volume opens at the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, where dealers from around the world offer genuine and replica fossils to collectors. The book then moves to explanations of what fossils are, how they form, and how their study helps scientists understand the relationships between extinct species and the plants and animals that exist today. With graphics that concisely summarize information and color photographs (by the author and others) that serve as examples of ideas discussed in the text, the volume explores concepts like the calculation of a fossil’s age, laws regarding fossil excavation and export, and the evidence for major extinction events, including a comparison of contemporary climate change to historical conditions. The book also goes into the substantial amount of work involved in preparing authentic and replica fossils for display. Wiewandt’s solid text is enlightening without being pedantic (“The size, shape, and bite pattern of these holes strongly suggest that ammonites were on the mosasaurian menu.”). But the illustrations are the volume’s greatest strength. Expertly designed spreads draw readers’ attention to detailed images that serve as examples of topics covered in the narrative. Captions are comprehensive, and they concisely demonstrate the complex and interconnected nature of paleontology work—for instance, the text accompanying a photo of a reproduction of a pterosaur describes the animal, identifies the museum that
is home to the model, and credits the artists who designed and built it. With its wide-ranging and illuminating text and its attractive presentation of vibrant images, the book is likely to appeal to both novices and paleontology fans (aficionados will find plenty of suggestions for further reading in the multipage, annotated bibliography). The author's enthusiasm for the subject is evident on every page, making the work an instructive and highly enjoyable reading experience.

A well-designed and well-written guide to fossils, evolution, and more.

THE FIELD HOUSE
A Writer's Life Lost and Found on an Island in Maine
Wood, Robin Clifford
She Writes Press (392 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $8.99 e-book
May 4, 2021
978-1-64742-045-1

A writer explores her personal connections to author Rachel Field.

"Something happens during the writing of a biography that feels a lot like falling in love," Wood writes in her prologue, explaining her intense drive to tell the story of Field, a Newbery Award–winning novelist and poet active in the early 20th century. After purchasing Field's summer home on Sutton Island, Maine, Wood found herself surrounded by Field's last remaining possessions and "lingering wisps of [her] creative energy." Through meticulous research, Wood uses letters and poems to reconstruct Field's life, from her childhood at the turn of the century to her hard-won success as a children's author. Field's childhood in an illustrious family provided inspiration for her legacy, but it was her unrequited love for a gay Southern gentleman and insecurities about her appearance that Wood believes inspired Field's best poems and her "wonderful" adult novel *Time out of Mind* (1935), which earned a Kirkus Star, both somewhat overlooked following her death. Field would eventually find love and relocate to California, witnessing the early, bustling days of Hollywood. She tried to build a family until her untimely and surprising death. Interwoven throughout this story are letters directly from Wood to Field detailing her unfultering admiration and how Field's story took Wood on her own journeys across the country and on to finding her own voice as a writer. Wood makes some admirable attempts to take some critical distance from Field. She provides insightful analysis of Field's work, discusses the two women's similar, yet vastly different, struggles over career and family, and even addresses Field's privilege and seemingly racist remarks. But Wood always returns to effusive, consistent admiration for her subject matter. Readers may not walk away with the same devotion and excitement that Wood desperately wants to share, but her passionate prose and carefully curated primary sources will certainly convince readers that Field is not a writer to overlook.

An eloquent, detailed tribute to a less well-known but inspiring author.
Books of the Month

**THE COLDNESS OF OBJECTS**
Panayotis Cacoyonnis

**CHARM AND STRANGE**
Linda Casebeer
Powerful, well-wrought poems that consider mystery with discipline and nuance.

**PREDATOR MOONS**
J.H. Ramsay
A memorable voyage through a brutal human society, bizarre alien environments, and elastic realities.

**PRAIRIE SONATA**
Sandy Shefrin Rabin
A poignant and eloquent reflection on tradition, family, friendship, and tragedy.

**THE $22.50 MAN**
Richard Voorhees
A wonderfully appealing, literate, compassionate, and funny Jazz Age tale; a home run.

**THE CHIEF REINVENTION OFFICER HANDBOOK**
Nadya Zhexembayeva
Outstanding business insights in a work brimming with energy and vitality.
BY DAVID RAPP

LINECOLN LAWYER SHOW HEADING TO NETFLIX

The Lincoln Lawyer is getting a retrial.

Netflix has picked up the TV show, which will draw on Michael Connelly's best-selling legal thrillers featuring Los Angeles defense attorney Mickey Haller. The program had previously been in the works at CBS, which elected not to go forward with the project last May. David E. Kelley will serve as an executive producer; he most recently created the HBO miniseries The Undoing, based on Jean Hanff Korelitz’s novel, You Should Have Known. No prospective premiere date was announced.

The new show takes its name from the first book in Connelly’s book series, which was published in 2005 and adapted as a 2011 theatrical film starring Matthew McConaughey. (Haller is known as “the Lincoln lawyer” because he has a reputation for working out of his Lincoln Town Car.) The sixth book in that series, The Law of Innocence, was published in November.

