Jenn Shapland reclaims a queer icon in *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* p. 62

Also in the issue: Colum McCann, Saeed Jones, Naomi Shihab Nye
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK:
Beyond Biography

BY TOM BEER

Biography is perhaps the trickiest of the literary arts. In addition to possessing dogged reporting and research skills, the biographer must also be a shrewd psychologist, getting inside the mind of the subject and understanding their motivations. This involves a lot of evidence-gathering along with, inevitably, some highly educated guesswork.

“Biography is not merely a mode of historical enquiry. It is an act of imaginative faith,” writes Richard Holmes in *This Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer* (Pantheon, 2017), a collection of essays on his chosen craft. Holmes, who has written biographies of Romantic poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, among others, likens biography to “a handshake across time,” emphasizing the deeply personal nature of the work.

Jenn Shapland, the author of *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* (Tin House, Feb. 4), knows how intimate biographical work can get. As she explains to Kirkus in an interview on p. 62, while doing archival research on McCullers, she came across the novelist’s letters to Swiss photographer Annemarie Clarac-Scharzenbach; she recognized them instantly as love letters, though most McCullers scholars have obscured the author’s lesbian attachments and focused on her two marriages to Reeves McCullers. The discovery led Shapland to a deeper recognition of her own queerness along with her subject’s, and the book she ultimately wrote is a self-aware hybrid of memoir and biographical meditation.

Biographers have been popping up in their own work ever since Edmund Morris somewhat notoriously made himself a character—and a fictional character, at that—in *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (Random House, 1999). In the preface to her recent memoir, *Parlisan Lives: Samuel Beckett, Simon de Beauvoir, and Me* (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2019), Elaine Bair writes, with a note of distaste, that “contemporary biographers who find little or no information about their subjects feel scant compunction about inserting themselves into lives in which they played no part, either as authoritative characters or commentators.” Bair didn’t inject herself into her biographies of Beckett and Beauvoir per se, but *Parisian Lives* is a vivid, stand-alone recollection of her encounters with these two literary titans and a glimpse at Bair’s own progress as a scholar. Would-be biographers can learn a lot from it.

In the 1980s, *New Yorker* staff writer Lawrence Weschler set out to write a series of profiles of the author Oliver Sacks (*Awakenings, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*) for the magazine, meeting with his subject over the course of four years. Sacks, who was gay, was uncomfortable coming out so publicly, and the profiles were killed. Last year, four years after his subject’s death, Weschler published *And How Are You, Dr. Sacks?: A Biographical Memoir of Oliver Sacks* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019). Note that “biographical memoir” in the subtitle—this is no straightforward, cradle-to-grave account of Sacks’ life, but rather a recollection of the author’s one-time subject, who became a friend and godfather to his daughter. Weschler, in an interview with Kirkus last year, called himself a “beanpole Sancho to his capacious Quixote.”

We live in a word with fewer boundaries—and greater transparency—than ever before, and our books reflect it. These complex hybrids of biography and memoir, when done scrupulously and honestly, can make for rich reading.
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

In her latest book, celebrated cultural critic Olivia Laing offers a stellar collection of essays and reviews. Read the review on p. 80.

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MEADOWLARK
Abrams, Melanie
Little A (240 pp.)
$24.95 | $14.95 paper | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-5420-0735-1
978-1-5420-0734-4 paper

When an email from a childhood friend invites photographer Simone to document life at a commune, little does she know she's stepping into Waco-level drama.

Simone understands life on a commune; after all, she and her mother moved to one when Simone was 4. She was called Simrin there at Ananda Nagar, an ashram in the California desert. Twenty years later, Simrin is now Simone, a rising star in the photography world, with a blog showcasing her talents in capturing difficult, dramatic moments. Simone's daughter, Quinn, has inherited her synesthesia, which her ex-husband finds weird. He's pushing Simone to enroll Quinn in a conventional kindergarten. And that's when Arjun contacts her. Now he calls himself Aaron, and he has a wife and three children, and he's founded a new commune called Meadowlark, where every child can find their gifts. But a disgruntled former member has accused the ashram of harboring child abusers, and Aaron needs Simone's help to show the world the real Meadowlark. Once there, however, Simone discovers that things are far more complex and dangerous than she thought. Aaron's wife, who has secrets of her own, is adamantly opposed to having her children photographed. Juniper, Aaron's eldest child, becomes jealous of Quinn's talent. And Aaron's own motives seem less than altruistic, especially as the police begin to push him to open the gates. In this, her sophomore novel, Abrams (Playing, 2017) gorgeously depicts the spellbinding world of closed communities, in which being noticed as special means everything. From the starkly beautiful desert landscapes that mirror the children's thirst for attention to the brightly colored lines and shapes that Simone and Quinn see linking them to those they love, Abrams deftly conjures a highly charged emotional terrain.

A compelling, taut portrait of love and broken promises.
An understated, lyrical story of reading and resistance over the tumultuous generations.

“For centuries the sun has been rising over the terraces of Algiers, and for centuries, on those terraces, we have been killing each other.” So writes Adimi in the first of her novels to be translated into English, a story that unfolds over decades, beginning in 1936, when a young pied noir named Edmond Charlot (who was a real person) buys a tiny bookstore in Algiers. He calls it Les Vraies Richesses, meaning something like “the true wealth.” In time he starts a publishing house, discovering a young Albert Camus. World War II follows, and Charlot battles censorship and paper shortages; then comes the Algerian War, and though readers continue to come to his store, no one has any money: “When I can, I slip them something I love and say, ‘Take it: fix me up later,’” Charlot records in his journal. Adimi recounts Charlot’s inspiring passion for books and ideas through his own voice and those of others, including one of his converts, a now old man named Abdallah, who tends to the store long after the death of its founder. But the Algerian authorities have no use for such secular spaces; as a journalist notes, “The government is sacrificing culture to build mosques on every street corner!” A young man named Ryad, an engineering student, is sent to clean out and refurbish the space. “Destroying a bookstore, you call that work?” Abdallah, who wears a shroud around his shoulders so that “the day God calls me, they’ll be able to bury me straight away,” asks the dutiful young man. The books he is sent to trash eventually enrapture Ryad, of course. Populated by the ordinary citizens of Algiers and such figures from French literary history as Robert Aron and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Adimi’s gently spun story takes an ominous turn as it nears its end, when the secret police turn up with increasing frequency: their “mustaches, sunglasses, dark suits” the uniform of the enemies of literature.

A lovely book about books—and freedom.

OUR RICHES
Adimi, Kaouther
Trans. by Andrews, Chris
New Directions (160 pp.)
$19.95 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-8112-2815-2

A poet navigates Iranian life and politics in the tumultuous years between World War II and the Islamic Revolution. Araghi’s ambitious debut novel pivots around Ahmad, who was 10 years old when he witnessed his shellshocked father commit suicide. The incident at once strikes him silent and introduces him to some peculiar family lore, most prominently from a seemingly immortal great-great-great grandfather who is inexplicably still alive. Another relative is convinced that Ahmad is similarly blessed with seeming immortality, and Ahmad unquestionably leads a charmed life amid the chaos of the Iranian capital: He survives the country’s postwar famine and rises from street brawling to becoming a poet whose words are so fierce they emit light. Writing under the pseudonym Silent Fist, Ahmad soon becomes a much-discussed figure in both literary and political circles. Araghi braids Ahmad’s story with an uncle’s obsession with the movements of cats around Tehran, which allegedly predict the country’s fate; and with an ever branching family tree full of activists, politicians, and poets. Ahmad’s professional and personal trek is compelling, but it also feels smothered by the competing storylines, which reflect Araghi’s urge to not miss a moment in Iran’s 20th-century history, from the postwar rise of Mohammed Mosaddegh to the 1953 coup to the shah’s exile. There are striking moments that capture the national drama (as when a tank crashes through a movie theater as if it were leaping off the screen), but Araghi is strongest at more intimate moments of courtship and parenting, and his zigzagging from blunt scenes of torture to magical realist imagery of Ahmad’s words cutting through metal makes the story feel lacking in a tonal center.

An admirable if overencumbered family saga.

THE FLORIOS OF SICILY
Auci, Stefania
Trans. by Gregor, Katherine
HarperVia/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$28.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-06-293167-2

An earthquake in the autumn of 1799 forces the relocation of the real-life Florio family from a devastated Calabria to Palermo, Sicily, where seismic changes of another kind continue to occur within the renowned family—and their new homeland—over the course of three generations.

Siblings Paolo and Ignazio Florio struggle to grow their burgeoning spice business in their new home, facing cultural and financial obstacles before reaching a level of acceptance from their Sicilian neighbors. In addition to competition from local merchants, their efforts to expand their trade are confounded by the era of rising Napoleonic power. Matters are further complicated by the difficult relationship between Paolo and his unhappy wife, Giuseppina, who is angered by her powerlessness in the marriage and her forced relocation to Sicily. After Paolo’s death, the business grows and prospers under Ignazio’s guidance while Ignazio himself lives an existence constrained by his lifelong unrequited passion for his widowed sister-in-law. Ignazio guides his beloved nephew, Vincenzo, into the increasingly more successful family business, and it is under Vincenzo’s steely-eyed and unrelenting leadership that the enterprise
ON RECONSIDERING AN OLD FAVORITE

Three years ago, I decided to recommend some books for National Women’s Day on Twitter: “Kind of random, just going through my shelves,” I wrote. Coming as she does at the beginning of the alphabet, Alice Adams was my first suggestion. “Anything by Alice Adams (Caroline’s Daughters, Second Chances, Almost Perfect). Like a great gossip with a friend. Colwin-esque.” I hadn’t read Adams since before she died in 1999, but I had happy memories of speeding through her novels about smart, complicated women living interesting if well-insulated lives in San Francisco. Fast-forward to 2020, and Adams is having a bit of a moment, with a fat new biography coming out (Alice Adams: Portrait of a Writer by Carol Sklenicka) and Vintage repackaging the 2002 collection The Stories of Alice Adams with a new foreword by Victoria Wilson, Adams’ editor. It seemed like a good time to recommend her again.

Sometimes a column doesn’t turn out the way you expected.

I started reading the reissued story collection and had mixed feelings. Many of the pieces felt hermetic, too 20th-century New Yorker. Here’s the beginning of “For Good,” from 1977: “‘How I hate California! God, no one will ever know how much I hate it here,’ cries out Pauline Field, a once-famous abstract-expressionist painter.” Adams is deft at opening lines, bringing the reader right into the world of her characters, but is the world of a once-famous abstract-expressionist painter where I want to spend my time? This isn’t a review, so I feel free to admit that I can’t quite decide.

Here are a couple more opening lines:

“Ardis Bascombe, the tobacco heiress, who twenty years ago was a North Carolina beauty queen, is now sitting in the kitchen of her San Francisco house, getting drunk.”

“Yvonne Soulas, the art historian, is much more beautiful in her late sixties than she was when she was young, and this is strange, because she has had much trouble in her life, including pancreatic cancer, through which she lived when no one expected her to.”

I admire these sentences (look at the work even the definite articles are doing: “the tobacco heiress,” “the art historian”), and I appreciate the way Adams sticks a preposition at the end of the second one, surely with intention; but from today’s perspective they feel encased in amber, not quite vital. On the other hand, Adams is writing about women in flux whose lives are far from pinned down and perfect, and some of her concerns are entirely contemporary. The opening story, “Verlie I Say Unto You” (1974), demonstrates with devastating skill how little the members of a white family know about the African American woman who cooks and cleans for them, spending every day in their house; recent novels by Rumaan Alam and Kiley Reid explore similar subjects.

I’ve spent time today reading through Kirkus’ reviews of Adams’ work, and they’ve been dismissive: “The novels Adams writes...are upholstered with mores: what people drink, eat, look at from windows, say at parties in well-educated Bay Area circles. But these cultural habits less reveal her fictional character than keep them stilled, fixed,” we said of Almost Perfect. The reviews are anonymous, of course, and they’re so old that even I can’t tell if they were written by the same person or many different people. Some of them are more positive, like this verdict on Medicine Men: “Her skill at sustaining an ente-nous point of view remains superb, leaving the reader flattered by the author’s confidence, if a little uncertain as to her aims.” That captures something of what I remember liking about Adams’ novels when I read them and leaves me ready to dive back in. —L.M.

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
expands beyond the spice trade into a hydra-headed entity dealing in sulfur, textiles, spices, insurance, Marsala wine, medicinal herbs, shipping, and banking. Vincenzo's own complicated personal life—involving a long-term liaison with the mother of his children—recalls that of his parents. The broad scope of Auci's narrative encompasses the personal and professional difficulties endured by both women and men within the family while dealing with issues of class as well (the Florios were often derided as traders and shunned by the insular Sicilian nobility). A condensed course in Sicilian history and Italian unification is interspersed between chapters and serves to place the Florios' struggles in historical context.

Auci focuses a panoramic lens on the Florio family's achievements while never losing sight of the smaller personal details of their (epic) lives.

**THE NEW LIFE OF HUGO GARDNER**

Begley, Louis

Talese/Doubleday (224 pp.)

$25.95 | Mar. 17, 2020

978-0-385-54562-4

After his significantly younger wife of 40 years suddenly leaves him for another man, 84-year-old Manhattanite Hugo Gardner searches for answers.

A man of wealth who once was managing editor of *Time* and who writes books about U.S. presidents, Hugo thought his marriage was a good one, with still-great sex, shared tastes, and a beautiful house in the Hamptons to retreat to. Then his spouse, Valerie, a bestselling food writer, tells him that “living with you is like living with a corpse.” And his daughter, Barbara, sides with her mother, calling him “unbearably dreary and unbearably selfish” even as she asks for a handout. Only his son, Rod, “a good guy” who’s “doing well at his not-quite-top-tier law firm,” offers any solace. During a trip to France, Hugo impulsively looks up Jeanne, the Frenchwoman he long ago dumped for Valerie, and gradually enters into a relationship with her. She lives with her dementia-afflicted husband. Hugo has been diagnosed with possible prostate cancer. What could go wrong? Reading like a personal diary, free of quotation marks, the book unfolds with self-effacing charm. Returning to the comfort of domestic fiction following a trio of mysteries (*Killer’s Choice*, 2019, etc.), the 86-year-old Begley turns in a spry, unerringly smooth performance.

A sharply amusing novel in which an octogenarian pundit rediscovers his past.

**A LIFE WITHOUT END**

Beigbeder, Frédéric

Trans. by Wynne, Frank

World Editions (304 pp.)

$16.99 paper | Apr. 14, 2020

978-1-64286-067-2

A man decides he will never die. French journalist, critic, and TV presenter Beigbeder (Manhattan’s Babe, 2016, etc.) describes this book as both “science nonfiction” and “a novel.” This apparent contradiction foreshadows the book’s challenging, cheeky, and sometimes confusing delivery. The narrator—let’s call him Beigbeder—confidently declares that he is the “first man who will be immortal. This is my story.” Accompanied by his 10-year-old daughter, Romy (he and his wife, Caroline, are separated), he sets off on a road trip, a “world tour searching for immortality.” Written in a breezy style, bristling with wit, sarcasm, heavy doses of gallows humor, and many lists (for
example, on the pros and cons of death), Beigbeder’s book provides extensive, detailed information about the science of aging. The scientists he interviews are actual doctors, but determining what is real/not real at any given moment gets tricky. First up is a visit to Geneva’s Institute of Genetics and Genomics, where Beigbeder learns about genome sequencing. Romy introduces Dad to Léonore, a highly attractive doctor. Immediately, he “wanted to see her belly swell with my fecund seed.” They have sex in Beigbeder’s hotel room while Romy sleeps. Is this an effort by a middle-aged man to postpone death? The tour continues with a visit to a Frankensteins exhibition (Faust, anyone?), and, soon after, he marries Léonore and—pop!—there’s a new daughter, Lou. Anxious to learn more from world-famous scientists about preventing his death, Beigbeder visits hospitals, research centers, and clinics in Israel, Austria, Boston, San Diego, and Monterey. He tries new diets, has blood transfusion laser therapy, and gets his DNA sequenced and stem cells frozen. Along the way the family is joined by a “plastic Michelin man,” Pepper, a Japanese robot Beigbeder bought as a companion for Romy.

This extravagant metafiction about obsession, life, love, and lists mixes sincerity with an endearing, genre-bending wackiness.

**THE OPERATOR**

Berg, Gretchen
Morrow/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$26.99 | Mar. 10, 2020
978-0-06-297894-3

Berg’s debut is set in an age when telephones were novel.

If you want to make a phone call in 1952, you’ll lift the receiver and hear an operator say “Number, please.” And if you live in Wooster, Ohio, that operator might well be Vivian Dalton. She’ll listen in on your conversation even though she knows she shouldn’t, always hoping to hear “something scandalous.” Her Pawpy had advised “Just don’t get
A madcap romp through St. Petersburg jumbles fiction together with history, anarchists with royalists, sense with nonsense.

**THE BOOK OF ANNA**

Boullosa, Carmen
Trans. by Schnee, Samantha
Coffee House (200 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-56689-577-4

A madcap romp through St. Petersburg jumbles fiction together with history, anarchists with royalists, sense with nonsense.

Sergei Karenin is driven to distraction by two things: First, that when people see him they think only of his mother and the scandal she created in St. Petersburg.
society; and, second, that like his mother, but unlike most of the others around him, he is a fictional character. At the opera, he wonders, “Is there anyone here who sees me not as a character, but as a person?” He despair: “Even I think of myself as a character.” The latest novel from one of Mexico’s finest experimental writers is a madcap metafictive romp that picks up a few decades after Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* leaves off. But it’s also an absurdist tour de force account of early revolutionary activity. The book opens in 1905. An anarchist seamstress leaves a bomb on a train but it fails to blow up. A mysterious priest named Father Gapon is leading a march to the czar, “seeking justice and protection.” “Comrades,” Gapon asks the masses, “do you swear to die for our cause?” “We swear!” they respond. Meanwhile, Sergei’s wife finds a box in the attic: It seems that Anna Karenina has left behind not one but two manuscripts written in an opium-fueled state. The second of these, a fairy tale about a girl named Anna, drives the latter half of Boullosa’s book. What does this all add up to? Who could say? The czar is taking a bubble bath, but the masses are on the march. All roads seem to point toward revolution.

Reminiscent of Bolaño, Borges, and Pynchon, but Boullosa’s utterly original voice is at its best when it’s let loose.

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**SUMMER OF RECKONING**

Brunet, Marion

Trans. by Gregor, Katherine

Bitter Lemon Press (224 pp.)

$14.95 paper | Apr. 15, 2020

978-1-912242-26-9

YA author Brunet’s first adult novel and first appearance in English, winner of the 2018 Grand Prix de Littérature Policière, chronicles the fateful summer when the world of a pair of Provencal schoolgirl sisters is detonated from within.

Once she realizes that she’s pregnant, Céline Gomez knows she can’t expect help from her father, Manuel, the boss of a construction crew whose first impulse, as usual, is to beat her; or from her mother, Séverine, who bore Céline herself as a teenager and can’t get over the fact that her daughter is repeating her mistake; or from the teachers and classmates who stand by ready to judge her; or from the attractive man who fantasizes about photographing his seduction of a pregnant teen. The only
person who’s supportive is her plain-Jane sister, Johanna, who’s always looked out for Céline even though she’s a year younger than her beautiful sister. As the summer months swell Céline’s belly and test the bond between the sisters, Manuel, taking his daughter’s disgrace as only the latest setback in a life full of them, seethes because he can’t identify the father. Then one night, while his daughters are at a party their mother has forbidden Céline from attending, he suddenly has an opportunity to take terrible revenge on the man he thinks is responsible. As his old mate and co-worker Patrick Bardin stands by in horror, he drunkenly, methodically beats the man to death and works feverishly to hide his body. Manuel’s choice of victim couldn’t be more ironic, and the murder is both shocking and inevitable.

A slow-motion nightmare notable for its evocation of febrile adolescent fantasies whose power extends well into adulthood.

I, JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE
Carroll, Kent & Blanco, Jodee
Pegasus (256 pp.)
$25.95 | May 5, 2020
978-1-64313-193-1

A fictional imagining of the troubled life of John Kennedy Toole and the selling of his Pulitzer-winning novel, A Confederacy of Dunces.

Toole’s story is well-known via biographies and appreciations of Dunces, published more than a decade after his suicide in 1969 at the age of 31. Claiming in their introductory note that personal details of the artist’s life proved too elusive for a standard biography, the co-writers have fashioned a novel of their own about the man called Kenny. At once a shy, lonely person and a “gifted mimic” who enjoys mocking people, he is controlled by his mother, Thelma, who restricts her gifted son from normal boyhood activities and accompanies him on his dates with a girl he can’t kiss in his mom’s presence. Though even in death Kenny is not free of Thelma’s helicopter presence—her pestering salesmanship led to his obsessed-over book’s publication—he mostly succeeds as an instructor at Columbia University and other schools. His pivotal moment comes when Simon & Schuster editor Robert Gottlieb, while finding much to recommend Dunces, rejects it. His dream destroyed, Kenny slowly sinks into mental illness, ultimately fixating on his fictional alter ego, “instigator extraordinaire” Ignatius T. Reilly, as an actual person. As editor-in-chief at Grove Press, Carroll was instrumental in foisting the bestselling paperback edition of Dunces on the world. He himself is a character in this entertaining if oddly assembled book, which features a made-up journalist who becomes obsessed with Toole’s story. While the authors do their best to capture their subject in all his eccentricities, their attempt to approximate his interior voice is pure folly. And their failure to provide a basic plot summary or excerpts from Dunces is puzzling.