Netflix released a statement by Connelly that noted that the show’s first 10-episode season will adapt the second series entry, 2008’s The Brass Verdict. That novel is particularly notable because it features both Haller and his half brother, LA cop Harry Bosch, who’s the star of another of Connelly’s book series—as well as the focus of the ongoing Amazon Prime Video TV show Bosch, starring Titus Welliver. It’s unclear if the Netflix show will include the Bosch character or, if so, if he would be played by Welliver or another actor.

The CBS series had been set to star Upgrade’s Logan Marshall-Green as Haller, but in the Netflix show, he’ll be played by Mexican actor Manuel Garcia-Rulfo, who had a supporting role in last year’s Apple TV+ war movie Greyhound, based on C.S. Forester’s 1955 novel The Good Shepherd.

WHITE NOISE FILM IN WORKS

Writer/director Noah Baumbach will begin shooting a film adaptation of Don DeLillo’s National Book Award–winning 1985 novel, White Noise, in June, according to the Los Angeles Times, which referenced an item in the latest issue of Production Weekly. The movie will star Adam Driver and Greta Gerwig, who was most recently nominated for an Oscar for her adapted screenplay for 2019’s Little Women, which she directed.

Baumbach previously directed both actors in the well-received 2012 film Frances Ha. Most recently, he was nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe for his screenplay for the 2019 film Marriage Story, which he helmed and which also co-starred Driver.

DeLillo’s acclaimed novel, which received a Kirkus Star, follows Jack Gladney, an academic at the Department of Hitler Studies at a small American college. (Other courses in the school’s department of “American environments” focus on topics such as Elvis Presley and automobile crashes.) His idyllic, suburban life with his wife, Babette, and their kids from previous marriages faces unexpected peril when an ominous “airborne toxic event,” caused by a chemical spill, passes through their lives. Kirkus’ reviewer wrote that “DeLillo turns a TV–movie disaster scenario into a new book of Revelations in these pages: a very disturbing, very impressive achievement.”

The author’s most recent book, The Silence, was published in October and also received a Kirkus Star. His 2003 novel, Cosmopolis, a chilly character study of a New York City asset manager, provided the basis for an unseen but excellent 2011 movie, directed by David Cronenberg and starring Robert Pattinson. The 2016 French film Never Ever was adapted from DeLillo’s Kirkus-starred 2001 book, The Body Artist.

David Rapp is the senior Indie editor.
Scene: a village in China in the mid-1920s. A revolution is beginning to rumble in faraway cities, but here the preoccupation is getting enough to eat. To that end, the men are going off to a place even farther away, Gold Mountain, to seek work. Across the ocean, the riches of America beckon, and even if laws excluding Chinese immigrants are still in force—only in 1943 would the last be repealed—those desperate men are willing to make the voyage, enter the country somehow, and find work, however demeaning.

In the village, a young woman gives birth and then drowns herself in a well. That the woman, Maxine Hong Kingston’s aunt, was pregnant was almost certainly not voluntary, for “Women in the old China did not choose,” writes the author in the first pages of her 1976 memoir, *The Woman Warrior*. Even suicide was not entirely a matter of choice in that Hobbesian society, where the distraction of childbirth gave fellow villagers the opportunity to loot the family compound, stealing food and household goods, slaughtering animals.

The raid, the suicide, the hunger—all were of a piece in a time of “ghost plagues, bandit plagues, wars with the Japanese, floods.” If they are shrouded in the fading memories of her traumatized relatives, Kingston recalls that now-receding past in a narrative that blends old folktales and legends with often fraught episodes that recount her generation’s clashes with its immigrant parents. The points of friction are endless: Where her mother had been a doctor in China but worked as a laundress in California, Kingston has the freedom of choice to declare that she intends to be either a journalist or a logger: “I’m going to cut down trees in the daytime and write about timber at night.” Her mother answers, very sensibly, “I don’t see why you need to go to college at all to become either one of those things.”

Amid tales of giants, nomads, dragons, ghosts (always ghosts, whole armies of them, in both China and America), the people of that distant village, and the toll of immigration that includes the madness of another aunt, Kingston weaves a particularly memorable story. It centers on two actors: Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior of legend who took her father’s place in battle, riding a shimmering white horse, and a youthful Kingston herself as she resists things as they are, rejecting the old mores of two cultures, the one insisting that women are of no value, the other reflexively racist.

*The Woman Warrior* was published to great acclaim, the first book in an emerging canon of literature by writers of many marginalized ethnicities that includes Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, and Audre Lorde’s *Zami*. Yet Kingston’s book immediately drew criticism from some Chinese American writers for what they alleged to be lack of authenticity, a charge that she anticipated at the beginning of her innovative melding of fact and fiction: “How do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese?” The question lingers even as, 45 years later, her book, now a classic of American literature, endures.
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