A lightly likable depiction of an ill-fated American master. Mind the credibility gap.

IF I HAD YOUR FACE
Cha, Frances
Ballantine (288 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-593-12946-3

A disturbing look at the unrealistic beauty standards placed on Korean women.

Cha’s timely debut deftly explores the impact of impossible beauty standards and male-dominated family money on South Korean women. Kyuri, Miho, Ara, and Sujin are two sets of working-class roommates who befriend each other, and...
Wonna is a married woman who lives on a different floor of the same apartment complex in Seoul. All are struggling financially. As Wonna laments, “Unless you are born into a chaebol family or your parents were the fantastically lucky few who purchased land in Gangnam decades ago, you have to work and work and work for a salary that isn’t even enough to buy a house....” Because of Kyuri’s successful plastic surgeries, men hire her to be their companion at after-work “room salons,” giving her an enviable stock of designer purses and spending money. Sujin is saving up for surgery to attain the same face as Kyuri, but Cha shows how all the women are impacted by these standards. Ara’s work as a hairdresser makes her literally invested in part of the beauty industry, and even though artist Miho hopes her talent will allow her to rise on her own, she finds herself dependent on the whims of a wealthy boyfriend. At times, the voices of the many characters can blur and the timeline can be confusing. Wonna is the least developed character and interacts with the others only in a plot twist at the end of the book. However, taken together, Cha’s empathetic portraits allow readers to see the impact of economic inequity, entrenched classism, and patriarchy on her hard-working characters’ lives. Cha grew up in the United States, South Korea, and Hong Kong and is a former Seoul-based culture and travel editor for CNN.

Multifaceted portraits of working women in Seoul reveal the importance of female friendships amid inequality.

FIFTY-TWO STORIES
Chekhov, Anton
Trans. by Pevear, Richard & Volokhonsky, Larissa
Knopf (528 pp.)
$35.00  |  Apr. 16, 2020
978-0-525-52081-8

The indefatigable translating team of Pevear and Volokhonsky deliver a first-rate collection of Chekhov's stories that highlight their “extraordinary variety.”

In his lifetime, Chekhov (1860-1904), physician and writer, was accused of immorality because he wrote of the lives of little people with little problems rather than taking the god's-eye perspective of a Tolstoy. His reply: “What makes literature art is precisely its depiction of life as it really is.” Pevear and Volokhonsky (Novels, Tales, Journeys: The Complete Prose of Alexander Pushkin, 2016, etc.) select stories—happily, one for each week of the year—that express that devotion to realism, even if sometimes broadly satirically. The first piece, from 1883, depicts the bursting-at-the-seams pride of a young man whose name has appeared in the newspaper, even if it’s not for reasons to be proud of: It seems that he was drunk and “slipped and fell under the horse of the cabby Ivan Drotov,” then was clonked on the head by the axle. He can’t wait to tell the neighbors. Chekhov notes that he’s a “collegiate registrar,” which, Pevear and Volokhonsky helpfully gloss, is at the bottom rung of the czarist civil service. In another story, “Fat and Skinny,” a difference in rank takes on great importance: Old friends meet. One, it turns out, is a “collegiate assessor,” a rung up the ladder, and forced to supplement his meager income by making wooden cigarette cases. “We manage somehow,” he sighs, while his portly friend allows that he’s “already a privy councillor,” third from the top and requiring the use of the term of address “Your Excellency.”

Encounters between young and old, rich and poor, country and city people mark these stories, though perhaps the best of them is an odd, longish yarn called “Kashanka,” about a young dog, “half dachshund and half mutt,” whose master, “drunk as a fish,” loses her, whereupon the dog undergoes a series of adventures worthy of Pinocchio. It’s a marvel of imagination.

A welcome gathering of work, some not often anthologized, by an unrivaled master of the short story form.
A woman takes on the educational system in order to save her daughter in this dystopian thriller.

Elena Fairchild has two daughters—Anne, 16, who does extremely well in school, and Freddie, 9, who has intense anxiety and struggles to keep up her grades—and is married to Malcolm Fairchild, the man who helped implement a new government educational system in which each person is assigned a Q, a number based largely on intelligence that determines their place in society. Elena, a teacher at an elite school, conducts each month’s Q tests with dread, watching more and more children fall through the cracks. When Freddie bombs her tests and her Q drops below 8, Elena knows the girl will be taken away to a boarding school half the country away and her family will have few opportunities to visit or even talk to her. Elena’s grandmother, who grew up in Germany during the run-up to World War II, warns her that she must rescue her daughter before it’s too late. With everything against her, Elena throws caution to the wind in an attempt to get Freddie back. Dalcher (Vox, 2018) is no stranger to tackling social issues in her fiction, and this time she turns her eye to eugenics. The book’s examination of the way people will accept more and more small social changes until the system becomes something unrecognizable and horrific feels timely and urgent. There are moments when this message is delivered in an overly blunt way, but it’s an important enough idea that the book works anyway. The world is fully realized, though it isn’t clear if it’s set in the present day or a near future. The writing, however, is top notch and keeps the reader guessing.

An engaging parable of dangerous social change.
Irish American writer Colum McCann won both the National Book Award and the International Dublin Literary Award for his 2009 novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, but with his new book he seems to have set his ambitions even higher. *Apeirogon* (Random House, Feb. 25) is the stunning story of Rami and Bassam, two fathers who’ve lost daughters on opposite sides of a war.

The novel is wildly creative—gorgeously written, spun through with stories of birds and family and legend and history—and is, like Scheherazade’s tale, structured in 1,001 short bursts. Yet despite all that invention, it’s based on a true story. McCann spoke with Kirkus about the project.

In America the conversation about Israel and Palestine can be really fraught. How do you imagine people coming at a book about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

When I went to Israel and Palestine, I was so knocked off my feet, I knew I had to somehow try to engage with it. I do realize it’s risky. To talk about politics is a very fraught thing right now. But I think we need to learn to talk to one another.

We went to the houses of settlers; we went to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum; we went to meet Israeli entrepreneurs and then Palestinian rappers; musicians and artists and writers. It was a complete head-wrecker and heart-wrecker. I sort of prided myself, after about 10 days, for being one of the few on the trip who hadn’t broken down. Thinking, I’m tough, I know Northern Ireland, I’ve seen things. The second-to-last night I went out to Beit Jala, this town on the outskirts of Jerusalem, walked into this room, two men sitting there, ordinary men, and then they began to talk, and within about half an hour I was in floods of tears. Just unable to stop. What I didn’t know is that they told that story over and over and over again. I thought, this is extraordinary. I went away the next day and I was changed. I was changed by them.

One of the engines of the book is their grief—their girls were killed at ages 10 and 13. But their effort to tell their stories is also an exercise in hope. How do those things connect?

They are intimately connected. Rami and Bassam both said to me that they wanted to use the force of their grief as a weapon. They wanted to recognize the sorrow and, out of the sorrow, create some form of joy. Now in today’s world, that sounds a little bit twee. But for me, it isn't twee at all. To me, they’re more heroic, more muscular, than any of the cynics out there. Their confrontation with grief is one of the purest forms of hope that I find.
What was it like putting the novel together?
I feel that something weird happened to me, and I was like a conductor. Some of the orchestra was familiar to me but most of it was not, and so I’m doing this [waves his arms] OK cello, OK contrabass, and then the doors would open at the back of the hall and the light would come in and all these musicians would pour in carrying these instruments the likes of which I’d never seen before, and I’d have to get them to sit down in amongst the other musicians and start to play. And incorporate that sound. That’s what it felt like.

When juggling so much in the story, did you have any early readers you trusted?
My 20-year-old, now 21-year-old son, John Michael, became my reader. He solved some things for me, particularly at the beginning. He read the first 40 pages, and he came in to me and said, I get it now, Dad. He was frustrated and trying to figure out where is Israel, where is Palestine, what’s all this stuff that’s going on. Then he said, I surrendered myself to the confusion. And that’s exactly what I wanted him to do. That’s exactly what I want the reader to do. It doesn’t try to explain all these different things to you. It says what’s at issue here is the human heart. What’s at issue is the story of these two men.

Carolyn Kellogg is the former books editor of the Los Angeles Times. Apeirogon received a starred review in the Nov. 15, 2019, issue.
who has put years of wild living behind her. Tricia, the young-
est, ended up in New York City, working for a prestigious law
firm after her graduation from Yale. When their father’s law-
yer reveals that a newly discovered half sister may lay claim to
part of Bill’s estate, the sisters realize that the woman at the
funeral was no stranger. In fact, she was their childhood neigh-
bor Serena Tucker, whose mother turns out to have had an
affair with Bill, which Serena learned about after having taken
a DNA test. Dolan (Elizabeth the First Wife, 2013, etc.) uses her
experience in podcasting with her own sisters (Satellite Sisters
and The Chaos Chronicles) to craft believable women characters
who worry about real problems and use wry humor to push
through dark moments. Faced with irrefutable DNA evi-
dence, the sisters gently remind each other not to blame Ser-
ena, yet they brim with questions: Why did Bill pair up with
Birdie Tucker, Serena’s stiff, country-club fixture of a mother?
Was their parents’ marriage troubled? And why didn’t Serena
come forward sooner? Is she hoping to cash in on her famous
father’s death? Or is she going to put her journalism career
to work and write a tell-all memoir? Struggling to remember
her own childhood from a new perspective, Serena is anxious
about fitting in with the tight trio of redheads. As the sisters
get to know each other, they begin to restructure their family
to include not only each other, but also new partners.
A warmhearted portrait of love embracing true hearts.

HE STARTED IT
Downing, Samantha
Berkley (400 pp.)
$26.00 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-451-49175-6

A road trip to scatter their grand-
father’s ashes—and claim their inheri-
tance—takes a strange turn for three
adult siblings in Downing’s (My Lovely
Wife, 2019) sharp psychological thriller.
It’s been a few years since the Mor-
gan siblings—narrator Beth, Eddie, and Portia—have all been
in the same place at the same time. Now, they’ve been forced
to re-create a nightmarish road trip from 20 years ago to satisfy
their grandfather’s demands and collect their share of an estate
worth millions. Beth isn’t thrilled by the presence of her hus-
band, Felix, and Eddie’s wife, Krista, and all she really wants to
do is put the pedal to the metal and collect her money. Unfor-
nately, they’re required to revisit every kitschy, and creepy,
tourist trap from Alabama to Nevada. They’re not about to take
any chances, especially since someone might be tracking them.
As the road unfurls ahead of the sibs and their spouses, Beth
gradually reveals what really happened on that road trip so long
ago, inspiring readers to become as invested in the past as they
surely will be in the present. When the family notices a strange
black pickup following them, Beth can’t help but wonder if
someone from their past has returned to haunt them. After all,
they all have secrets, some more dangerous than others. Down-
ing subtly ratchets up the tension while perfectly capturing
the complex dynamics between the siblings, including all the
little betrayals and slights and plenty of old wounds left to fes-
ter over the years. The droll, slyly funny Beth is a captivating
(unreliable?) narrator, and the parallels that she draws between
the past and present make for compelling reading, as do their
visits to out-of-the-way tourist traps, all of which take on a sort
of dark meaning. Will everyone make it to the end? Readers will
be turning the pages to find out.

Buckle up and settle in for one diabolically fun road
trip.

CASTLE OF SHADOWS
by Anna Lawton

Castle of Shadows
A Family Saga

“...ambitious, sophisticated, and controlled
storytelling.”

—Kirkus Reviews

“Captivating characters... fascinating reading that
reminds me of Downton Abbey!”

—Willee Lewis, Vice President,
PEN/Faulkner Foundation

“Anna Lawton has written a beautiful book of
place, time, and character.”

—NetGalley Review

“polished language...contemporary take on the
classical family saga, historically accurate and
absolutely enjoyable.”

—Finlay Lewis, Contributing writer, CQ-Hold Call


For information on publishing and film rights, email
alawton@newacademia.com  •  www.newacademia.com
A humorous and heartfelt look at the expectations women have lived with, and triumphed over, across the centuries.

THE QUEEN OF PARIS
Ewen, Pamela Binnings
Blackstone (428 pp.)
$27.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-9825-4684-7

Coco Chanel schemes to save her company in Ewen’s (An Accidental Life, 2013, etc.) novel based on the life of the fashion icon.

1940, France: Coco Chanel gets the devastating news that the man who financed her company and paved the way for her iconic success in the fashion industry has stolen the formula for Chanel No. 5. Betrayed and self-righteous, Coco does everything she can think of to thwart his plan, first by trying to buy out France’s jasmine supply, and then by mounting legal countermeasures. One of her darkest weapons: her willingness to challenge Pierre’s rights based on the fact that he is Jewish, for Paris soon falls under Nazi control. As she desperately fights to save her company, Coco also tries to make a deal with her lover, a Nazi spy, to save her nephew (really her son). Spatz agrees to help, as long as Coco will first travel to Spain, there to spy on her vast network of friends and acquaintances and uncover secret information that could bring Spain into the war as a German ally.

Ewen’s Coco is a proud and image-conscious character, sprung from a painful, lonely childhood to become a self-made triumph. A Machiavellian madame, she is quite willing to live comfortably in the Hotel Ritz in Paris, surrounded by Nazi officers, as the rest of her country falls to ruin, as the Jews are rounded up and “counted” and then begin disappearing. She’s a hard character to like, but her uncompromising sense of self-worth does inspire grudging admiration at times. Unfortunately, this independent stance indirectly facilitates the horrors of the Holocaust. Perhaps the most uncomfortable effect of Ewen’s story, then, is the way it makes the reader wonder: Would I have understood the true horror of the Nazis’ plans any better than Coco? Would I have taken action, or would I, too, have let the war pass me by?

More morality play than fashion fable; a reminder that fame does not always guarantee goodness or likability.

THE SPINNER DIARIES
Fattore, Gina
Prospect Park Books (216 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-945551-73-4

An anxious Hollywood writer journals about her obsession with 18th-century novelist Frances Burney to help make sense of her life as a self-declared spinster. Written in a series of stream-of-consciousness diary entries, the novel follows an unnamed Hollywood writer in her late 30s who has recently been diagnosed with a benign brain tumor. She is anxiety-ridden over both her prognosis and her new TV-writing job alongside a bevy of 20-something women whom she considers part of a “GirlWorld” to which she has no entry (membership seems to be based mostly on the fact that they have a penchant for wearing $400 stilettos to work and have active social lives). In response, she takes up Journaling for Anxiety™ and focuses on writing a miniseries following the life of Frances Burney, Mother of English Fiction. The novel’s setting in 2006 does little to add to the reading experience and unnecessarily dates the text. Many modern readers will cringe at the heroine’s constant negative comments toward her own plus-size body and her continual insistence that she’s “not like other girls” as well as the repeated references to controversial director Woody Allen and his films. But Fattore’s lightning-fast prose shines when she spotlights the parallels between Burney’s life and that of her heroine—struggles with anxiety, lack of successful romantic relationships, career highs and lows—and in the moments of true self-reflection that break through the heroine’s daily malaise. When she eventually comes to the realization that the biggest difference between her early 20s and late 30s is...
The novelist Aravind Adiga is usually thought of as an Indian writer. His provocative debut, *The White Tiger*—which won the Man Booker Prize in 2008—explored corruption in Bangalore, and his fiction since then has put a spotlight on his home country’s slums and underbellies. But Adiga also spent much of his adolescence in Australia, the setting for his new novel, *Amnesty* (Scribner, Feb. 18). Speaking from his home near Sydney during the January bush fires, he can feel the connection in the air.

“When I was writing the novel, I described a day when there were bush fires and the smell of combustion and smoke in Sydney,” he says. “But what has happened in the last few days has been a thousand times worse. One principal difference [between India and Australia] for me has always been that the moment you arrive in Australia you can feel the clean air. But now, ironically, the air quality is much worse.”

*Amnesty*, Adiga’s first novel set outside India, is concerned with the relationship between South Asia and Australia, two regions that are rapidly transforming one another. The novel’s central figure is a young Sri Lankan named Dhananjaya Rajaratnam, aka Danny, who moved to Sydney to attend a college that proved to be a useless degree mill. Living in hiding on an expired visa, he works multiple cleaning jobs, which puts him in position to witness a murder. But he fears that informing the authorities will make him subject to Australia’s strict deportation laws. “If I tell the Law about [the murderer], I also tell the Law about myself,” Danny calculates.

In Adiga’s hands, Danny is a symbol of the large influx of South Asian immigrants who’ve similarly found themselves in menial service jobs after immigrating to attend sham colleges. (One report found that 65,000 students from Nepal in one year alone attended Australian vocational schools, often indebting themselves to exploitative education brokers.) The “provocation” for the novel, as Adiga puts it, came from a moment when the problem hit home.

“I like to write in pubs, which are often empty during the day,” he says. “And I noticed a few years ago that people began yelling at me. There’d be more than one case where I’d be sitting with my laptop—I’m in my mid 40s, I hardly look like somebody who’d be working there—and an Australian woman would come in and yell, ‘Why didn’t you help me with my bag? Why didn’t you open the door for me?’ I realized that everyone working in restaurants and pubs was now South Asian. They could look like me. This was not true 10 or 15 years ago.”

Research on how South Asian immigrants have been affected by this shift could be as simple as standing still in public, Adiga says. “All you have to do is go into a train station, someone will come up to you and say, ‘I’ve overstayed my visa, do you know anyone that can help me?’
That’s a common thing. You have to try to explain to them that it’s not a question of who you know. It’s just the law.”

_{Amnesty_} funnels Adiga’s concerns about race, immigration, and economic inequality into a thriller-ish plot: As the story unfolds over the course of a day, Danny is under increasing pressure to decide how much he’s willing to risk his status in his adopted country. Adiga says he was careful not to frame Danny exclusively as a victim of racism or hard-line immigration policy so much as representative of a complex set of systems that render immigrant identities ambiguous.

“Breaking the law is something Danny feels guilt about, but he can also see the law as being quite harsh and inhuman,” he says. “I hoped to represent his feelings with some complexity. It’s a difficult situation, and I hope it’s something the reader has to think about.”

But while _Amnesty_ is not meant to be an explicitly prescriptive book about immigration and education policy, Adiga says the degree-mill environment “should not be allowed to flourish.” And if writers think that they’re immune to the effects of the dysfunction, he suggests they need look no further than the nearest literary festival.

“Australia probably has more literary and arts festivals than any other country, and if you’re a writer visiting Sydney you can attend a seminar about what injustices have been done in Africa or Asia,” he says. “But you have probably been driven there in a car by a young man who was being paid less than minimum wage.”

Mark Athitakis is the author of _The New Midwest_ and a regular contributor to _Kirkus_. _Amnesty_ received a starred review in the Dec. 1, 2019, issue.
A prodigal son returns to a spectral Colombia in a novel by a writer praised by Gabriel García Márquez.

“My father’s [death] obeys a natural law in Colombia—the law of the jungle.” So says Larry, returning to Medellín after a dozen years away, his father having been kidnapped and killed in the endless cartel wars. His father, Libardo, was a man accustomed to luxury, for, as Franco’s (Paradise Travel, 2006, etc.) novel unfolds, with the time and point of view constantly shifting, we learn of his powerful place within the crime syndicate ruled by Pablo Escobar. His boss gunned down, anguish eats at Libardo as he realizes that he’s now a target himself. He disappears, leaving his wife, “the former Miss Medellín 1973,” to drink, shop, and slowly disintegrate. In a scenario reminiscent of Bret Easton Ellis’ Less Than Zero, Larry and his friends drink, smoke pot, snort coke, and look for something to do, trading barbs that the translator renders in perfect young Americanese, “dudes” and “bullshit” and all. Those friends bear names like La Murciélaga (Batwoman, that is), Carlos Chiquito (Teeny Tiny Charles), and Pedro the Dictator. Collectively they slide, free fall, into addiction and the betrayals large and small that, Franco suggests, are inevitable in a society consumed by violence: “I’d often pass by the site of a recent explosion and shudder at the wreckage, the dried blood,” Larry recalls of Escobar’s car-bomb campaign. “Anything might be a piece of leg, an arm; a pile of something would look like a pile of guts, and there was always a lone shoe somewhere, loose sneakers, flip-flops, boots amid the rubble.” A dark moment comes when it slowly dawns on Larry that his mother and his best friend are up to no good, and vengeance follows with a flicker of magical realism courtesy of an appearance by Libardo’s ghost. For the most part the story is grimly realistic, however, even as it ends with a welcome suggestion of redemption.

A cheerless but supremely well-crafted story that proves Franco to be among the best Latin American writers at work today.

DETERMINATION
by Keith Buff

Determinations is a very motivational true story about a man who, in an infinitesimal tick of time, had his life changed forever.

“A man recounts his struggles to overcome the debilitating effects of a severe brain bleed.”

“An inspiring story of mettle and optimism in the face of overwhelming challenges.”

—Kirkus Reviews

For agent representation and information on publishing rights, email keithbuff73@gmail.com

EMPIRE CITY
Gallagher, Matt
Atria (368 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-5011-7779-8

A trio of government-engineered superheroes navigate a war-torn, divided nation: the United States of America.

Gallagher debuted with a savagely funny memoir (Kaboom, 2010, etc.) and followed it up with a novel, Youngblood (2016). Here, he pivots to an alternate version of America that’s just recognizable but radically different due to a few twists in history. In this present, the U.S. won the Vietnam War, but chaos still reigns in the streets of the country 30 years later, wracked by seemingly unending wars overseas and terrorist violence at home on the part of extremist groups who oppose the administration’s authoritarian approach to most issues, especially domestic policies. The aforementioned superbeings, created with space rocks called cythrax, are Peter Swenson, able to turn invisible; Grady Flowers, whose super-strength belies his vigilant nature; and Jean-Jacques Saint-Preux, a man granted Flash-like speed but unable to run back to his beloved war. They’re impatiently waiting for orders in Empire City, an expanded version of New York. Our everyday characters are Sebastian Rios, an unremarkable bureaucrat infamous for being kidnapped in the Middle East, and his childhood friend Mia Tucker, who participated in the special forces raid that freed him. As you might expect, there are dubious characters too, including fugitive freedom fighter Jonah.
Tough, street-wise NYPD detective Neil Jericho, burnt out after years working violent homicide and drug cases in East Harlem, transfers to the police department of peaceful, posh East Hampton. But Jericho quickly finds that beneath its serene surface, the East End of Long Island is rife with crime, much like the big city.

“A fast-paced mystery with plenty of action and colorful characters....”
—Kirkus Reviews on Death Hampton

“An entertaining mystery with an engaging hero and deftly handled plot twists.”
—Kirkus Reviews on Amazing Detective

For information on film/tv rights, email WMarksNYC@gmail.com
Gray, who is using his guerrilla faction, the Mayday Front, to terrorize Empire City, and Maj. Gen. Jackie “Jackpot” Collins, a fiercely pro-war presidential candidate who may not have the country’s best interests at heart. Gallagher’s prose is more elaborate than in his previous work, and because he doesn’t spoon-feed readers the plot, they may find themselves pushing pins in a conspiracy board, Watchmen-style, to follow along. That said, there’s a lot to take in here, including acute explorations of America’s current political and ideological divisions, the heavy responsibility superheroes would be forced to shoulder in real life, and a keen extrapolation of a country launched down a radically altered historical continuum.

An admirable diversion into alternative history and humanity’s inherent nature that plays to the author’s strengths.

THE SILENT TREATMENT
Greaves, Abbi
Morrow/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-0-06-293384-3

In this debut novel, a man looks back at his relationship with his wife and tries to figure out where it went wrong in hopes that there’s still time to make things right.

When Frank’s wife, Maggie, collapses in their home, she ends up in a medically induced coma with an unclear prognosis. The nurse on duty tells Frank to talk to her—it’s good for patients to hear their loved ones’ voices. The only problem? Frank hasn’t spoken to Maggie in six months. Although Maggie has pleaded with him to speak to her, Frank has been unable to say a single word. And now, as his time might be running out, Frank attempts to tell Maggie what happened—starting with recounting the story of their entire 40-year relationship. Frank recalls the good times (their charming meet-cute at a bar, their early dates, their travels) as well as the hard times (years of loss and infertility). And then the arrival of their daughter, Eleanor, which changed everything. The story is as much about Frank’s and Maggie’s difficult individual relationships with Eleanor as she grows up and begins to pull away from them as it is about their relationship with each other. Although the story is largely told from Frank’s point of view as he talks directly to Maggie, the reader also sees Maggie’s journal entries, meant for Frank to read. Greaves writes their distinct voices expressively and assuredly, making both characters come alive. Their struggle to help their daughter as she flounders is both realistic and moving, and it’s almost impossible not to like Frank and Maggie as they do everything they can to save her.

A sometimes-hopeful, often heartbreaking look at the difficult and beautiful moments of parenting and marriage.

THE LOST ORPHAN
Halls, Stacey
Harlequin MIRA (288 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Apr. 7, 2020
978-0-7783-0932-1

In 1740s London, a mother attempting to retrieve her child must first unravel a mystery—and so must readers.

Halls’ (The Familiars, 2019) two adult protagonists, whose stories alternate in long sections, are Bess Bright, a working-class London shrimp vendor, and Alexandra Callard, the wealthy widow of whalebone merchant Daniel. Like many impoverished Londoners, Bess cannot afford to raise her child, Clara, whom she delivers as a newborn to the Foundling Hospital. Six years later, after painstakingly accumulating the fee for Clara’s release, Bess is told that Clara was reclaimed the day after her admission—by Bess herself. Unpicking this conundrum will be the book’s major focus,
to its detriment. As Bess continues her quest at the hospital, with the help of its sympathetic physician, Dr. Mead, she encounters Mrs. Callard and her child, Charlotte, on what will prove to be one of their rare outings. On a hunch that has everything to do with the brief assignation—with Daniel Callard—that impregnated her, Bess assumes that Charlotte is Clara. Cut to Alexandra, who is raising Charlotte as her own. Though she’s a first-person narrator, Alexandra withholds information on several key issues, particularly how she came by Charlotte and exactly how much she knows of Charlotte’s parentage. Why is Alexandra housebound by choice? And obsessed with locks and maps? When Bess, calling herself Eliza Smith, wangles a position as Charlotte’s nursemaid, it is unclear why Dr. Mead, Alexandra’s only friend besides her sister, Ambrosia, recommends “Eliza” for the job when he knows her real name. The puzzle-box plot distracts readers from the far more compelling enigmas that have made “lost orphans” of all three main characters. A notable strength of the novel is the depiction of the entrenched social injustice that affords slum-dwellers like Bess so few options. Various mid-18th-century subsistence occupations are vividly evoked, including Bess’ workdays doling out boiled shrimp from her hat and “linkboys,” who guide people through London’s unlit streets at night.

Character motivation is the main puzzle here.

**THE ASTONISHING LIFE OF AUGUST MARCH**
Jackson, Aaron
Harper/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$27.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-0-06-293938-8

An orphaned child searches for love in New York City in this debut novel by a writer and comedian.

In the early 1930s, an actress gives birth to a son between acts of *These Dreams We Cherish* in the Scarsenguard Theater and promptly abandons him after the show. The infant is discovered by the laundress, Eugenia Butler, who hides him backstage and...
becomes something of a surrogate mother, though she only cares for him while she’s at work and gives him champagne as his first food. “That the boy survived his infancy was perhaps the greatest miracle in his miraculous life,” we’re told. Indeed. After almost a year, Miss Butler names the boy August March, and the child remains unknown to all the theater’s inhabitants except one actor, Sir Reginald Percyfoot. In 1945, August is left to survive on his own after Miss Butler dies. Percyfoot refuses to take him in, and the Scarsenguard is demolished to make way for a hotel; he becomes a street thief to survive. He is finally located by Percyfoot, who tells him he’s inherited Miss Butler’s five-story brownstone (which raises the question of why she was willing share her home after her death but not in life), but then Percyfoot promptly sends the never-schooled August off to boarding school. Though August offers rich soliloquies, having grown up seeing all manner of plays, he has difficulty adapting to the expectations of formal schooling, though he thrives when offered a chance to direct the school’s plays. August still lacks purpose or family, however, and after graduation, he returns to running cons with the help of a girl he’s fallen in love with, who is only dimly capable of returning his affections. If you can suspend your disbelief long enough to buy the book’s setup, the characters’ lack of interiority and weak or absent motives make it difficult to engage with the story; which seems to exist in a slightly alternate world but one strangely without charm. One of three things often keep a reader interested in a book: its world, characters, or ideas. Though Jackson’s prose is nimble and clever, his novel can’t quite decide what it’s interested in, so neither can we.

A lightly told but incomplete story.

**IN OUR MIDST**

*Jensen, Nancy*

Dzanc (360 pp.)

$26.95 | Apr. 28, 2020

978-1-950539-16-1

A blameless family of first-generation German immigrants, running a restaurant in small-town Indiana, learns harsh lessons in nationalism after World War II categorizes them as alien enemies.

Good people suffer terrible injustices when war reasserts tribal loyalties. That’s the message of *The Sisters*, 2011, etc.) black-and-white depiction of the treatment of German Americans during the Second World War, a story similar to but less well known than the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during that conflict. The Aust family, with roots in Koblenz, finds itself suddenly the subject of rough FBI attention after Pearl Harbor forces the U.S. into war. First Nina Aust is arrested and interrogated; then, when she is freed, she discovers her husband, Otto, and sons, Kurt and Gerhard, have been incarcerated too. Meanwhile the family business has been stripped and vandalized, both by the authorities and the previously friendly, now antagonistic townspeople. Otto and Kurt find themselves imprisoned behind the wire fences of a miserable camp in North Dakota that also houses a contingent of Japanese detainees; Gerhard is sent to a soddien, health-threatening camp in Tennessee. Improvement of a kind comes when Nina agrees to voluntary imprisonment in a “family camp,” which at least reunites the four Austs in a scourching, barren corner of Texas called Crystal City. The pitiless conditions of this new prison, threats of deportation, and violent intimidation from Nazi factions render life even more testing. The Austs struggle to remain optimistic about a new start once hostilities are over, unaware of another avalanche of catastrophe just ahead. Jensen’s plain tale does justice to the brutal treatment suffered by Germans and other immigrants from hostile countries, but the novel delivers less a vibrant narrative, more a social and political horror story acted out by simple, stiff characters.

A sad, and sadly still relevant, history lesson in fictional form.

**BREASTS AND EGGS**

*Kawakami, Mieko*

Trans. by Bett, Sam & Boyd, David

Europa Editions (448 pp.)

$27.00 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-60945-587-3

Newly translated fiction by one of Japan’s most celebrated contemporary authors.

Kawakami is almost certainly new to most Anglophone readers. Her novel *Ms. Ice Sandwich*—published in Japan in 2013 and released in English in 2017—earned some critical acclaim, and Haruki Murakami’s praise for her work has generated interest in this writer as well. Murakami is not alone in mentioning Kawakami’s voice—her choice to incorporate Osaka’s distinctive dialect is an unusual one—and critics have lauded the author for tackling subjects that are seldom explored in Japanese literature. But Kawakami’s idiosyncratic use of language is lost on Anglophone readers, and her frank talk about class and sexism and reproductive choice is noteworthy primarily within the context of Japanese literary culture. An audience outside of Japan probably doesn’t know Kawakami from her career as a pop singer, nor will they have experienced her writing as a blogger—this novel began as blog posts written more than a decade ago. So, what will readers encounter in this newly published translation? A novel about women figuring out how they want to be women. The central figure here is Natsu, the narrator. She begins her story as her sister, Makiko, and her 12-year-old niece, Midoriko, are arriving in Tokyo from Osaka. Tokyo is the city where Natsu came as a young woman to build a new life as a writer. Osaka is the place she left, and it’s where her sister still works as a hostess—a woman whose job is keeping men company while they buy alcohol, food, and karaoke. Makiko’s goal during her brief stay in Tokyo is to choose a clinic for breast enhancement; this surgery has become her obsession. Her daughter, Midoriko, has stopped speaking to her mother—she communicates by
During World War II, a scrappy Australian teenage runaway turns pampered bride, then Resistance agent and ruthless soldier in the French countryside.

writing notes—but Midoriko’s journal entries reveal a girl who is afraid of becoming a woman. In the second half of the novel, Natsu contemplates becoming a mother while dealing with the options open to a single woman in Japan and also listening to her colleagues talk about their experiences as mothers and wives. Kawakami’s style is sometimes funny, occasionally absurd, and mostly flat—at least in translation and in novel form.

It’s hard to know who the audience for this translation is supposed to be.

LIBERATION
Kealey, Imogen
Grand Central Publishing (384 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-5387-3319-6

During World War II, a scrappy Australian teenage runaway turns pampered bride, then Resistance agent and ruthless soldier in the French countryside.

‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I can’t be like those other wives. The thought of hurting you is awful but so is the thought of letting those bastards win....’ Nancy twisted in her seat and hitched up her skirt so she could sit astride him. ‘Henry Fiocca, I fucking love you.’

In the less successful of two novels this year inspired by the amply decorated, famously high-spirited World War II heroine Nancy Wake (the other is Ariel Lawhon’s Code Name Hélène), the character emerges as a feisty foremother of Lisbeth Salander. While Wake’s liberal use of profanity is a historical fact, documented in her own autobiography and elsewhere, here it is deployed with anachronistic abandon. “Vagina, vagina, vagina,” shouts Nancy in her interview for a position with the British Strategic Operations Executive. “It’s a scien-fucking-tific term!”

The facts of Wake’s war participation, working with the Resistance troops in the Auvergne, are dramatized in high-stakes scenes of battle, ambush, and betrayal. As in life, Nancy kills one man with her bare hands and others with a gun; she completes an epic bike ride that saves the day. But some aspects of this character’s behavior—her treatment of a gay radio operator comrade in arms (at first close friends, she later accuses him of “sticking [his] cock in every hole [he] can find”); her participation in a fireside blood ritual with a Resistance leader; other unpleasant interactions with the soldiers of the Maquis—seem to strike the wrong note. The first collaboration by American screenwriter Darby Kealey and British historical fiction author Imogen Robertson under the pseudonym Imogen Kealy, this novel is already being adapted into a feature film for Anne Hathaway.

We look forward to the movie.

THE BOOK OF LONGINGS
Kidd, Sue Monk
Viking (432 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-525-42976-0

In Kidd’s (The Invention of Wings, 2014, etc.) feminist take on the New Testament, Jesus has a wife whose fondest longing is to write.

Ana is the daughter of Matthias, head scribe to Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee. She demonstrates an exceptional aptitude for writing, and Matthias, for a time, indulges her with reed pens, papyri, and other 1 C.E. office supplies. Her mother disapproves, but her aunt, Yaltha, mentors Ana in the ways of the enlightened women of Alexandria, from whence Yaltha, suspected of murdering her brutal husband, was exiled years before. Yaltha was also forced to give up her daughter, Chaya, for adoption. As Ana reaches puberty, parental tolerance of her nonconformity wanes, outweighed by the imperative to marry her off. Her adopted brother, Judas—yes, that Judas—is soon disowned for his nonconformity—plotting against Antipas.

On the very day Ana, age 14, meets her prospective betrothed, the repellent Nathanial, in the town market, she also encounters Jesus, a young tradesman, to whom she’s instantly drawn. Their connection deepens after she encounters Jesus in the cave where she is concealing her writings about oppressed women. When Nathaniel dies after his betrothal to Ana but before their marriage, Ana is shunned for insufficiently mourning him—and after refusing to become Antipas’ concubine, she is about to be stoned until Jesus defuses the situation with that famous admonition. She marries Jesus and moves into his widowed mother’s humble compound in Nazareth, accompanied by Yaltha. There, poverty, not sexism, prohibits her from continuing her writing—office supplies are expensive. Kidd skirts the issue of miracles, portraying Jesus as a fully human and, for the period, accepting husband—after a stillbirth, he condones Ana’s practice of herbal birth control. A structural problem is posed when Jesus’ active ministry begins—what will Ana’s role be? Problem avoided when, notified by Judas that Antipas is seeking her arrest, she and Yaltha journey to Alexandria in search of Chaya. In addition to depriving her of the opportunity to write the first and only contemporaneous gospel, removing Ana from the main action destroys the novel’s momentum.

A daring concept not so daringly developed.
THE MOMENT OF TENDERNESS
L’Engle, Madeleine
Grand Central Publishing (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-5387-1782-0

From the author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, 18 gemlike stories ranging from the small heartbreaks of childhood to the discovery of life on a new planet

In these stories, some previously published and others appearing for the first time in this collection, L’Engle explores family dynamics, loneliness, and the pains of growing up. In “Summer Camp,” children show a stunning capacity for cruelty, as when one writes an imploring letter to a lost friend only to witness that friend mocking the letter in front of their bunkmates; in “Madame, Or...” a brother finds his sister at a finishing school with a sordid underbelly and is unable to convince her to leave. L’Engle employs rhythm and repetition to great effect in multiple stories—the same gray cat seems to appear in “Gilberte Must Play Bach” and “Madame, Or...”—and sometimes even in the language of a single sentence: “The piano stood in the lamplight, lamplight shining through burnt shades, red candles in the silver candlesticks...red wax drippings on the base of the candlesticks.” Occasionally, emotional undertones flow over, as in the protagonist’s somewhat saccharine goodbye to her Southern home in “White in the Moon the Long Road Lies.” Overall, though, the stories seem to peer at strong emotions from the corner of the eye, and humor dances in and out of the tales. “A Foreign Agent” sees a mother and daughter in battle over the daughter’s glasses, which have come to represent the bridge between childhood and adulthood when the mother’s literary agent begins to pursue the daughter. On another planet, a higher life form makes a joke via code: The visitors will be “quartered—housed, that is, of course, not drawn and quartered.” While there is levity, many of these stories end with characters undecided, straddling a nostalgic past and an unsettled future. Although written largely throughout the 1940s and ’50s, L’Engle’s lucid explorations of relationships make her writing equally accessible today.

A luminous collection that mines the mundane as cannily as the fantastic and extraterrestrial.

STILL LIFE WITH MEREDITH
Lewinson, Ann
Outpost19 (102 pp.)
$10.00 paper | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-944853-69-3

An isolated woman writes her novel and awaits her roommate’s return.

Lewinson’s debut novella follows an unnamed narrator—a former art handler at a contemporary art museum—who spends her days in a storefront-turned-apartment with blacked-out windows. “I have not left this room for longer than I care to reveal to you,” she says. “I have found that isolation breeds productivity and I’m reluctant to mess with that.” As she waits for her roommate, Meredith, an up-and-coming artist, she does a few things: writes this novel, reads nonfiction, sits in a corner picking at the carpet, and obsesses over many things, including sex, Meredith, genital mutilation, Dutch still life paintings, and Marie Bonaparte’s quest for sexual fulfillment. Lewinson’s ability to observe is masterful and made only stronger by the novel’s static quality. About revisiting her old college books, she says now, “I can only see the highlighted text, the rest recedes into unimportance, and I am beholden to my youthful judgements.” Propelled by plotlessness, the novella becomes a bricolage of facts, fiction, history, literature, and art. The narrator returns endlessly to certain ideas and facts until she bends, changes, and rewrites them into something else entirely. Throughout the novel, she reimagines what happened to Marie Bonaparte’s clitoris—which was surgically moved three times—and how she met Meredith—at a museum, a summer camp, a class about
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New episode every Tuesday
Dutch realist painters—until the truth becomes almost entirely obscured, though Lewinson consistently proves the “truth” is less interesting than the way she explores concepts like gender, sexuality, and art. Endlessly inquisitive and wider in scope than length, the novella proves a worthy addition to the canon of messy, strange, and keen women.

Genre-bending, hard to categorize, and teeming with life.

Three women—two white and one biracial—reckon with a Michigan hometown each thought she had escaped.

As this debut novel opens on fictional River Bend, “perched just above the state line in the soft crook of the St. Gerard River,” its citizens register the sounds of particular truck and car engines, signaling the comings and goings of the individual townsfolk: “Women, especially those of limited means, must learn to read the signs.” This shrewd line sets up a tale preoccupied with rural American limits and rupture, all marbled with prosaic details, such as meatloaf stretched with too much oatmeal. Mercurial Beth DeWitt has returned from North Carolina with two teenage children, stymied by job loss and divorce. Linda Williams, whom Beth once babysat, retreats from her own cratered marriage in Houston. And Linda’s mother, Paula, who bailed out of River Bend years ago when her kids were small, arrives to secure the divorce from her husband that her Wyoming lover wants for them. Still, the main strip of this tale runs through Beth, who’s biracial, damaged by a childhood of macroaggressions and the surly neighborhood babysitter’s malevolent son. Beth’s trauma sits astride this book, tucked into short italicized chapters which puncture the present-day story. That story, in turn, brims as Beth’s elderly father impregnates Linda, Beth resumes furtive sex with the town’s alcoholic married bad boy, who reeks of “cigarettes and Aqua Velva,” and Paula dithers with her still-besotted ex. No reader would expect these scenarios to end well, but McFarland knows her way through the murk. Angry women mud-fight in a public pigsty, and the Williams clan navigates a surprisingly recuperative farmhouse Christmas, scrolled out in one long tracking shot. Some of the writing is expository and belabored, but the flood hinted at in the title arrives and delivers. So, in the end, does the story.

A matriarchal tale asks who can thrive in small-town America.

Two devoted sisters become estranged after an incident at a Vietnam protest march in 1968.

Raised by activist parents in Detroit, Rosa and Esther are committed to the anti-war cause. Rosa—fierce, headstrong, and unforgiving—has always exerted a strong pull on her quiet, more pliant younger sister. At the march, in a tear-gas haze,
the sisters attack a row of baton-wielding mounted cops, with tragic, unforeseeable consequences. Rosa eventually goes to jail. Esther, the mother of a 5-month-old child, accepts a plea bargain and testifies at her sister’s trials. The novel follows the two women for several decades, charting the fallout from their painful rift and the different paths they choose. Author Meeropol (Kinship of Clover, 2017, etc.) is married to the younger son of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, executed in 1953 for passing atomic secrets to the Soviets. Ethel’s brother, David Greenglass, a fellow spy, delivered strong testimony against the couple in court—suggesting a whiff of similarity between the Rosenberg saga and this novel. But Greenglass later admitted to lying on the stand; Esther, while denounced by her sister, is basically telling the truth. In any case, the book seems more concerned with the toll of political activism on families than with the aftereffects of true treachery. Though the end of the novel is never in serious doubt, it takes a while to get there. There are unlikely plot turns (Rosa’s second pregnancy) and a number of awkward moments (the daughters of the two sisters meet for the first time, not quite by accident). Still, the author writes knowingly about left-wing politics from the vantage point of an insider, and she also writes poignant domestic scenes.

A sprawling novel, uneven and overlong yet moving at times.

A compelling and breathless page-turner.

**STRIKE ME DOWN**

*Mindie, Mindy*

Emily Bestler/Atria (352 pp.)

$27.00 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-9821-3323-8

A forensic accountant gets in over her head in Mejia’s (Leave No Trace, 2018, etc.) latest psychological thriller.

Nora Trier is very good at her job. She always gets her man (or woman) and never lets personal ties get in her way. It’s why she took down a powerful CEO who was inflating profits. He was also one of her father’s oldest friends. The case ended tragically and imploded her relationship with his family. However, it’s that fierce independence and nose for justice that got her a job at the Minneapolis firm Parrish Forensics soon after the trial. Now, 15 years and 65 convictions later, Nora and her partners at Parrish have been retained by fitness giant Strike, Inc., owned by champion kickboxer Logan Russo and her husband, Gregg Abbott. In less than a week, they’ll be hosting Strike Down, a massive kickboxing tournament where fighters will be competing for $20 million in prize money, and Logan will choose a new face for the company. The prize money is missing, though, and Gregg tells Nora he thinks Logan is sabotaging the company. Nora and her team must find and recover the money before the tournament ends. It complicates things that Nora herself is a Strike devotee and idolizes the magnetic Logan Russo, who inspires a cultish following. Nora also knows Gregg from a one-night stand several months earlier where full names weren’t exchanged. Nevertheless, Nora starts digging into Strike’s financials as well as Logan and Gregg’s messy and complicated partnership and marriage. It soon becomes terrifyingly clear that this case isn’t just a matter of money—it’s life or death. Mejia’s narrative crackles with obsession, greed, lust, and plenty of ambition, and it’s loaded with more twists and turns than a spy novel. She obviously did her research into the visceral world of competitive kickboxing, and there’s plenty of territory left to mine in the surprisingly interesting (at least the way Mejia writes it) world of forensic accounting. Readers will hope to see more of the unconventional Nora Trier.

A compelling and breathless page-turner.
KEPT ANIMALS
Milliken, Kate
Scribner (368 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-5011-8858-9

A toddler’s death and a vast wildfire bracket a coming-of-age story set at a horse ranch in Topanga Canyon in the summer of 1993.

Rory Ramos is 15 the year her alcoholic stepfather, Gus, is responsible for the car accident that kills Charlie Price. Charlie is the 19-month-old son of a movie star and his wife, the only sibling of their beautiful, troubled teenage daughter, Vivian. Rory has enjoyed spying on this family from her bedroom window, which perches above their spread in the canyon, but the night of the accident she was busy getting bitched out by her shrewish barmaid mother. Rory and Gus are both employed at Leaning Rock Ranch, locus of much of the action and a slew of other characters, including wealthy teenage twins June and Wade Fisk. June is out as a lesbian, and her attentions to Rory will help the latter realize she’s in love with Vivian. While Vivian is dating the racist, classist pig Wade, she is also happy to toy with Rory as well as her former AP English teacher. In addition to being an accomplished horsewoman, Rory is a promising photographer—“I can’t teach this” says her photo teacher in admiration—and in fact she will grow up to become a war correspondent, as we learn in a second narrative line set in 2015, narrated by her daughter. If this sounds complicated, it is, and this is not the half of it. Milliken writes well about horses, photography, Southern California, taxidermy, lifestyles of the rich and famous, and more—if only she had chosen a subset of these topics.

This gifted author has packed enough material for at least two books into her debut.
**BARKER HOUSE**

Moloney, David

Bloomsbury (272 pp.)

$26.00 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-63557-416-6

A collection of linked stories that explore an often overlooked class within our criminal justice system: corrections officers.

New Hampshire’s Barker County Correctional Facility, colloquially known as the Barker House, is a squalid, private, for-profit jail staffed by men and women trying to juggle work in the jail—where the general consensus is “this place will change you”—with their angry children, dying parents, second jobs, and DUIs. Most would rather have been police officers but, lacking connections, education, or military experience, settled instead for life in corrections. Some, like Brenner, the only female officer on her shift, are perplexed by “abrasive” officers who consider their jobs a sentence, “every task a trial, every inmate an enemy.” Others, like Kelley, a pacifistic young officer who objects to a beating he witnesses in the House, ultimately do change: Kelley eerily manages to dehumanize inmates while maintaining his nonviolent nature, referring to them only by their inmate numbers. In his daring, important, though at times uneven debut, Moloney, himself a former corrections officer, demonstrates a keen sense for detail and an intimate knowledge of his subject. In one moment he shows us the creativity of the small-scale sadist—Mankins, on the restricted unit, opens the rec yard door on frigid winter mornings when his inmates are trying to enjoy their showers—yet in the next shows us Big Mike, who moonlights as a bouncer at a strip club and whose father is dying of cancer, allowing his female inmates to “wear eye makeup they'd made from colored pencil shavings” on visiting days even though makeup is against the rules. The power of Moloney’s crisp observations, however, is partially diminished by some very careless sentences (“In the way of Tully's happiness seemed to be his marriage but he would never say”) and his often repetitive story structure. Read the end of the first chapter—in which Mankins, our quiet sadist, towels a cripple, freezing inmate while still not shutting the door—and you’re like Wowzers, that’s complicated, nicely done; but when the same formula is applied to a half-dozen more endings, one begins—in between those brilliant details—to disbelieve the construct.

Generally beautiful, sometimes unconvincing—very much a debut.

**DEATH IN HER HANDS**

Moshfegh, Ottessa

Penguin Press (272 pp.)

$27.00 | Apr. 21, 2020

978-1-9848-7935-6

A note suggesting a woman has been killed in the woods captures the imagination of an elderly woman, with alarming intensity.

Vesta, the extremely unreliable narrator of Moshfegh’s fourth novel (*My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 2018, etc.), is a 72-year-old widow who’s recently purchased a new home, a cabin on a former Girl Scout camp. Walking her dog through the nearby woods, she sees a note lying on the ground which says that a woman named Magda has been killed “and here is her dead body,” but there’s no body there or any sign of violence. Call the police? Too easy: Instead, Vesta allows herself to be consumed with imagining what Magda might have been like and the circumstances surrounding her death in her hands...

Eerie and affecting satire of the detective novel.
her murder. Whatever the opposite of Occam's razor is, Vesta's detective work is it: After some web searching on how mystery writers do their work, she surmises that Magda was a Belarussian teen sent to the United States to work at a fast-food restaurant, staying in the basement of a woman whose son, Blake, committed the murder. Moshfegh on occasion plays up the comedy of Vesta's upside-down thinking: “A good detective presumes more than she interrogates.” But Vesta slowly reveals herself as what we might now call a Moshfegh-ian lead: a woman driven to isolation and feeling disassociated from herself, looking for ways to cover up for a brokenness she’s loath to confront. Over the course of the novel, Vesta’s projections about Magda’s identity become increasingly potent and heartbreaking symbols of wounds from the narrator’s childhood and marriage. The judgmental voice of her late husband, Walter, keeps rattling in her head, and she defiantly insists that “I didn’t want Walter in my mindspace anymore. I wanted to know things on my own.” You simultaneously worry about Vesta and root for her, and Moshfegh’s handling of her story is at once troubling and moving.

An eerie and affecting satire of the detective novel.

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THE BEAUTY OF YOUR FACE
Mustafah, Sahar
Norton (312 pp.)
$26.95 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-324-00338-0

As a shooter makes his way through a Muslim girls’ school, a woman thinks back on her life.

Afaf is 10 when her older sister disappears. Her parents, Palestinian immigrants, are devastated, her mother especially. They and Afaf and her younger brother, Majeed, struggle to maintain a life, and while Afaf’s father turns increasingly to alcohol, Afaf herself, as she becomes a teenager, turns to boys. It takes a car crash to spring them out of their self-destruction. As they turn toward faith, Afaf and her father find comfort and community in the Islamic Center of Greater Chicago, but their problems at home seem to multiply. Mustafah’s (Code of the West, 2017) novel is frequently moving, especially in her depictions of Afaf’s inner state.
Smart, savvy, atmospheric work from a promising new talent.

A TENDER THING

The sections of the book that describe Afaf’s early life are especially vivid. But these passages alternate with shorter chapters set in the present day, when an older Afaf now serves as principal of a Muslim school for girls. Over the course of a morning, a shooter makes his way through the school, rifle in hand. In these chapters, Mustafah switches from Afaf’s point of view to the shooter’s, making every effort to understand his interior state and the life that has led him to his actions. But unlike Afaf and her father, the shooter feels like a stock character, and his chapters, though suspenseful, become unwelcome interruptions to the novel’s main action: the slow unraveling of a single family. That’s where this book’s heart seems to be.

At times, the novel feels almost like two separate stories jammed together.

A TENDER THING

Neuberger, Emily

Putnam (320 pp.)

$26.00 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-0-593-08487-8

A stage-struck Wisconsin farm girl discovers that musical theater is no refuge from real-world problems. When Eleanor O’Hanlon hears that her favorite Broadway composer, Don Mannheim, is having an open-call audition to replace the star in his current hit, she cashes in the war bonds her parents have been saving for her wedding day to pay for a train ticket to New York. “I’m not some girl who wants to be on Broadway for the fame or glamour,” she tells Mannheim when someone else gets the part. “I understand this. I understand you….This is my life.” Intrigued, he hires her instead for the lead in his musical work in progress, A Tender Thing. An interracial love story is daring stuff for Broadway in 1958, and Eleanor is thrilled by the chance to work with her idol. Debut author Neuberger, who studied musical theater and writing at NYU, clearly knows the world she’s depicting; she brings to life with nice historical detail the rehearsal milieu, complete with a martinet director, unabashedly gay chorus boys, and a production taking shape with daily rewrites and new songs. Eleanor, who knows everything about musical theater and not much about real life, may be the only person in the company who doesn’t get why Don takes a special interest in her creatively and personally. When Mannheim discovers that musical theater is no refuge from real life, may be the only person in the company who doesn’t get why Don takes a special interest in her creatively and personally. When Mannheim

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A set of 19 Rust Belt stories that reject the label “flyover country” with arresting strangeness.

Neville (Fabrication, 2009, etc.) seduces a reader with language, but there’s nothing romantic about her words. The book is haunted and haunting, not only by a group of roaming dolls, but by the consequences of American empire. “Grotto,” the opening story, makes for a mysterious and disturbing kickoff: Narrated by “the mother of a girl who is now a doll,” the story introduces a chorus of dolls that sing by removing their heads. “As you know, the heads are empty. And so the singing comes from the emptiness at the base of the head, like wind blowing over the neck of a bottle. I can’t say where the breath comes from, but it always comes.” The following stories illuminate the area’s history, geography, and economy; providing context for the dolls and the people struggling to survive. With the mill shut down and farms displaced, the locals can sometimes earn a bit of money by dressing up in “head scarves and choir robes” to play captured civilians at the army base’s fake Middle Eastern villages for training exercises.

These circumstances are deranged, perhaps even more than “a plague of dolls” infiltrating a community already beset by poverty, drugs, and environmental degradation. Neville has a lack of cynicism while confronting these crises that makes the stories searing. The narrator of “The Plume” says matter-of-factly, “Why am I telling you this? Out of love, I suppose, for this little strip of human habitation. Out of anger. Out of the wish to confess.” The second half of the collection has some terrific writing but is less impressive than the first. Once the dolls disappear, the stories read like simple premises rather than complete and complex narratives, and the conceit of the book loses its vigor.

A potent combination of style and substance that loses some steam halfway through.

THE OTHER FAMILY
Nyhan, Loretta
Lake Union Publishing (288 pp.)
$14.95 paper  |  Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-5420-0643-9

A middle-aged woman who was adopted as a baby searches for her birth family as she simultaneously struggles to care for her own chronically ill daughter.

Ten-year-old Kylie Anderson suffers from food allergies, joint pain, headaches, skin irritations, and other symptoms of a mysterious chronic illness. Her mother, Ally, is at her wits’ end attempting to adequately respond to her daughter’s ailments. Ally and her husband, Matt, have also recently separated, torn apart by the emotional and financial strain of caring for a sick child. When a new doctor tells Ally that Kylie’s disease might be genetic, Ally accepts that Kylie’s condition necessitates a genealogy search even though she never wanted to know about her own past. With the minimal effort of completing an at-home DNA test, Ally quickly locates a biological family member who lives less than an hour away. Unfortunately, Ally’s adoptive mother, Sophie, can’t stand the idea of reconnecting with the family that gave Ally away. As Ally attempts to piece together a medical history for Kylie without destroying her special relationship with Sophie, she also struggles to understand her feelings for her now-estranged husband. The couple dances around each other, worried for their daughter and nostalgic for what they’ve lost with each other. Circumstances grow increasingly complicated, and Ally must determine how to best move forward as a daughter, a mother, and a wife. Through Ally’s complex journey toward self-determination, this engaging, plot-driven tale examines what it really means to be part of a family. With the book told entirely from Ally’s perspective, the self-deprecating, girlfriend-y tone will draw readers right into Ally’s inner circle as she wrestles with questions about parenting, friendship, love, and loss. Replete with details about conventional and alternative medicine as well as quaintly humorous small-town moments of school board elections and run-ins with neighbors, the novel is engaging throughout. Moments of self-doubt and embarrassment abound, but they are tempered by messages of hope and palpable love that hit just the right note.

A captivating and uplifting tale about the essence of self-reliance and the unsung benefits of modern families.

THE BOATMAN AND OTHER STORIES
O’Callaghan, Billy
Harper/HarperCollins (240 pp.)
$25.99 |  Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-06-285659-3

The latest from Irishman O’Callaghan (My Coney Island Baby, 2019, etc.) is a collection of 12 mostly quiet but often deeply affecting stories.

What these stories have in common is that they’re understated, patiently told, and deeply attentive to the perils and poignancies of daily life. Still, there’s plenty of variety here. Some stories (especially “The Border Fox,” about a mission into Northern Ireland that goes awry, and “Beginish,” about a young couple in love who decide to row out to an abandoned island to live rough and free for a month) feature pulse-quenching events. Some have exotic settings in place (“Segovia”) or time (at least one takes place, in the main, 90 years ago). But the collection’s best pieces stay close to home and cleave close to the bone. At least two occupy a borderland between fiction and a kind of imagined memoir. Among these is the remarkable “A Death in the Family,” in which, circa 1980, a grandfather thinks back 50 years to the harrowing last night of
When Nina and her kids move in with Simon, however, cracks appear just as they are needed, health scares aren’t really that bad, and bad guys back down immediately. Told in uncomplicated prose, this is a straightforward story that takes as fact that love is truly in the air.

**Fans of cozy fiction will enjoy this small escape from reality.**

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**THE NEW HUSBAND**

**Palmer, D.J.**

St. Martin’s (384 pp.)

$27.99 | Apr. 14, 2020

978-1-250-10749-7

Nina Garrity’s new boyfriend might not be all he seems.

More than a year ago, Nina’s husband, Glen, disappeared from his fishing boat on a Saturday morning, leaving behind evidence of a torrid affair and a drained bank account but no body. When Simon Fitch, the social studies teacher at her daughter’s middle school, comes into the picture, it seems like something is finally going right. When Nina and her kids move in with Simon, however, cracks in their relationship begin to appear. Nina decides to get a job to help support her family, but Simon is very much against it. Nina finds herself second-guessing a lot of her decisions in the face of his kind but firm resistance. Maggie, Nina’s daughter, absolutely hates Simon and refuses to play nice. Her son, Connor, is fine with the situation, but Maggie is convinced Simon has something out for their family. As time marches on and both Simon and Maggie reach the ends of their ropes, Nina has to decide whom to believe. In a twisty novel that never lets the reader see different sides to Simon, a character who doesn’t quite reveal himself until midway through the novel with a big, unexpected twist. Though it’s sometimes frustrating how easily Nina lets Simon off the hook and Maggie’s voice doesn’t always sound quite right for a middle schooler, the way the novel always answers questions with more questions makes it hard to put down. Clues are cleverly laced throughout, keeping one guessing.

A well-crafted, increasingly tense page-turner.

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**THE SECRETS OF LOVE STORY BRIDGE**

**Patrick, Phaedra**

Park Row Books (368 pp.)

$25.99 | Apr. 28, 2020

978-0-7783-0978-9

Three years after a single dad suffers the loss of his partner, he finds love again.

Mitchell Fisher, former architect and current city maintenance worker, is doing his best as a single dad. He and his 9-year-old daughter, Poppy, live in his onetime work-week crash pad in the city of Upchester, England, now the only home they have. It’s been three years since Poppy’s mom, Anita, died in a car crash, and Mitchell is still struggling with his grief over her death and with the long hours he spent working apart from his little family in an effort to take care of them. Author Patrick (The Library of Lost and Found, 2019, etc.), known for her cozy tales, has crafted another one. The story here kicks off when Mitchell catches the eye of an attractive woman on a bridge just before she locks a padlock onto the railing, a token of love and commitment that’s become a citywide trend. (Mitchell has to remove these padlocks as part of his job.) Then the woman falls into the river below. Despite not being a great swimmer, he jumps in and saves her, but he doesn’t manage to learn the woman’s name. When Mitchell becomes a local hero in the press, though, he finds out that the woman, whose name is Yvette, has been missing for 12 months, and he joins together with Liza, her sister (conveniently his daughter’s new music teacher), to locate her. Readers will need to suspend their disbelief at the tale; the right person always shows up at the right moment, solutions appear just as they are needed, health scares aren’t really that bad, and bad guys back down immediately. Told in uncomplicated prose, this is a straightforward story that takes as fact that love is truly in the air.

**Fans of cozy fiction will enjoy this small escape from reality.**

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**NO-SIGNAL AREA**

**Perišić, Robert**

Trans. by Elias-Bursac, Ellen

Seven Stories (368 pp.)

$22.95 paper | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-60980-970-6

A novel that shows postwar Croatia suspended between socialism and capitalism and between hopelessness and hilarity.

The farcical tone that opens the latest from the highly acclaimed author (Our Man in Iraq, 2013) leads to darker and deeper implications within an expansive novel that suggests insanity might be the best way to adapt to the new normal of a world gone mad and that language has blurred any distinction between truth and lies. Cousins Oleg and Nikola,
of uncertain tribal ethnicity in a territory torn by war, initially seem like a duo out of slapstick Beckett, only instead of waiting for Godot they are waiting for their big payday. A hustler without political loyalties or principles, Oleg has stumbled upon a potential bonanza: a factory in the middle of nowhere, in a town known only as N., “had been spared the worst, because it was so remote that it wasn’t worth fighting over.” The factory used to manufacture a turbine that no one uses anymore except for a country at odds with the United States that is willing to pay big money for it. If only Oleg can reopen the factory with workers who know what they are doing and can resume production, he can cash out. While Oleg arranges financing and puts the deal together, he leaves Nikola in N. as the plant manager, albeit one who knows almost nothing about the plant or management. They locate a former engineer and hobbyist sculptor to help them resume production so that this speculative capitalist scheme has the workers actually running the operation, “holding on to the vestiges of a socialist mind-set.” Ultimately, these are people caught between -isms, between an unworkable past and an unthinkable future. Toward the end, the third-person narration gives way to a series of first-person soliloquies, and confusion ultimately reinforces the sense that individual voices, lives, and fates are being subsumed within the chaos of systems falling apart. The climax finds art markets and revenue streams converging in a way that seems both impossible and inevitable.

A sharp, subversive novel of ideas that seems to reflect an era in which ideas themselves are bankrupt.

**THE PINE ISLANDS**

Poschmann, Marion  
Trans. by Calleja, Jen  
Coach House Books (160 pp.)  
$16.95 paper | Apr. 14, 2020  
978-1-55245-401-5

A German scholar travels through Japan with a suicidal young companion in this cerebral meditation on death and poetry. German novelist Poschmann’s first book to be translated into English.

Gilbert Silvester, a professor and pompous, self-assured scholar of beard fashions in film, wakes from a dream that his wife cheated on him and takes it as a sign that he should flee to Japan. “He didn’t know a great deal about Japan—it wasn’t exactly the land of his dreams,” yet Gilbert feels pulled toward the country’s asceticism and away from his own attachments. Early in his journey, he meets a young man at a train station: He observes that like him, the young man, Yosa, gives “endless effort, but this effort [is] not recognized.” Gilbert sees himself reflected in Yosa even though Gilbert is on a journey to enrich his life, and Yosa—who intended to jump in front of a train—is on a journey to end his. Gilbert becomes enamored with the writings of Matsuo Bashō, innovator of the haiku. Yosa carries a suicide handbook. Together, the men use their texts as guidebooks to wander Japan: Yosa, to find the perfect place to end his life, and Gilbert, to find enlightenment. Mirrors, leaves, and trees are recurring motifs in this beautifully written novel, yet the story wanders in awe and distraction, suggesting that poetry, travel, and companionship are all worth undertaking for the experience of exploration. “Learning to die,” Gilbert muses. “The journey that serves to distance oneself from everything, in order to get closer to something, was nothing more than a contemplation of the space that resulted from the journey itself.” Both men are undertaking a journey of self-fulfillment that involves abandoning everything.

An introspective, meandering novel of transcendence.

**PASSAGE WEST**

Reddi, Rishi  
Ecco/HarperCollins (448 pp.)  
$28.99 | Apr. 21, 2020  
978-0-06-089879-3

A debut novel recounts the struggles and triumphs of immigrants in California’s Imperial Valley a century ago.

Reddi’s novel opens in 1974 with the death of a cantankerous old man named Karak Singh Gill, attended by a longtime friend, the equally cantankerous Ram Singh. But most of the book is set between 1913 and 1924, after Karak and Ram, both natives of Punjab, have arrived in the Imperial Valley. Its rapid agricultural growth is powered by immigrants like the two friends, who first work for Karak’s well-established patron, Jivan Singh, and later become sharecroppers themselves—it’s illegal for immigrants to own land. Ram was sent to the United States by the uncle who raised him, assigned to earn money to send home. He left behind a bride whose pregnancy he doesn’t even hear about until he’s in America, and he longs to return, but the uncle keeps telling him to stay a while longer—stays that add up to years. Karak, a veteran of the British Army, has no desire to go back to India. A man of immense pride, he aims to establish himself in California. Reddi details the obstacles in his way, especially the pervasive bigotry not only against immigrants in general, but between members of each immigrant group: Indians, Mexicans, Japanese, and more. Another barrier that has a huge impact on Ram and Karak: laws that make it nearly impossible for immigrants to bring their wives into the country at the same time that miscegenation laws forbid them to marry women of another race here. The pressures on Ram, Karak, and other immigrants will lead to an explosive act of violence. The sweeping narrative is deeply researched and offers a fascinating look at a historic era from a fresh perspective. Dense with incident and a large cast of characters, the plot bogs down from time to time, and the book’s female characters remain mostly long-suffering and one-dimensional. But the complex relationship between Ram and Karak powers the book and reflects issues still with us.

The lives of two Indian immigrants are scarred by forces still alive a century later.
A raw and sophisticated debut.

TAKE ME APART

Sligar, Sara
MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux
(368 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-374-27261-6

An ex-journalist falls into a churning vortex of dark secrets when she’s hired to archive a famous photographer’s personal effects.

In 2017, after a harrowing incident ruined 30-year-old Kate Aitken’s journalism career, she’s eager to leave New York for sunny California and the idyllic little hamlet of Callinas, where her sweet but nosy Aunt Louise and Uncle Frank will put her up while she archives the tangible remains of controversial photographer Miranda Brand’s life and work, a gig they hooked her up with. Miranda’s husband, Jake, a painter, has recently died, leaving their son, Theo, with a hoarder’s paradise of letters, documents, and possibly even a few of Miranda’s viscerally intimate photos, which would be worth a fortune. Kate’s first meeting with the enigmatic Theo, who’s recently been divorced, is tense, but Theo’s two small children, Jemima and Oscar, dull his sharp edges, and Kate soon becomes so immersed in her work that returning to Louise and Frank’s home every evening is akin to waking from a fever dream. And they’re eager for details. Miranda’s death at 37 was ruled a suicide, but questions remain, and rumors, such as then 11-year-old Theo’s possible culpability, persist. Kate, bound by a nondisclosure agreement, must remain silent but wonders if Miranda might have actually been murdered. When Kate discovers Miranda’s diary, which often reads like dark poetry, she begins to feel an uneasy kinship with the artist, whose life was fractured by domestic violence, mental illness, and the inexorable demands of fame, motherhood, and the creative process. Kate’s obsessive inquiry into Miranda’s death and her growing attraction to Theo soon threaten to unravel the delicate threads of her new life and her increasingly precarious state of mind. Kate and Miranda are vividly rendered, and an entire novel could easily be crafted out of Miranda’s fascinating diary, letters, and other ephemera, snippets of which are sprinkled liberally throughout. Sligar delivers an intriguing mystery while tackling big themes, especially sexism and the societal restraints placed on women’s bodies and minds. The results are spellbinding.

A raw and sophisticated debut.

THE STAR-CROSSED SISTERS OF TUSCANY

Spielman, Lori Nelson
Berkeley (400 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-9848-0316-0

For generations, the second-born daughters of the Fontana family have been cursed with loveless lives. Can Emilia and her cousin Lucy finally break the spell?

Enraged that her beautiful younger sister might have beguiled her boyfriend, Filomena Fontana cast the curse long ago. Since then, family lore has held that every second-born daughter is doomed. Two hundred years later, Emilia and her older sister, Daria, scoffed. That is, until 7-year-old Emilia had to make a family tree for her social studies class and noticed the inescapable truth: There were no marriages among the second daughters. Even her free-spirited cousin Lucy, herself a second daughter, can’t manage to keep a boyfriend past the fourth date. Now pushing 30 and still single, Emilia’s resigned to her fate of working in the family bakery and living in her tiny third-floor apartment in the family home in Bensonhurst, aka Brooklyn’s Little Italy. Her Nonna Rose rules the roost with an iron fist, watching Emilia’s every move and even banning her from communicating with her mysterious Great Aunt Poppy, herself a second daughter and the only relative willing to talk about Emilia’s late mother. But when Poppy sends Emilia and Lucy an invitation to an all-expenses-paid trip to Italy—and promises that she can break the curse—how can Emilia refuse? Nonna might be furious, but the possibility of learning more about her own mother makes her curious. Once in Italy, Emilia and Lucy discover the truth about not only the curse, but also themselves, not to mention Poppy’s own secrets. Spielman (Sweet Forgiveness, 2015, etc.) deftly spins Emilia’s story, layering in the backstory of how Poppy and Rose immigrated to America, with Rose following her husband, Alfonso, but Poppy losing the love of her life. Or did she? Along the way, Spielman twists our fairy-tale expectations about love, curses, and happy endings.

A bright, funny, hopeful tale of untangling family knots.

MISCONDUCT OF THE HEART

Strube, Cordelia
ECW Press (400 pp.)
$18.95 paper | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-77041-494-5

In this novel of one woman’s daily travails, Strube (On the Shores of Darkness, There Is Light, 2016, etc.) offers a Canadian perspective on a range of contemporary issues, from immigration to PTSD to corporate greed to rape.

“Inactive alcoholic” Stevie is kitchen manager at a Toronto chain restaurant where she fights daily to maintain quality...
“Mani Pedi,” a failed boxer begins working at his sister’s nail salon. There may be more melodrama than necessary, but even despite increasing corporate demands that her location cut expenses, Chappy’s is a richly drawn, darkly comic world filled with boiled characters confronting the same ugly problems found below the 48th parallel.\hfill

**How to Pronounce Knife**\hfill

*Thammavongsa, Souvankham*\hfill

Little, Brown (192 pp.)\hfill

$26.00 | Apr. 21, 2020\hfill

978-0-316-42213-0\hfill

Fourteen short stories about being Lao and working class in North America. In poet Thammavongsa’s *(Cluster, 2019)* first collection of fiction, privilege is a concrete force, arbitrary and inexorable. Red, a woman who plucks chickens at a factory, longs for the money to get a nose job to turn hers into “a thin nose that stuck out from her face and pointed upward. Everyone who worked in the front office had that kind of nose.” When a spot in the office opens up, Red’s co-workers get nose jobs, but “none of them got knives.” When a young man asks to read aloud in class, her teacher won’t let her continue until she pronounces the word correctly. “Finally, a yellow-haired girl in the class called out, ‘It’s knife!’ The k is silent,’ and rolled her eyes as if there was nothing easier in the world to know.” These stories, written in a spare, distant register, twist the heart; Thammavongsa captures in a few well-chosen words how it feels for immigrant children to protect their parents. But occasionally the stories lean on stereotype to make their point—that scornful yellow-haired girls, blue-eyed and freckled, has a mother who wears a black fur coat and heels and drives a “big shiny black” Volkswagen.

**The King of Warsaw**\hfill

*Twardoch, Szczepan*\hfill

Trans. by Bye, Sean Gaster\hfill

AmazonCrossing (384 pp.)\hfill

$24.95 | $14.95 paper | Apr. 21, 2020\hfill

978-1-5420-4446-2\hfill

978-1-5420-4444-8 paper\hfill

Set in late-1930s Poland, this haunted epic recounts the violent life of an aging Jewish prizefighter who finds another outlet for his brutish skills as a powerful drug lord’s enforcer. A hero in Warsaw’s Jewish community for demolishing the stereotype of the weak Jew by battering his boxing opponents, 37-year-old heavyweight Jakub Szapiro thinks nothing of murdering Jews as well as gentiles outside the ring. The Hebrew letters for “death” are tattooed on the fingers of his right hand. Though he is a caring husband and father whose loving wife is trying to wear down his resistance to immigrating to Palestine, he cavorts with prostitutes. He pines for the ex-flame of privilege: One narrator can’t bear to tell her father what “thief” means after he hears his co-workers spitting the word at him. In the title story, a little girl asks her father how to pronounce knife. “It’s kahneyff,” he says. But when she’s asked to read aloud in class, her teacher won’t let her continue until she pronounces the word correctly. “Finally, a yellow-haired girl in the class called out, ‘It’s knife!’ The k is silent,’ and rolled her eyes as if there was nothing easier in the world to know.” These stories, written in a spare, distant register, twist the heart; Thammavongsa captures in a few well-chosen words how it feels for immigrant children to protect their parents. But occasionally the stories lean on stereotype to make their point—that scornful yellow-haired girl, blue-eyed and freckled, has a mother who wears a black fur coat and heels and drives a “big shiny black” Volkswagen.

Moving, strange, and occasionally piercing.
An engaging novel that turns some clichés of recent thrillers on their heads.

HAVE YOU SEEN ME?
White, Kate
Harper/HarperCollins (384 pp.)
$16.99 paper  |  Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-06-274747-1

A woman suffers memory loss due to trauma; her search for truth may end up being the most dangerous decision of all. When Ally Linden arrives at work one morning, she’s shocked to find out that she hasn’t actually worked at this office for years. Somehow, she’s suffered a dissociative episode, and while the memories of the past eventually come flooding back, she still cannot remember anything that happened over the previous two days. Alarmed, she seeks out her therapist, her friends, her husband, trying to put the pieces together. There’s been tension in her marriage because her husband is pressuring her to have children, so when Ally finds out they had a fight the night before she “disappeared,” the root of her memory loss seems clear. However, there are still too many loose ends: Why were there bloody tissues in the pocket of her coat? What happened to her cellphone? And could any of this be related to a murder investigation from her childhood? Not sure whom she can trust, Ally hires a private detective who then ends up murdered. One thing’s for certain: Someone will go to any lengths to prevent Ally from recovering her memory. White (Such a Perfect Wife, 2019, etc.) provides the twists and shocks that any reader of domestic thrillers expects and savors, but she also manages to use some of our expectations to create clever dead ends. Ally’s need for self-discovery has an immediacy, of course, but also a larger resonance, as she begins to realize that she hasn’t always made choices that are completely authentic or independent. Perhaps recovering her memory will be the first step in a larger quest to find herself.

A witty, formally thrilling family saga that feels about 100 pages too long.

REPRODUCTION
Williams, Ian
Europa Editions (576 pp.)
$18.00 paper  |  Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-60945-575-0

A generation-spanning debut novel of unintended pregnancies and imperfect chosen families, winner of the 2019 Scotiabank Giller Prize, by a black Canadian writer. In the late 1970s, two people meet in a Toronto hospital, where their dying mothers share the same room. That seems to be as far as their similarities extend: Edgar Gross is a wealthy, early-middle-aged white German man who works for his family’s company, while Felicia Shaw is a 19-year-old black high school student originally from a “small unrecognized island.” Felicia’s mother dies and Edgar’s is eventually discharged, but the two strike up a romance that is by turns affectionately teasing and rancorous. But soon Felicia finds out Edgar is married and then that she’s pregnant; Edgar tries to force her to have an abortion, and Felicia moves out. A decade and a half later, Felicia and her 15-year-old son, Army, live in part of a house shared by their landlord, Oliver, and his two children. In alternating sections, Williams (Personals, 2012, etc.) roves among the perspectives of the people living at 55 Newcourt—Felicia, drawn in yet again by Edgar, who’s facing allegations of sexual harassment at his company; Army, who lusts after Oliver’s 16-year-old daughter, Heather, and concocts various get-rich-quick schemes that rely mostly on his peers’ money; Oliver, who can’t stop thinking about his recent, acrimonious divorce; and Heather, who flirts with Army and a skinny shelf stocker at the local mall. But when Heather is raped and becomes pregnant, the residents of 55 Newcourt band together to take care of her. The novel contains a sly but sharp critique of power, in which women are forced to shoulder the failings, large and small, of white men—“[Edgar] stood in the doorway of the living room, calling for Felicia, whining the last syllable, waiting, as if he had forgotten how to take off his coat”—whose internal monologues are self-absorbed and un-self-consciously racist: “Her people killed each other as punctuation,” Edgar thinks of Felicia. But what pulls the reader along are Williams’ playful, brilliant formal innovations: song lyrics annotated from Heather’s point of view, a bravura section organized in the form of a numbered list that cycles through each character’s stream-of-consciousness and humanizes everyone involved. The last section, by contrast, drags as it attempts to tie together the novel’s themes into a neat yet unsatisfying bow.
In Young’s lyrical and atmospheric debut, two damaged outsiders, estranged from their families and cultures, struggle to discover where they really belong.

Fleeing Seattle after her husband leaves her for her younger sister, Mexican American anthropologist Claudia, distraught and humiliated, heads to the Makah reservation at Neah Bay, “an old whaling village on the northwest tip of the lower 48.” She hopes to bury herself in work, interviewing Maggie, an elderly woman she had befriended the previous summer: “Maggie would give her what she wanted, would tell her things about spirit animals and songs that she wasn’t supposed to reveal to anyone outside her family.” But standing in her way is Maggie’s son, Peter, who has returned home to care for his mother, newly diagnosed with dementia. Initially suspicious of Claudia, he realizes he can use her to tap into Maggie’s failing memories about his father’s murder. Likewise, by helping Peter sort through a trailer’s worth of possessions Maggie has been saving for her son, Claudia can mitigate her guilt that she “was hustling a hoarder.” As the two warily collaborate, their simmering mutual attraction explodes into violent passion, although Claudia fights to reclaim her anthropological distance. When she realizes that Maggie’s hoard is not junk but gifts saved for a potlatch, or ceremonial feast, to be thrown for her son, Claudia can mitigate her guilt that she “was hustling a hoarder.” As the two warily collaborate, their simmering mutual attraction explodes into violent passion, although Claudia fights to reclaim her anthropological distance. When she realizes that Maggie’s hoard is not junk but gifts saved for a potlatch, or ceremonial feast, to be thrown for her son, Claudia can mitigate her guilt that she “was hustling a hoarder.”

Like life, not all the issues raised in this first novel are resolved.

In searching for answers to her husband’s untimely death, a young widow in Beijing finds room to explore her own existential angst.

Jia Jia is packing for an out-of-town holiday when she finds her husband, Cheng Hang, drowned in the bathtub of their Beijing apartment.
Bell’s eighth Pliny mystery effectively folds history into a meticulous whodunit.

HIDING FROM THE PAST

Effie-Fawn, simply had to find, at an early age, her own way of protecting herself.” On the one hand, this style, overfilled with em dashes and run-on sentences, can come at the price of worldbuilding; without much variety in sentence structure, settling in to each story and adjusting to its pace often feels difficult. On the other hand, if the reader puts in the work, this same whirlwind style produces female characters with fascinating internal lives and emotional crescendos that land. Zabuzhko’s characters struggle with domestic issues like navigating sibling rivalry or accepting a child’s sudden need for independence, each problem made thornier by the omnipresence of gender expectations, the terror of the KGB, or the passion of the Orange Revolution. The final story, “No Entry to the Performance Hall After the Third Bell,” offers a particularly intimate look at the way not only a current war, but the history of war, affects personal relationships. How does a mother protect her daughter from pain and trauma? Which secrets must she hold close and which, in her silence, drive a wedge between her and her daughter?

Evocative stories about the way national issues impact even the most personal aspects of life.

MYSTERY

ANTIQUES FIRE SALE

Allan, Barbara
Kensington (240 pp.)
$26.00 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-4967-1143-4

A new sheriff makes her mark with some decidedly unorthodox crime-fighting techniques.

Somehow Vivian Borne, antiques dealer, thespian, amateur detective, and all-around diva, has been elected sheriff of Serenity County on the banks of the Mississippi River. Her Prozac-popping daughter, Brandy Borne, and Brandy’s diabetic Shih Tzu, Sushi, have long been her partners in detective work as well as antiquing (Antiques Ravin’, 2019, etc.). When Brandy and Vivian visit James Sutter, owner of the Wentworth Mansion, which is being slowly restored to its former glory, a short tour reveals many valuable antiques, including a Tiffany lava vase. Oddly, though Jimmy owns the house, the Wentworth family still owns the furniture. When Vivian rushes into the house that night to save Jimmy—and the vase—from a fire, she finds that the Tiffany vase is gone. Brandy’s boyfriend, police chief Tony Cassato, suggests that Vivian stay out of his investigation, but soon she’s holding court in the hospital, insisting that she’s ready for the following night, when tryouts begin for the play she’s directing. Releasing herself from the hospital, she goes directly to the coroner just in time to save the already badly burned body that everyone assumes is Jimmy from cremation so that an autopsy can be performed. Her appearance makes her unpopular with both the coroner and Jimmy’s stepson, Gavin Sutter. Vivian’s hunch pays off when the autopsy indicates that the man was murdered by a blunt instrument. Insurance agent Cliff Reed meets with Sutter and Benjamin Wentworth, heir to the collection, who are shocked to learn that the insurance on the house has lapsed and some of the antiques may be missing. Something odd is going on that may be a motive for murder. Vivian, busy illegally rewriting the play as a musical, is flabbergasted when Sushi digs up a body, readily identifiable as that of Jimmy Sutter, not far from the playhouse garage and the trailer of missing janitor Leon Jones. Is the unidentified body that of Jones? And what could be his involvement with the Wentworth mansion?

The usual mix of humor, detection, and flamboyant personalities adds sparkle to an otherwise mundane mystery.

HIDING FROM THE PAST

Bell Jr., Albert A.
Perseverance Press (224 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-56474-610-8

Pliny the Younger gets a second crack at a case he first tackled a decade ago.

The year is 87 C.E. Gaïus Pliny the Younger (The God’s Help Thoes, 2018, etc.) and Aurora, his lover and slave, accompany the historian Tacitus, their friend, on a journey of several hundred miles to Gaul to visit his ill brother, Lucius. As Bell counterpoints first-person accounts by Gaïus and Aurora in short cuts, freedman Albinus begs that his paramour, Sophronia, be allowed to come too. This proves an unwise decision when the woman brazenly mocks Aurora for “screwing [her] way to the top of the household.” Tragedy strikes early in the journey when barbarians attack the company, killing Albinus. Rescue arrives in the person of Lucius Valerius Catulus, the handsome son of a local landowner who offers the party refuge. The place is odd; Syrus, one of Catulus’ men, attributes the vacancy of a nearby villa to ghouls. It seems best to leave soon, taking an alternate route, a decision with which Tacitus concurs. The chosen route resonates disturbingly: Ten years ago, the teenage Aurora and Gaïus were struck in the Alpine village of Collis, where local mill owner Junius was killed in a fall that authorities ruled accidental. The aftermath has confirmed Gaïus’ suspicions of murder; the prosperous Roscius stepped in almost immediately to take over the mill. The story moves back and forth between the time of the crime and the present day, when Roscius is far from the only suspect, and Gaïus, now an experienced investigator, closes in methodically on the killer.

Bell’s eighth Pliny mystery effectively folds history into a meticulous whodunit.
A new investigative odd couple probes a strange killing at a construction site in London’s Battersea neighborhood. Veteran detective Calil Drake would never have expected to be called to a scene as unlikely as the upscale development Magnolia Quays. But it’s there that a pair of bodies have been found at the bottom of a pit, partially covered with rocks. One of them appears to be that of Marsha Thwaite, a gallery owner whose husband is the developer. Howard Thwaite takes the news stoically, curious mainly about the manner of his wife’s death. Dr. Rayhana Crane is a forensic psychologist assigned to the case. Drake’s reputed volatility and the reserved Crane’s inexperi ence as a forensic investigator make their partnership proceed uneasily. The second victim is identified as Tei Hideo, a middle-aged French widower born in Japan. His daughter, Yuko, confirms that he was an artist. The motive and mechanics of the killing remain unclear. Adultery is one theory; after all, stoning is the punishment for adulterers in some cultures. Drake’s sidekick, Kelly, also uncovers evidence of kickbacks on the construction project involving creepy Mr. Cricket. As pieces of the puzzle come together with the aid of CCTV, witness testimony, and forensic analysis, Bilal rounds out the characters of his two leads with chapters about their histories. Drake’s compulsion to investigate the torching of a mosque in the neighborhood where he grew up brings him unexpectedly closer to an understanding of Crane’s past and her personality. While Drake fills in the backgrounds of the two victims, Crane clarifies the timeline and details of the murder, leading to success for the sleuths and the author of the popular Makana Mysteries series (Dark Water, 2017, etc.).

Bilal’s sure-footed storytelling and nuanced sense of character augur well for this new series.

The new investigative partnership of two former Met detectives is strained by some personally painful cases. The discovery of a severed head aboard the London Underground sets the city abuzz. Calil Drake, a former inspector with the Metropolitan Police and now a private detective, immediately connects the event with the disappearance of Zelda, an informant who’d been helping him build a case against crime boss Goran Malevich. A torso washed up on the beach in Brighton four years ago, and Drake’s instinct tells him that the recently discovered head belongs to that torso and is Zelda’s. As he presses former police colleagues to investigate, guilt and remorse about Zelda thrust him into bitter memories and compel him to probe feverishly on his own. Meanwhile, Drake and his partner, Dr. Rayhana Crane (The Divinities, 2019), clash over whether to investigate the disappearance of young Kuwaiti student Howeida Almanara. The chief sticking point is the obnoxious personality of the potential client, fulsome television celebrity Marco Foulkes. Drake finds him unctuous and suspicious; what’s his relationship to the young Howeida? Crane, who knew Foulkes as a child, can’t disagree but is intrigued by the case and pursues it. Crane also feels compelled to look into some financial irregularities involving Edmund Crane, the elderly father with whom she’s always had a difficult relationship. She’s amazed to learn that this path leads back to Foulkes. While Crane’s probe follows white-collar crime among the upper crust, Drake delves the lower depths and the most cutthroat criminals. Might the two possibly be connected as well?

Bilal’s stylishly written second Crane and Drake mystery offers complex portraits of the detective duo.
The author’s juggling of truth and fiction is almost as dexterous as his hero’s.

FAKE TRUTH
Goldberg, Lee
Thomas & Mercer (298 pp.)
$24.95 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-5420-1469-4

Ian Ludlow, the novelist who’s blessed or cursed with the ability to invent and transplant plot twists from real life to fiction and vice versa, gets a third opportunity to devise a rollicking tale that’s ripped from the headlines and a bunch of James Bond movies.

Always looking for new ways to bring the United States to its knees, Russia’s GRU stumbles over a new wrinkle flooding digital media with fake news about nonexistent events. They provoke or invent incendiary incidents they can count on other news sources to parrot. Double-crossing every party she can find, GRU agent Beth Wheeler arranges to have a well-armed deranged and endangered their lives, so that they can survive to revise its working out is hilariously surprising.

The author’s juggling of truth and fiction is almost as dexterous as his hero’s.
Theo Brownbeck’s daughter, Katherine, with whom he was
Devlin’s valet, Jules Calhoun, goes out and returns with news
Devlin as he reconsiders the evidence that led to the con-
Hayes’ murder is followed by the deaths of several of his ene-
died before their father, and the Comte de Compans, whose
answers goes in myriad directions. The Lindberghs ran a fertil-
and his wife, Hero, is a committed reformer even though
etc.). Shortly after Hero spots a child watching their house,
the other suspects, all
wealthy and well-connected, include Hayes’ cousin Ethan,

Readers new to this series will find it hard to get
engaged in the coincidence-laden story.

A pair of Regency sleuths take on a
miscarriage of justice in the past that
leads to murders in the present.

Sebastian St. Cyr, Viscount Dev-
lin, despises injustice in every form,
and his wife, Hero, is a committed reforer even though
her father, Lord Jarvis, is cousin to the Prince Regent and a
major power behind the throne (Who Slays the Wicked, 2019,
shortly after Hero spots a child watching their house,
Devlin’s valet, Jules Calhoun, goes out and returns with news
that someone he knows has been murdered. Nicholas Hayes,
youngest son of the late Earl of Seaforth, was convicted of
murder, sent to Australia, and thought to have died. But now
he’s returned with Ji, a child he’s brought from China, only
to be stabbed to death with a sickle in Pennington’s Tea Gar-
dens. Why would Hayes risk his life to return to England,
where he would be hanged if caught? The question plagues
Devlin as he reconsiders the evidence that led to the con-
viction of Hayes. He revisits the scenario that was hushed up
back when Hayes was accused of kidnapping the daughter
of a wealthy man and shooting to death a married woman
on whom he’d reportedly set his eye. The other suspects, all
wealthy and well-connected, include Hayes’ cousin Ethan,
who’s succeeded to the title since Hayes’ two older brothers
died before their father, and the Comte de Compans, whose
wife he was convicted of killing. The more he learns of Hayes,
the more Devlin is convinced he was an innocent man who
took the blame for things he never did, including kidnapping
Theo Brownbeck’s daughter, Katherine, with whom he was
actually eloping and whom Brownbeck immediately married
off to Sir Lindsey Forbes, a power in the East India Company.
Hayes’ murder is followed by the deaths of several of his ene-
mies. If Hayes were alive, Devlin would suspect him; since

he’s not, Devlin and Hero risk their lives following clues no
one wants to see uncovered.

A suspenseful tale of hypocrisy, greed, and cunning
finally overcome by social conscience.

LESS THAN A MOMENT
Havill, Steven F.
Poisoned Pen (304 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Mar. 17, 2020
978-1-4926-9909-5

A poor New Mexico border county’s
residents are proud of an unusual tour-
ist attraction and concerned about a
possible new development that could
threaten it, the jobs it provides, and ulti-
mately the county’s peace.

Posadas County (Lies Come Easy, 2018, etc.) is home to
NightZone, a combination of astronomical observatory, high-
end hotel, restaurant, and walking trails that draws tourists
from all over the world, most arriving on a purpose-built nar-
ow-gauge train from the county seat. Taciturn sheriff Bobby
Torrez sends his more socially adept undersheriff, Estelle
Reyes-Guzman, to the county commissioners meeting, where
developer Kyle Thompson, who just bought a large tract of
land next to the observatory, is expected to make a presen-
tation. Instead of coming, Kyle sends word that he wants to
meet with Miles Waddell, who used part of the hefty fortune
he inherited to finance NightZone and worries that a large
development will ruin the near-total darkness the observatory
needs. Eventually Kyle sends along his gun-toting wife, Lydia,
who accepts Miles’ offer of a room at NightZone, has a pleas-
ant chat with Miles and Estelle, reveals nothing of Kyle’s plans,
but later tells Estelle that he doesn’t want to ruin NightZone.
The sheriffs have other fish to fry when a gunman shoots
up the local newspaper office and wounds two workers. The
weapon is a .22 aimed with precision from a stolen vehicle.
Tor-
rez suspects his wild nephew, Quentin, may be involved.
That case pales when Kyle Thompson either falls or is pushed off a
mesa to his death. The way his body lands indicates murder,
with his body lands indicates murder,
and his wife isn’t willing to leave the case to the police. Both
Thompsons were New York State Police officers, so Lydia has
investigative skills, but her pain may lead her into danger. The
experienced sheriffs must unravel both cases in Havill’s 24th
Posadas mystery.

A character-driven procedural that subordinates its
mystery to a strong sense of place and family ties.
Romance, suspense, mystery, and bawdy historical customs add up to a fine read.

A STROKE OF MALICE
Huber, Anna Lee
Berkley Prime Crime (384 pp.)
$17.00 paper  |  Apr. 7, 2020
978-0-451-49138-1

A couple with a reputation for crime-solving becomes involved in an odd murder case in 1832 Scotland.

Kiera Gage, better known as Lady Darby, and her husband, Sebastian Gage (An Artless Demise, 2019, etc.), are among the five dozen guests the Duke and Duchess of Bowmont have invited to Twelfth Night festivities at an immense Gothic castle in the Scottish border country. Kiera’s first marriage—the source of the title she’d rather not use—made her both miserable and notorious for executing anatomical drawings for her cruel husband, but she’s more recently gained a reputation as a portrait artist, and the Duchess is her client. Each guest at the ball is given a costume to wear and a role to play; amusingly, the heavily pregnant Kiera is a nun. Although the Duke claims all his children as his own, several of them were actually sired by other men. When his third son, Lord Edward, offers a ghost tour, the Gages are happy to escape the ballroom until the group stumbles upon a dead body in the dungeons. Ravaged by rats and decomposition, the corpse is difficult to identify, but its gentle manner and beauty suggest it may be Helmswick, the husband of the duke’s daughter Lady Eleanor, who left for Paris a month ago. The ducal couple beg the Gages to investigate while withholding vital information. Lady Eleanor was unhappy with Helmswick, a man of many secrets and mistresses, and she’s commenced an affair with her first love, the Marquess of Marsdale. After the guests who were not at the castle when the murder occurred are permitted to depart, a disconcerting number of suspects remain behind. Kiera knows she’s touched a nerve when someone tries to push her down a flight of stairs. She and Gage must uncover many family secrets before they can unmask a killer.

Romance, suspense, mystery, and bawdy historical customs add up to a fine read.

A BAD DAY FOR SUNSHINE
Jones, Darynda
St. Martin’s (400 pp.)
$27.99  |  Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-250-14944-2

After ending the long-running Grim Reaper series (Summoned to Thirteenth Grave, 2019, etc.), Jones introduces a sexy, funny, tough new heroine in Sunshine Vicram, the police chief of Del Sol, New Mexico.

Sun fled her hometown years before after the horrifying experience of being kidnapped when she was 17—an experience she doesn’t talk about, though it’s never out of her mind.

After becoming a police officer, she worked most recently only half an hour away in Santa Fe before her parents nominated her for chief without telling her. Now that she and her 14-year-old daughter, Auri, have settled into a cottage in her parents’ backyard, she lands a case that brings back all her worst fears and cracks open suppressed memories. Auri’s first day at school is blighted by mean girls and rumors that identify her as a police snitch. The best part of her day is meeting heart-stopping Cruz De los Santos, a talented poet who’s the coolest guy in school. Del Sol has a reputation as a place where weird things happen, but the toughest ordeal for Sun is seeing the man she’s loved forever. Levi Ravinder, owner of Dark River Shine distillery, is the successful member of a dysfunctional, crime-ridden family. At first he responds to her coolly, but the atmosphere between them is combustible. Then Marrianna St. Aubin literally crashes into the police station to report the kidnapping of her daughter, Sybil. For years Sybil told her parents about dreams she’d be taken and killed before her 15th birthday, but they never believed her. A desperate hunt for Sybil and Levi’s nephew, Jimmy, who has autism and is also missing, reveals the long-dead body of Levi’s uncle and the shack Sun suddenly realizes she was kept in after her abduction. Both Sun and Auri must fight to overcome the dangerous secrets that spring up from nowhere.

Compelling characters and a sexy, angst-filled bunch of mysteries add up to a winning series debut.
rides. Unfortunately, her indifference to Violette deprives readers of any reason to engage with the soprano’s death, as Kallb’s series debut devolves into a tepid mating ritual of damsel and duke.

No encore necessary.

THE LOST BOYS OF LONDON
Lawrence, Mary
Kensington (336 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-4967-1533-3

A determined herbalist searches for a missing boy in Tudor London.

When a young boy is found hanging from one of the grotesques on the exterior of St. Mary Magdalen’s church, a local constable calls Bianca Goddard to help. Although Bianca’s a brewer and purveyor of mendicants and physics, she’s proven herself useful in solving past crimes (The Alchemist of Lost Souls, 2019, etc.). This death is particularly poignant: The “danger,” who can’t be more than 10, has a rosary wrapped around his neck and looks, all things considered, surprisingly peaceful. With the help of a bead maker, Bianca’s discovery of the initials YHS on the back of the rosary makes her wonder whether the murderer is connected with the Catholic cult of the Holy Name. She throws herself into the mystery as a distraction from her own loneliness in the grime, filth, and rain of an unlovely London February. She’s recently lost a baby, and her husband, John Grunt, is in the north as an unwilling soldier in Henry’s war on Scotland. Now Bianca has only her cat, the street vendor Meddybemps, and a boy named Fisk for company. She plans to hire Fisk to help her with her plant collecting, but he goes missing, and rumors that he was part of a ring of young street thieves run by a displaced monk who held them against their will add to Bianca’s anxiety. So does rivalry among Catholic and Lutheran worshipers, constables of different wards, and priests of different churches as well as an extortion plot.

Winnie develops a relationship with Sheriff Colton Wise in her last brush with murder (Apple Cider Slaying, 2019). Although he’s willing to listen to her ideas, he warns her off the case, a warning she ignores since Hank is a prime suspect. The best man, Aaron, had the key to the truck, but even after it turns up in the visor, Winnie keeps him on her list of suspects, along with the bride and the bridesmaid, who’s made herself scarce. After Hank’s sister, Gina, begs Winnie for help, they discover a bunch of flirty emails from Sarah Bear Twenty-two, who turns out to be the elusive bridesmaid. When Colton tells Winnie that mud found in her house contains mushrooms, she realizes that it may have been left by Hank, who has an old cabin in the woods, and she enlists her best friend, park ranger Dot, to help her find it. Soon after they find camping gear inside the cabin that Hank probably took from Winnie’s house, someone starts shooting at them, and they must run for their lives. Winnie realizes that she must find out a lot more about the bride and groom before she can possibly understand who murdered Jack and is willing to kill again to keep a secret.

A budding romance and an age-old motive combine in a heartwarming cozy.

PULP FRICTION
Lindsey, Julie Anne
Kensington (356 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-4967-2349-9

A small-town businesswoman’s sleuthing marks her death.

Winona Mae Montgomery saved her Granny Smythe’s apple orchard from ruin by building a thriving cider and event business in Blossom Valley, West Virginia. She’s receiving praise, and a hefty check, for throwing together a fabulous wedding reception for Elsie Sawyer and Jack Warren when the party’s happy mood turns sour. The bride seems angry, the groom tipsy, and Winnie’s heartbreaking ex-boyfriend Hank Donovan’s interested in making out with a bridesmaid. But these minor glitches pale when the groom is found dead under the truck with “Just Married” on the window after having had words with Hank. Winnie developed a relationship with Sheriff Colton Wise in her last brush with murder (Apple Cider Slaying, 2019). Although he’s willing to listen to her ideas, he warns her off the case, a warning she ignores since Hank is a prime suspect. The best man, Aaron, had the key to the truck, but even after it turns up in the visor, Winnie keeps him on her list of suspects, along with the bride and the bridesmaid, who’s made herself scarce. After Hank’s sister, Gina, begs Winnie for help, they discover a bunch of flirty emails from Sarah Bear Twenty-two, who turns out to be the elusive bridesmaid. When Colton tells Winnie that mud found in her house contains mushrooms, she realizes that it may have been left by Hank, who has an old cabin in the woods, and she enlists her best friend, park ranger Dot, to help her find it. Soon after they find camping gear inside the cabin that Hank probably took from Winnie’s house, someone starts shooting at them, and they must run for their lives. Winnie realizes that she must find out a lot more about the bride and groom before she can possibly understand who murdered Jack and is willing to kill again to keep a secret.

A budding romance and an age-old motive combine in a heartwarming cozy.

AND THE KILLER IS . . .
McKevett, G.A.
Kensington (320 pp.)
$26.00 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-4967-2013-9

The very old and the very young occupy the attention of Savannah Reid of the Moonlight Magnolia detective agency (Bitter Brew, 2018, etc.).

Savannah knows that helping her handsome husband, Sgt. Dirk Coulter, isn’t always a walk in the park. But nothing prepares her for the challenge pint-sized Brody Greyson provides when she and Dirk try to arrest his mother outside the drug den they’ve been staking out. After whupping Dirk upside the head, along with every other body part his tiny hands can reach, Brody is so tuckered out that bighearted Savannah takes him home to rest at her place, where she shares space with resident cats Cleo and Diamante and her Granny Reid’s old hound dog, the Colonel. Brody turns out to be so sweet and gentle when he isn’t seeing his mother hauled off to the slammer that Savannah almost hates to leave him behind with Granny when she gets a call from film star Ethan Malloy begging her to find out who killed his old friend Lucinda Faraday. Lucinda was a knockout in her day, but 40 years past her prime, she’s died withered and abandoned in her palatial estate with no one but companion Mary Mahoney to look after her. One room at a time, her massive house filled
So fierce, ambitious, and far-reaching that it makes most other mysteries seem like so many petit fours.

DEAD LAND

Paretzky, Sara
Morrow/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$28.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-06-243592-7

V.I. Warshawski’s search for a homeless woman with a fraught past leads her deep into a series of political conspiracies that stretch over generations and continents.

Bernadine Fouchard, V.I.’s goddaughter, thinks that Lydia Zamir, whose songs about strong women she reveres, was shot dead along with her lover, Hector Palurdo, at a Kansas fundraiser four years ago. She’s only half right. The 17 victims ranch hand Arthur Morton shot in Horsethief Canyon include Palurdo but not Zamir, whom V.I. and Bernie happen to hear banging out haunting tunes on a toy piano under a Chicago railroad viaduct. But they glimpse her only momentarily before the traumatized musician flees and eventually disappears. Soon afterward, Bernie finds herself in trouble when the young man she’s been dating—Leo Prinz, a summer employee of SLICK, the South Lakefront Improvement Council—is murdered and she becomes a person of considerable interest to Sgt. Lenora Pierce Meyer and Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Detective Caleb Ward, both ask Celeste to keep out of it, she’s determined to suss out Erica’s killer. It’s not as if either of them has the skills that a painter like her brings to the investigation…wait, are they detectives? No matter! Celeste is kind of helped in her nosing around and digging up by Ama, a woman from the past whom Celeste returns to the present via her painting and who may have her own mystery to solve. There are recipes, too.

Your Chihuahua is more likely to be confused by the clichéd plotting and writing than by the murder itself.

THE HAUNTED LADY

Rinehart, Mary Roberts
Penzler Publishers (250 pp.)
$25.95 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-61316-159-3

Hilda Adams, less than an official police detective but a whole lot more than a trained nurse, is dispatched to a family manse to protect the matriarch from all manner of things that go bump in the night in this reprint originally published in 1942.

Old Eliza Fairbanks maintains that somebody tried to poison her with arsenic. But it’s hard to know what to make of her claim since she also insists that her bedroom’s been invaded by “three bats, two sparrows, and a rat” in the months since her sugar was doctored. So Inspector Harlan Fuller sends Hilda (Miss Pinkerton, 1932) into the Fairbanks home, partly to keep an eye out for further mischief. Hilda finds plenty of mischief, from the bat Mrs. Fairbanks has caught that very day to the test Dr. Courtney Brooke ran that proves that her sugar was indeed laced with arsenic. Quizzed by
Hilda, Mrs. Fairbanks tells her that she trusts her servants more than her family, and it’s easy to see why. Her daughter, Marian, has bled her architect-ex-husband, Frank, dry by the $10,000 in alimony he pays her each year. Shortly after their divorce seven years ago, Frank married his daughter’s governness, and now Eileen Garrison announces that she’s pregnant. Although Frank and Marian’s daughter, Janice, is selflessly attached to her grandmother, the same can’t be said for Marian’s brother, Carlton, a stockbroker ruined by the Depression, or his wife, Susie. As the family members bicker and the suspicious incidents mount, Rinehart wrings the maximum effect from her trademark flash forwards, here presented in a flat third-person, as when she begins a chapter by leapfrogging three days into the future: “Mrs. Fairbanks was murdered on Saturday night, the fourteenth of June; or rather early on Sunday morning.” The solution to the locked-room murder relies on some state-of-the-art technology that’s dated severely, but nostalgia buffs won’t mind a bit.

**A superior example of the plucky-heroine-in-an-old-dark-house school.**

**THE BODY IN THE GARDEN**
Schellman, Katharine
Crooked Lane (336 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-64385-356-7

A widow in the Napoleonic era takes an unlikely path out of her grief by turning detective.

London, 1815. After the sad passing of her young husband, Freddy, Lady Lily Adler embarks upon a reimagined life, beginning with a new house in Half Moon Street. Her friend Lady Serena Walter offers support in Lily’s shaky resolve to reenter the world by throwing a gala party attended by the crème of London society. The courtly Capt. Jack Hartley, who grew up with Freddy, appoints himself Lily’s protector. She witnesses much bad behavior that evening, including a quarrel between a young man and woman that ends in a slap, and endures an improper advance by the boor Reggie Harper. After Lily hears a shot, she discovers the body of the young man who was slapped, one Augustus Finch. The next day, Lily and Jack try to testify before the Magistrate but are turned away. Boldly, she undertakes her own discreet investigation, cleverly unearthing the identity of the lady who did the slapping. Miss Ofelia Oswald is an heiress from the West Indies with deep albeit unspecified feelings toward Finch. She and Jack both insist on accompanying Lily to Finch’s rooms, where they find a few sketchy clues. As the measured probe proceeds, Lily realizes that the murderer is probably someone she knows and that her life may be in danger, a suspicion borne out when the killer takes a shot at her.

Schellman’s well-researched fiction debut uses nuanced, elegant prose to depict a fully realized world.

**THE STOLEN LETTER**
Shelton, Paige
Minotaur (304 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-250-20387-8

A bookseller is once again drawn into a historical murder mystery.

No sooner has Delaney Nichols returned from her honeymoon (“The Loch Ness Papers, 2019) than she runs into her doppelgänger outside the Cracked Spine bookshop where she works. Mary Stewart may look just like an older Delaney, but she considers herself a reincarnation of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. Intrigued, Delaney accepts Mary’s invitation for her, her new husband, Tom, and Rosie, a longtime bookstore employee, to come to dinner. Meanwhile, a major problem has arisen for the bookstore because the Edinburgh council has informed Edwin, the owner, that it’s failed a building code inspection. Everyone knows that the store’s buildings, which include a warehouse stuffed with valuable treasures, including rare Mary Queen of Scots coins, are safe. There was never any inspection, and Edwin’s more than willing to fix any problems, so no one knows why they were told the bookstore would have to close. Arriving at Mary’s house, which is like a modern castle, Delaney, Tom, and Rosie meet her husband, Henry, who fails to mention that he’s a city councilor—and who’s gobsmacked by the resemblance between Delaney and his wife—and the other dinner guests: Mary’s niece, Dina; her husband, Mikey; and Dr. Eloise Hansen and artist Gretchen Lovell, another couple. As they enjoy Henry’s delicious dinner and Rosie’s reminiscence of her passage on the Titanic in a past life, they can’t see how dramatically their lives will soon be entwined. When Henry is killed by a car bomb the very next day, Delaney, who feels obligated to investigate, wonders what connections there might be between Henry and Mikey—who’s also a city councilor, and the underhanded attempt to close The Cracked Spine. Unable to believe that two such nice men were part of a plan to ruin the bookstore, she starts digging for information, even using Tom’s former girlfriend, a journalist with friends in high places, to save the store and catch the killer.

As usual, the interesting historical tidbits, local color, and charming characters far outweigh the mundane mystery.

**DEAD ON THE VINE**
White, Elle Brooke
Crooked Lane (320 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-64385-296-6

A displaced ad executive inherits a farm whose latest crop includes a corpse.

Charlotte Finn’s windfall couldn’t have come at a better time, or a worse. The farm her Uncle Tobias left her in
Fans will love the second installment of this dark fantasy about very human characters beset by inhuman dangers.

RAVENCALLER

Dalglish, David
Orbit/Little, Brown (624 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Mar. 17, 2020
978-0-316-41669-6

When the world changes, will you change with it?

A boy who takes pleasure in causing pain meets a monster who can teach him to do much more. A Soulkeeper puts his reputation on the line to stop the abuse of soulless humans—while concealing his relationship with an “awakened” formerly soulless woman. A religious woman given unimaginable power over human souls by a monster struggles to determine right from wrong, faith from blasphemy. In a world where mountains walk, prayers can change the physical world, and magical creatures like talking rabbit-soldiers have awoken from a centuries-long slumber, no choice is simple. The Soulkeeper Devin has chosen to befriend creatures like the faery Tesmarie while his spellcasting brother-in-law, Tommy, believes the newly awakened magical creatures have as much right to the land as humans do. In a time when most humans are reacting with fear and anger to their changing world, seeing the world in shades of gray can be dangerous. Meanwhile, Devin’s sister, Adria, finds that her new powers are testing her faith and bringing up questions she’d rather not confront. As new magical threats to the human population arise, all of these characters will be pushed to their limits, and the decisions they make may determine the fate of humanity. Picking up where Soulkeeper (2019) left off, this second book in a planned trilogy raises the stakes for every character, complicating the moral choices they face. The plot rockets along from one magical battle to the next, but Dalglish deftly weaves in rich character development alongside all this action.

Fans will love the second installment of this dark fantasy about very human characters beset by inhuman dangers.

THE CERULEAN QUEEN

Kozloff, Sarah
Tor (512 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-250-16896-2

Cerúlia takes back her throne, but her troubles are just beginning in Kozloff’s (A Broken Queen, 2020, etc.) fourth and final Four Realms novel.

It only takes five chapters for Cerúlia to successfully overthrow Matwyck and take her throne. At first it feels a bit pat for a four-book series to resolve its main plotline so early in its final volume, but it turns out there’s more to successfully ruling a kingdom than putting a crown on your head. Queen Cerúlia has to root out the network of people who supported Matwyck’s coup; she must discern which people genuinely wish to serve her and which are liars waiting to end her reign before it gets going. What’s more, she must address political issues like the growing resentment among the common people toward the aristocracy and deal with thorny issues of international diplomacy. All the while, she has to figure out how to finally be herself when she was forced to spend almost her entire life pretending she was not the rightful queen. Kozloff has great instincts when it comes to pacing, and the novel flies by with a good mix of action sequences and emotional, character-developing beats. Her villains are never one-note, and her heroes are complicated and fallible. Still, it all starts to feel a little paint-by-number. It’s not that there are never any consequences or losses, but eventually it feels a bit too certain that Cerúlia will get it right and things will go her way. Even so, the series ender is just as much fun as the rest of the books.

An enjoyable, worthwhile end to an immersive series.
Although the worldbuilding is solid, the action is nonstop, and Izmoroz, but Sonya Turgenev Portinari—a ranger from a pre-Empire effectively conquered the impoverished nation of Marzanna, the Goddess of Winter and Death—has cate when he falls in love and is betrothed to a woman named ers that imperial soldiers killed her father and abducted her mother and younger brother, Sebastian, she is shocked to realize that her brother—who is a powerful elemental mage—has enlisted in the imperial army and is using his magical ability to further the empire. With only a young apothecary named Jorge accompanying her, Sonya—who is slowly being transformed into a foxlike deity of sorts by Marzanna—sets out to gather allies in her fight against the empire. As Sonya finds support in the unlikeliest of places, Sebastian’s life is complicated when he falls in love and is betrothed to a woman named Galina. But as his love for her intensifies, so does his duty to the empire—and he soon finds himself using his power to kill. Although the worldbuilding is solid, the action is nonstop, and Skovron’s overall character development is exceptional (especially when it comes to the female main characters, who are all brilliantly multidimensional and identifiable), the one major weakness is the portrayal of Sebastian, whose staunch idealism and naiveté through much of the novel are both irritating and improbable, especially considering the fact that empire soldiers murdered his father.

An undeniable page-turner that will have readers salivating for the next volume of this projected trilogy.

Near the end of World War II, two friends and aspiring diabolists (“We’re not witches, Jane”) get in each other’s way as they pursue forbidden magic for different ends—one to stop the Nazis, even if it costs her life, and the other to save herself, even if it puts the world at risk.

Perfectionist Jane Blackwood and people-pleaser Miriam Cantor, the Blackwoods’ ward and a German Jew, are more sisters than friends. When Aunt Edith, an allied diabolist spy, arrives in their sleepy English village to administer The Test, their lives and their relationships are changed forever. Miriam passes and can take the next step to becoming a full-fledged diabolist, but she also learns the diabolist society suspects her parents, still in Germany, of joining the Nazis. Meanwhile, Jane must hide that she failed her Test or risk life as a society servant…or worse. Isolated by their fears and plagued by building resentments, each girl delves into forbidden magic as a last resort. Miriam works to clear her parents, which literally endangers her soul, and uncovers a Nazi diabolist’s plot that could win them the war. Jane, who can no longer make a pact through a set of handcuffs that had jammed before she could unlock them. Thalia had never transformed before; that’s something that can only be done by a Trader, a person born with the innate ability to Trade between human and animal forms, but Thalia is a Solitaire, a human without any real magic. If she were a Trader, she would have shown some sign of it by now, or so she thinks. Convinced that there’s a logical explanation for her situation, Thalia carries on, only coming to terms with her new identity when she’s attacked by a manticoire, a creature that eats the magic of untested Traders. The revelation of her Trader identity is the least of Thalia’s problems, however, as the onstage death of a rival magician has made murder suspects out of Thalia and David Nutall, her business partner and father figure, and she alone can solve the mystery and clear their names. Although the three types of humans—nonmagical Solitaires, form-shifting Trad she does his duty to the empire—and he soon finds himself using his power to kill. Although the worldbuilding is solid, the action is nonstop, and Skovron’s overall character development is exceptional (especially when it comes to the female main characters, who are all brilliantly multidimensional and identifiable), the one major weakness is the portrayal of Sebastian, whose staunch idealism and naiveté through much of the novel are both irritating and improbable, especially considering the fact that empire soldiers murdered his father.

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A richly imagined, futuristic stand-alone with appeal to gamers, SF fans, and armchair futurists alike.

REPO VIRTUAL

White, Corey J.
Tor (352 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-250-21872-8

A near-future hacker in a digitally enhanced city runs afoul of dangerous adversaries when he steals a unique prize. The cyberpunk ethos has been endlessly consumed and reimagined by writers since dystopian domains like *Blade Runner* and writers like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling captured the popular imagination. While this techno-thriller suits that company, *White* (*Static Ruin*, 2018, etc.) has admirably built a self-contained world. Hyun, his cryptic stepsibling, asks him to steal a virus from the office. This companion to Tanzer’s other two Creatures novels (*Creatures of Want and Ruin*, 2018, etc.) dives deeper into the diabolists’ world and their magical sciences. Familiarity with the previous books is unnecessary to enjoy this well-written, fun, and thoughtful tale of evil Nazi plots, body-snatching diabolists’ world and their magical sciences. Familiarity with the previous books is unnecessary to enjoy this well-written, fun, and thoughtful tale of evil Nazi plots, body-snatching behind enemy lines, magical libraries, complicated parental relationships, deep-seated prejudices, and suspicious felines.

An enticing genre mashup. Horror, SF, and fantasy readers alike will find something to love and someone to root for.

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An enticing genre mashup. Horror, SF, and fantasy readers alike will find something to love and someone to root for.

A richly imagined, futuristic stand-alone with appeal to gamers, SF fans, and armchair futurists alike.

ROMANCE

A DUKE TOO FAR

Ashford, Jane
Sourcebooks Casablanca (352 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-4926-6344-7

A hunt for treasure—and treasures of the heart.
Peter Rathbone, the Duke of Compton, isn’t ever expecting visitors—his estate is so impoverished that he keeps a tennis racquet at the dinner table to fend off attacks from bats. Suddenly, however, he becomes the host to two parties: the Earl of Macklin, whom he hasn’t seen in six months, and a group of young women (plus chaperone, naturally) who went to school with his late sister, Delia. Led by Miss Ada Grandison, Sarah and Charlotte and Harriet are all eager to help the duke uncover a secret that Delia told Ada about just before her accidental death. Though the house is in disrepair, they all settle in, with chaperone Aunt Julia taking the opportunity to teach them how to run a household. Ada keeps looking for chances to be alone with the duke, to discuss Delia’s secret, and their private encounters spark a mutual interest. But Peter, for his part, won’t act on his feelings, having nothing to offer her, and Ada grows frustrated. After they all discover that Delia’s secret is a potential treasure trove hidden on the estate, the girls race to solve the puzzle Delia left behind and find the fortune. Peter’s not sure anything will come of it—but the chemistry between Ada and Peter is sweet and compelling, it’s the friendship between Ada and her three girlfriends that really sets the book apart. All of the dialogue, but especially theirs, is fast-paced and charming, adding a welcome richness to the story. The appearance of Lord Macklin might seem odd to readers who are new to the series, but the book can be read on its own, and fans of the series are sure to enjoy the latest entry.

An effervescent Regency romantic mystery brings a decrepit estate to life.
Tess Bailey and her crew agree to a rescue mission which is practically suicidal, but as they prepare, she discovers deep secrets about her past that may give her and her rebel allies more leverage in their battle for freedom from the Galactic Overseer, though at great cost.

Nightchaser Tess Bailey, her ship, *Endeavor*, and her rebel crew—which now includes her lover, Shade Ganavan, until recently a Dark Watch bounty hunter—have been given the task of freeing Reena Ahern, a scientist who could save Demeter Terre, a planet that was poisoned by the Galactic Overseer when it stood up to him, killing 90% of its population. Unfortunately, Reena is imprisoned on Starbase 12, “the most secure place in the known universe.” First, though, Tess and Shade have a meeting with her uncle, Nathaniel Bridgebane, second-in-command to the Overseer, during which Tess realizes her uncle is likely an ally. They also meet his lieutenant, Sanaa Mwende, who joins their crew and helps Tess get a clearer picture of the dangerous game her uncle has played all these years. As the crew prepares for their rescue mission, Tess’ first love reappears; then the crew agrees to a smaller job liberating some food supplies during a Dark Watch personnel switch and wind up rescuing hundreds of people the Overseer captured for their superblood—which, like ‘Tess’, is impervious to disease and heals extremely quickly. The stakes rise as people across the galaxy are about to be tagged and tracked, all in order to find the blood that will be used to create an army of supersoldiers, annihilating any possible rebellion. Help for their mission also leads to more secrets regarding Tess’ past being revealed, setting up more hope and more danger for the next book in the series. The Nightchaser space opera continues with tons of action, romance, pathos, and fascinating worldbuilding.

**Another brilliant odyssey from Bouchet.**

Rhett was on track to attend a prestigious East Coast boarding school on full scholarship when his parents died, and his eldest brother sent him anyway, loath for him to miss the opportunity. The experience was horrible and also made him feel alienated from his family and his hometown, though his best friend, Grady Holt, was always there for him, even in the darkest days. So when Grady’s father is diagnosed with cancer, Rhett agrees to buy the Holt family’s farm so the illness won’t threaten them with financial ruin. Grady’s sister Julianna is currently managing the farm, and they protect her job as part of the agreement. What they don’t do is consult her in any way before the sale happens, making her feel disrespected and angry. Especially since she and Rhett had spent a scorching night together in Dallas only a few weeks earlier, which he had immediately regretted because of Grady: “There was no explaining to Grady, who’d kill him if he ever found out.” But now that Rhett is finally returning to Silverlake, he’ll have to deal with his own family’s long-standing misunderstandings as well as Julianna’s valid hurt and bitterness and a wealth of complications from their Dallas encounter. The Silverlake Ranch series continues with another sweet, sexy Braddock romance, more complicated family issues, and, once again, a lot to love. However, there’s an uncomfortable amount of reactive paternalism and toxic masculinity that gets joked about by the women of Silverlake but is never actually addressed in any meaningful way.

**Very engaging, somewhat disquieting.**

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**STARBREAKER**
*Bouchet, Amanda*
Sourcebooks Casablanca
(448 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-4926-6716-2

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**HOME WITH YOU**
*Kendall, Liza*
Jove/Penguin (368 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Mar. 31, 2020
978-0-593-09802-8

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**CHASING CASSANDRA**
*Kleypas, Lisa*
Avon/HarperCollins (384 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Feb. 18, 2020
978-0-06-237194-2

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A dynamic start to a series with a refreshingly original premise.

THE MAGNOLIA SISTERS

Major, Michelle
Harlequin HQN (336 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Mar. 24, 2020
978-1-488-05664-2

After a horrible affair implodes her life, a young woman travels to North Carolina for an inheritance, meets a sexy firefighter and two half sisters she didn’t know she had, and decides it’s time for a life-changing move.

Avery Keller believed her mother’s claim that she didn’t know who Avery’s father was. In truth, her father knew about her, which makes her feel unwanted and resentful when she finds out about it after he dies, despite the inheritance he leaves her. Traveling to Magnolia, North Carolina, to claim it, she meets her two half sisters, who also have tangled feelings toward their father. Her inheritance consists of some heavily mortgaged buildings in downtown Magnolia, so Avery stays in her sister Carrie’s apartment while the sisters decide how to handle the properties and Carrie cleans out her father’s mansion. The apartment’s landlord, Gray, is the sexy fireman she bickered with at a gas station on her way into town. Every day Avery lingers, she grows closer to Magnolia, her sisters, Gray, and his daughter, softening her determination to leave. She doesn’t have anywhere to go, anyway, since her successful life in San Francisco had been derailed by an affair with a deceitful married man. As her relationship with Gray grows emotionally and physically intimate, it threatens his narcissistic ex-wife just as he hopes to gain sole custody of his daughter. The first full-length novel (A Magnolia Reunion, 2019) in the Magnolia Sisters series introduces the daughters of a renowned artist whose star had faded, highlighting his complicated relationships with them and with his community. Major’s characters and small-town romance worldbuilding are unique, engaging, and emotionally compelling. Avery and Gray’s romance is complex, but the Magnolia backdrop adds dimension and texture to the story.

A dynamic start to a series with a refreshingly original premise.

THE BILLIONAIRE IN BOOTS

London, Julia
Jove/Penguin (368 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Mar. 3, 2020
978-0-451-49239-5

In Book 3 of the Princes of Texas series (The Devil in the Saddle, 2019, etc.), a restless rancher is torn between the family business and bigger dreams. Nick Prince’s dreams of becoming a commercial airline pilot were dashed when he inherited the family’s struggling business, Saddlebush Land and Cattle Company, after his father’s death 18 months ago. Deeply unsatisfied with the cattle rancher life, Nick is grumpy and brooding. His capable office manager, Charlotte Bailey, is a bubbly extrovert who enjoys needling Nick over their differing organization styles and his general moodiness. Sexual tension simmers just below the surface of their banter ever since their steamy encounter at the company Christmas party two years ago. Nick tries to put Charlotte out of his mind so he can focus on fixing up the family finances and leaving for flight school, but neither can resist flirting. Charlotte is funny, loving, and adores their little town of Three Rivers. She likes her job and wants to settle down and start a family, but she knows Nick is not ready: “Why did it have to be so hot and tense between them when he was the one guy who would never be the man she wanted?” Eventually, they give in to their desires and spend more time together, but the central conflict remains. Nick’s dithering and complaining wear thin, but he is surrounded by a lively group of family and friends who offer advice he mostly ignores. An engaging subplot, especially one that foregrounds life on the ranch, might have generated more excitement.

A well-written but not especially engaging entry in London’s contemporary cowboy series.

GIRL GONE VIRAL

Rai, Alisha
Avon/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-06-287813-7

The dangers of fame in the internet era draw a former model and her longtime bodyguard closer together. Katrina King is a retired model–turned–successful angel investor. She has battled debilitating anxiety and panic attacks all her life, thanks in part to her abusive and controlling father, but became terrified of venturing far from her
A well-secured home after she was kidnapped 10 years ago. She has a loyal, honest, and incredibly good-looking bodyguard in Jasvinder Singh, who also helps run her many ventures. Katrina has had a deep crush on Jas for years but is reluctant to risk their friendship by making a move. She’s finally ready to try some exposure therapy at a local cafe when she becomes the subject of a viral social media post. When Katrina is endangered by the ensuing publicity, they retreat to Jas’ family’s farm north of Sacramento. Jas is an Army vet with PTSD from a horrifying event that left him with a busted knee and a sense of deep betrayal. Little does Katrina realize that Jas shares her feelings: “It was her small acts of kindness that had sucked him in, her clever intelligence and sweetness that had kept him hooked.” Forced proximity on the farm finally breaks down her caution and his reserve, and they give in to their desires in sexy, sweet scenes. But Jas, a man of few words not used to acknowledging his pain, must stop hiding from his military past and his family issues in order to earn Katrina’s love. With so much going on, the romance can feel secondary at times, although the couple’s strong history somewhat makes up for Rai’s (The Right Swipe, 2019, etc.) slowest of slow burns.

The leisurely pacing may frustrate some, but this sweet tale of mutual longing finally expressed repays the investment.

**LAKESHIRE PARK**

Walker, Megan

Shadow Mountain (320 pp.)

$15.99 paper | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-62972-734-9

A young woman in desperate straits hopes a house party will find her sister a happy match with their host, but she doesn’t expect to fall in love herself.

After the death of their mother, Clara and Amelia Moore are left in the begrudging and belligerent care of their stepfather, Lord Gray, whose health is failing. The sisters’ future is precarious, since he’s informed Amelia that once he’s died, his family won’t support them. Their hopes rise when Sir Ronald Demsworth—Clara’s would-be suitor from their recent season—invites them to a house party. Amelia keeps their dire situation from her sister, hopeful things will turn out. A match between Clara and Sir Ronald looks promising, but Georgiana Wood, another guest, seems set on Sir Ronald herself, and her brother, Peter, is doing everything he can to help his sister win their host’s regard. In order to keep each other from interfering, Clara and Peter agree to spend more time together, yet as an attraction grows between them, Georgiana’s behavior toward Ronald becomes increasingly assuming, putting Amelia’s friendship with Peter at odds with her support for her sister. When an opportunity arises for Amelia to make a good but loveless match, she must decide between security and love, especially once Georgiana goes too far and risks everyone’s happiness. Austen-esque themes abound in this historical romance of manners and masks, yet Amelia’s first-person narrative undermines her character, since she’s continually justifying her decisions and then changing her mind or her behavior a few pages later, while the absolute lack of communication among the characters is frustrating.

A sweet, somewhat engaging Regency romance hindered by exasperating character choices.
DEMYSTIFYING SHARI'AH
What It Is, How It Works, and Why It’s Not Taking Over Our Country
Ali-Karamali, Sumbul
Beacon (240 pp.)
$22.95 | May 12, 2020
978-0-8070-3800-0

An examination of Shariah, a concept that has been distorted in the U.S. and elsewhere in recent years.

Ali-Karamali, author of The Muslim Next Door, attempts to explain the meaning of Shariah to non-Muslims, emphasizing it as a benign and indeed beneficial trait of Islam. After a section introducing readers to basic fundamentals of Islam—e.g., Who was Muhammad? What is the Quran?—the author begins to unwrap the meaning of Shariah itself. Refreshingly, she shies away from giving a simple definition, instead characterizing Shariah as a broad and in some ways all-encompassing system of Islamic wisdom. In fact, in the introduction, she writes, “in religious terms, shariah is the path you take to quench your spiritual thirst….It’s the path you follow to be a good and righteous person. In a nutshell: shariah is the way of God.” Throughout the book, Ali-Karamali notes that Shariah, in its truest form, was and is entirely flexible and adaptable to varying cultures and conditions. It was built on generations of scholarly analysis and interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith (the words and acts of Muhammad). The author argues that for generations, Shariah promoted a healthy, fruitful civilization marked by concern for those in need, clemency, and the rights of women, among much else. She contends that Western colonization interrupted Muslim cultures, disrupting and perverting Shariah, forcing it to conform to more rigid standards found in European law. As she explains, Muslim-majority countries continue to grapple with how to rediscover the flexible, liberalizing Shariah practices of the past. Ali-Karamali’s explanation of Shariah is a useful counter to the perceptions of many in the West. Throughout, she contends that the misuse of Shariah is limited to a minuscule fraction of Muslims and that without European interference, everything from the Ayatollah Khomeini’s abuses of power to the rise of the Islamic State group could have been avoided.

Ali-Karamali may overstate the case somewhat, but her book is significant in a time of continued misconceptions about Islam.
February is probably my least favorite month. Football season is over, it’s usually dark and cold—thankfully, less so here in Charleston than for my esteemed colleagues in New York—and it contains Valentine’s Day, which, in its modern Hallmark-friendly form, is the most fraudulent holiday on the calendar.

In order to brighten things up a bit, I selected a trio of travel/adventure books to highlight in February. So grab your blanket and a scotch, hit the couch, and dig in.

The World Beneath Their Feet by Scott Ellsworth (Little, Brown; Feb. 18): Rock/mountain climbing is very much in vogue these days—if you haven’t seen Meru or Free Solo, consult Netflix immediately—and Ellsworth offers a pleasing addition to the literature with his tale of 1930s climbers who tackled “the deadliest mountains on Earth.” The author, whose previous book, The Secret Game, chronicled a significant basketball game in the Jim Crow South, takes readers on a unique journey, as we follow climbers from the United States, Britain, and Germany trying to summit such giants as Everest, Kangchenjunga, Minya Konka, and Nanda Devi. Our reviewer writes, “in vivid, novelistic prose, the author describes the significant expeditions and delivers engaging portraits of climbers from many different countries and their invaluable Sherpas….A captivating, rousing adventure story.” It’s a must-read for any climber or armchair adventurer.

Try To Get Lost by Joan Frank (Univ. of New Mexico; Feb. 18): Frank is not as well-known as she should be, but hopefully this collection of travel pieces, the winner of the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize, will introduce her to the wider audience she deserves. More than just a gathering of observations on her surroundings, these are highly contemplative, even philosophical meditations on place and identity. In a starred review, our reviewer writes, “Frank skillfully uses the ordinary aspects of traveling to segue into wide-ranging insights on belonging, longing, and home, with occasional familiar laments.”

Taken together or read individually, each of the essays offers a revelation on nearly every page; the most moving of them, “Cave of the Iron Door,” follows Frank’s bittersweet return to her hometown of Phoenix after many years. Indeed, “for all its attentiveness to beauty and loss, this wise and humorous collection is also a moving record of anticipation and expectation. Each place, taken on its own terms, yields up its own flavors and character, but everyone is bound by one eloquent fact: ‘Time is the vastest real estate we know.’”

The Adventurer’s Son by Roman Dial (Morrow/HarperCollins; Feb. 18): Dial, a renowned Alaskan ecologist and wilderness expert who teaches biology and mathematics at Alaska Pacific University, gets deeply personal in this poignant account of his search for his son, Cody, who disappeared into the Costa Rican jungle in 2014. Our reviewer captures the essence of the book perfectly: “His descriptions of Costa Rica’s jungles echo with mystery, and, despite his grief, Dial’s writing remains measured and cleareyed. When he recounts how a TV crew took a sensational angle for the sake of drama, the author’s dismay is palpable. Two years later, Cody’s remains were found, and it was determined that his death was an accident, which brought his family some sense of closure. In its emotional restraint and careful descriptions of the wild, this is a slow-burning tribute.” Not just an adventure story—though it certainly is an excellent addition to the genre—this is also “a poignant, highly moving memoir of tragic circumstances and a lifelong love of exploring.” —E.L.

Eric Liebtrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
Aly delivers again, this time expanding his lens outside of Germany to offer further revelations about the Holocaust.

EUROPE AGAINST THE JEWS, 1880-1945
Aly, Götz
Trans. by Chase, Jefferson
Metropolitan/Henry Holt (400 pp.)
$32.50 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-250-17017-0

The award-winning German author dips into his vast archive of resources to produce a major work on anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism has been around for centuries. Though occasionally somewhat dormant, usually during times of fiscal strength and political peace, it always returns to rear its ugly head, each time spelling disaster for Jewish populations. Aly—the highly respected historian of the Holocaust who won the 2007 Jewish Book Award for his excellent Hitler’s Beneficiaries—examines the period of 1880 to 1945 to show how, why, and in what forms anti-Semitism increased sufficiently to support the Nazi concept of the Final Solution. The author ranges widely across Europe, examining Russia, Romania, France, and Greece as well as Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and other less-explored locales. “There is no way we can comprehend the pace and extent of the Holocaust,” writes Aly, “if we restrict our focus to the German centers of command.” While Jews were restricted from many jobs, they applied all their strength and determination to areas that were permitted, such as pharmacology, medicine, and journalism. Governmental actions began with bans on Jews serving municipalities and joining trade associations, and they also experienced limited access to education. After World War I, the concept of self-determination morphed into a brand of nationalism and misguided “racial theory” that led to increased animosity and violence. “Insofar as gentiles in the first half of the twentieth century pressed for Jews to be partially or completely stripped of their civil rights or insisted they be shipped off to somewhere outside Europe,” writes the author, “they were motivated by [an] obsessive anxiety: the fear of a supposedly overwhelming power and the real intellectual and economic agility of a small, precisely delineable ‘foreign’ group.” Though the gruesome subject and detail are sometimes tough to swallow, readers should forge ahead, relishing the author’s incredible research and singular scholarship.

Aly delivers again, this time expanding his lens outside of Germany to offer further revelations about the Holocaust.
A writer muses on what lighthouses mean to her. Barrera, a Mexican journalist and editor and co-founder of the Mexico City-based publisher Ediciones Antilope, confesses early on that she’s a collector. “Collecting is a form of escapism,” she writes. After visiting Yaquina Head Lighthouse on the Oregon coast, she wanted “to articulate my feelings about that panorama—the moment and the lighthouse.” There was “something in the lighthouse itself that intrigued me.” Following that trip, she visited a few others and conducted research into their histories and the stories surrounding them: “It was like falling in love; I wanted to know the lighthouse to its very core.” Each story includes a wide array of topics in lighthouse culture, including literature, history, science, art, music, and the daily, brutal lives of the isolated keepers and their families. “From afar, a lighthouse is a ghost, or rather a myth, a symbol,” writes the author. “At close quarters, it is a beautiful building.” Barrera gives close attention to Robert Louis Stevenson’s family: his father, Thomas, instrumental in developing the revolutionary lens that replaced kerosene lamps, and his grandfather, Robert, the first to “construct a lighthouse on a marine rock, far from the coast.” The author is also intrigued that Edgar Allan Poe’s last, unfinished story was about a lighthouse keeper. Barrera chronicles her visit to the Ghoury Lighthouse, built in 1823 after a boat shipwrecked off the Normandy coast, and she comments on the many lighthouses in Edward Hopper’s paintings; he “said that the lighthouse is a solitary individual who stoically confronts the onrush of industrial society.” The author bemoans the fact that GPS and computers may one day make them obsolete. After reading Yukio Mishima’s The Decay of the Angel, about an orphaned boy who works in a signal station, Barrera stopped writing. “There are collections that will always be incomplete, and sometimes it’s better not to continue them.”

These subtle, reflective observations offer delightful insights into the lighthouse mystique.

### ON LIGHTHOUSES

**Barrera, Jazmina**

*Two Lines Press (174 pp.)*

$19.95 | May 12, 2020

978-1-949641-01-1

A writer muses on what lighthouses mean to her. Barrera, a Mexican journalist and editor and co-founder of the Mexico City-based publisher Ediciones Antilope, confesses early on that she’s a collector. “Collecting is a form of escapism,” she writes. After visiting Yaquina Head Lighthouse on the Oregon coast, she wanted “to articulate my feelings about that panorama—the moment and the lighthouse.” There was “something in the lighthouse itself that intrigued me.” Following that trip, she visited a few others and conducted research into their histories and the stories surrounding them: “It was like falling in love; I wanted to know the lighthouse to its very core.” Each story includes a wide array of topics in lighthouse culture, including literature, history, science, art, music, and the daily, brutal lives of the isolated keepers and their families. “From afar, a lighthouse is a ghost, or rather a myth, a symbol,” writes the author. “At close quarters, it is a beautiful building.” Barrera gives close attention to Robert Louis Stevenson’s family: his father, Thomas, instrumental in developing the revolutionary lens that replaced kerosene lamps, and his grandfather, Robert, the first to “construct a lighthouse on a marine rock, far from the coast.” The author is also intrigued that Edgar Allan Poe’s last, unfinished story was about a lighthouse keeper. Barrera chronicles her visit to the Ghoury Lighthouse, built in 1823 after a boat shipwrecked off the Normandy coast, and she comments on the many lighthouses in Edward Hopper’s paintings; he “said that the lighthouse is a solitary individual who stoically confronts the onrush of industrial society.” The author bemoans the fact that GPS and computers may one day make them obsolete. After reading Yukio Mishima’s The Decay of the Angel, about an orphaned boy who works in a signal station, Barrera stopped writing. “There are collections that will always be incomplete, and sometimes it’s better not to continue them.”

These subtle, reflective observations offer delightful insights into the lighthouse mystique.

### 140 DAYS TO HIROSHIMA

**Barrett, David Dean**

*Diversion Books (352 pp.)*

$27.99 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-63576-581-6

A detailed, almost day-by-day account of political debates that preceded Japan’s surrender in World War II.

In his first book, Colorado-based military historian Barrett emphasizes that by 1943, once it became clear that matters were going badly, Japanese leaders never doubted that they could salvage matters by convincing the United States that every Japanese would fight to the death. They believed the U.S. lacked the fortitude for this crushing task and would seek a compromise peace. As the war journal of Imperial Headquarters wrote in July 1944, “the only course left is for Japan’s...people to sacrifice their lives by charging the enemy to make them lose their will to fight.” By that time, American military leaders also suspected that to win, American forces would be forced to kill every single enemy. The result was massive firebombing of cities and use of the atomic bomb. Barrett reminds readers that at first, the atomic bomb played no part in America’s strategy because no one knew if it would work. Planners envisioned a massive invasion of the home islands for November 1945. Everything changed after the bomb’s successful test on July 16. Several important American figures objected to such a terrible weapon, but they did not make a big fuss, and Barrett expresses little sympathy. According to the author, there was never doubt that we would use it. The Aug. 6 bombing of Hiroshima shocked Japan’s leaders, strengthened “peace” advocates, and persuaded the emperor that the war might be lost, but military chiefs exercised their veto, convinced that America would invade and suffer a crushing defeat. The Soviet Union’s declaration of war on Aug. 8 did not tip the balance, but the Nagasaki bomb on Aug. 9 was another matter. Military leaders realized that the invasion they yearned for might not happen and that the U.S. might simply continue to drop atom bombs. As a result, when the emperor announced that he favored surrender, they went along.

A nonrevisionist, reflective, opinionated, intensely researched WWII history. (16-page b/w photo insert)
A BETTER MAN
A (Mostly Serious) Letter to My Son
Black, Michael Ian
Algonquin (304 pp.)
$24.95 | May 5, 2020
978-1-61620-911-7

A multitalented actor and comedian digs deep to write a letter to his son about becoming a man.

Black, who got his start with the cult classic The State, is a performer with many facets. Onstage, he displays a dryly sarcastic sense of humor, and at the same time, he has been able to fully engage his goofy side in projects like Wet Hot American Summer. In his latest work of autobiography, following You're Not Doing It Right, Black drops the act in order to deliver heartfelt lessons for his college-bound son. Opening with the Sandy Hook mass shooting, which occurred blocks from his son's school, the author addresses his fears, hopes, and missteps in raising his children. The shooting, he writes, “felt like a tornado touching down, mindless and cruel. But also predictable. Infuriatingly predictable...In America...mass shootings are as common as sunsets.” Whether examining violence, sex, relationships, or compassion, Black lays out his thoughts and feelings with few defenses up and a comic lightness that doesn't belie the book's rather heavy truths. Though not as analytical as Peggy Ornstein's incisive analyses of the sex lives of young people (although she shows up here), the narrative offers thoughtful ruminations on masculinity in the modern age. It's also refreshing to read a memoir that doesn't preach its messages from an author who honestly admits his imperfections. “The ideas I'm giving to you now are the best I can do now,” Black writes. “I hope you'll tell me where you think I've fallen short. I hope you'll remind me to stay open and available and receptive to new ideas. Maybe the last job of parenting is surrendering the lead and letting our kids guide us forward. We're going to need the help.”

Whether you're a parent or simply thinking about life choices, there's both melancholy and wisdom to be found here.
While optimistic, he is still attuned to patterns of addiction sur-
domestic programs and their simple, mysterious commitments,
1920s musician Leon “Bix” Beiderbecke (1903-1931). Calling him
Las Vegas and the Mandalay Bay mass shooting, and he weighs
Brown’s guilt at learning of a former drug buddy’s son’s plung-
doomed jazz musician.
days (and later triumphant weeks) of withdrawal. Brown’s per-
drop of the city’s ordinary temptations. Another striking piece
utilizes second person to take readers through the excruciating
recovery story. The author details his engagement with
other ethnically charged circumstances. The author is a touch
other Clarkton weren’t as bloodthirsty as popular culture has made

Clavin, who has written books on Dodge City and

Tombstone, \textit{The Earp Brothers, Doc Holliday, and the Vendetta}

The stories of Wyatt Earp and company, the shootout at
the O.K. Corral, and Geronimo and the Apache Wars are all

Rootin’-tootin’ history of the dry-
gulchers, horn-swogglers, and outright
killers who populated the Wild West’s
wildest city in the late 19th century.

The at-home graphic biography, Canadian
cartoonist and illustrator Chantler chronicles the life of legendary
1920s musician Leon “Bix” Beiderbecke (1903-1931). Calling him

A mostly wordless illustrated tribute to a celebrated yet
doomed jazz musician.

In this unconventional graphic biography, Canadian
cartoonist and illustrator Chantler chronicles the life of legendary
1920s musician Leon “Bix” Beiderbecke (1903-1931). Calling him

Tombstone, \textit{The Earp Brothers, Doc Holliday, and the Vendetta}

A vivid interpretation of the life of a remarkable musi-
cian perfect for “anyone who’s ever struggled to express
themselves.”

Tombstone, \textit{The Earp Brothers, Doc Holliday, and the Vendetta}

A dark yet hope-infused look back at
the long-term transformations fueled by
an addict’s recovery.

In his previous memoirs—particularly \textit{The Los Angeles Diaries} and \textit{This River}—Brown focused on
his bleak, destructive days as a substance abuser. While those
experiences remain with him, he has been sober for years.
While optimistic, he is still attuned to patterns of addiction sur-
rounding him, and earlier experience with violence and despera-
tion left him sensing the world’s fragility. The author explores
these themes in terse, punchy pieces that often feel like an
essay collection, but Brown’s passionate perspective provides
a throughline. Much of the material is memorably well crafted,
tight, and searing, including the title piece, which captures
Brown’s guilt at learning of a former drug buddy’s son’s plung-
ing down the same path: “What the older recovering addict has
to offer the younger, active addict is the hope and promise of
change through example and nothing more.” Brown explores
the horrible juxtaposition of his reunion with his grown sons in
Las Vegas and the Mandalay Bay mass shooting, and he weighs
the gambling-addict shooter’s embrace of evil against the back-
drop of the city’s ordinary temptations. Another striking piece
utilizes second person to take readers through the excruciating
days (and later triumphant weeks) of withdrawal. Brown’s per-
sonal history fuels the prose with compassion and near amaze-
ment at his own fortunate survival, and he builds a compelling
universe of characters. The author details his engagement with
12-step programs and their simple, mysterious commitments,
reflects on his experiences reaching out to hardened young pris-
oners in California prisons, and considers the guilt he still feels
for plunging into addiction. “I spend a decade going in and out
of the rooms of A.A.,” he writes, “along with an occasional stint
in rehab, before I’m able to broach that ridiculous idea of God.”

Tough, meditative, realist prose creates a worthy addi-
tion to the crowded field of (post-) addiction memoirs.

The “unlikeliest of jazz heroes,” the author re-creates the musi-
cian’s life through a series of cartoon panels that relate events
from previous biographies, varying in interpretation and reli-
bility. Chantler’s drawings chronicle Beiderbecke’s childhood
in World War-era Iowa, where he was raised by critical, conser-
"vative parents. The story then moves to his boyhood, when his
love of music and harmonic jazz melodies blossomed, particu-
larly after hearing it live from a passing river steamboat. Though
his schooling suffered, he matured as a mostly self-taught musi-
cian, scoring gigs with local bands and garnering regional notori-
ety. Inspired by Louis Armstrong, Bix rose to prominence as an
outstanding jazz pianist and cornetist. However, chronic alco-
hol dependency would lead to his death at age 28. Chantler’s
"treatment of the musician’s life is distinctly creative, capturing
moods through facial expressions and tightly detailed panels.
In the brief introduction, the author readily admits that several
scenes in the book are “apocryphal at best,” but he notes that
the silent nature of its contents and the manner in which Bix’s
life is portrayed reflects the struggle of many hypercreative,
misunderstood artists (himself included) to express themselves
in terms outside of the art they create. His experimental visual-
ization of musical rhythms in scenes depicting Bix’s career high
points is a marvel of imaginative illustrated narration. Chantler
poignantly notes that the book was drawn during a devastating
upheaval in his own personal life and that sketching it served
as a “life raft for my battered sense of self.” This biographical
storybook is a unique keepsake for jazz fans.

A vivid interpretation of the life of a remarkable musi-
cian perfect for “anyone who’s ever struggled to express
themselves.”
to intimidate them, sometimes with the help of a gun barrel to the skull.” Indeed, while some of the Clantons and some of the Earps died violently, most—Wyatt, Bat, Doc Holliday—died of cancer and other ailments, if only a few of old age. Clavin complicates the story by reminding readers that the Earps weren’t really the law in Tombstone and sometimes fell on the other side of the line and that the ordinary citizens of Tombstone and other famed Western venues valued order and peace and weren’t particularly keen on gunfighters and their mischief. Still, updating the old notion that the Earp myth is the American Iliad, the author is at his best when he delineates those fraught spasms of violence. “It is never a good sign for law-abiding citizens,” he writes at one high point, “to see Johnny Ringo rush into town, both him and his horse all in a lather.” Indeed not, even if Ringo wound up killing himself and law-abiding Tombstone faded into obscurity when the silver played out.

Buffs of the Old West will enjoy Clavin’s careful research and vivid writing. (b/w illustrations; first printing 125,000)

A heartwarming story that explores the power of friendship as well as race, sexuality, talent, and identity. (color photo insert)
A hybrid of memoir and biography, Jenn Shapland’s insightful debut book, *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* (Tin House, Feb. 4), is a sensitive recounting of her discovery of novelist Carson McCullers and, in a very real sense, of her own identity as a lesbian and a writer.

Shapland talked to Kirkus by phone from Santa Fe, New Mexico, the place she and her partner, Chelsea Weathers, chose to make their home after a long road trip through New Mexico and into northern Utah from Austin, Texas, where Shapland had been a graduate student in English at the University of Texas. Austin, Shapland says, had become too crowded and urban—not a place in which to grow. Santa Fe, “a small, tucked-away place,” seemed perfect for them.

But the inspiration for *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* began in Austin, where, as part of her graduate program, she worked as an intern at the Harry Ransom Library, which holds a fantastic archive of materials on writers such as Norman Mailer, British poet Edith Sitwell, David Foster Wallace—and McCullers.

One day at the library, a scholar inquired about letters between Swiss writer and photographer Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach and McCullers. Curious, Shapland read them and immediately felt a surge of recognition.

“I had received letters like these,” she writes in the book. “I had written letters like these to the women I’d loved.” These were love letters, she was certain, and, looking back, Shapland tells us that she discovered them “at the exact right moment,” when she was wrestling with her own issues of sexual identity and secrecy. A six-year closeted relationship with a classmate she had fallen in love with during her first year at Middlebury College had just ended, and Shapland felt at sea. It was liberating to discover that “there are other people who [felt] this way.” From that moment, she wanted to find out everything she could about McCullers. “I was never exposed to her work,” Shapland admits, but she began to devour the novels—*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Member of the Wedding*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, to name a few—and everything she could find about McCullers’ life.

“I immediately started tracing her,” she says.

The idea for her book evolved gradually, beginning at the Vermont Studio Center, where she was a resident in 2014. She kept writing short pieces about McCullers but at the time wasn’t sure if they would be the seeds of essays, a biography, or a memoir. In February and March 2016, as the project took shape, she was invited to stay at the Carson McCullers house in Columbus, Georgia, which steeped her in McCullers’ world: the furnishings in the house and also the particular feeling of Columbus. “It reminded me of Lake Forest,” Shapland says, referring to the wealthy, conservative Chicago suburb where she grew up. In that community
and in her family, she says, there was “overwhelming silence” about mental health issues and personal struggles. As a teenager, not knowing that she was queer or what it meant to be queer, she felt like an outsider. McCullers, she imagined, might have felt the same way.

The residence also gave her access to archives at Columbus State University, which holds much material about McCullers. There, she found what is undeniably a treasure trove for a biographer: transcripts of McCullers’ taped therapy sessions with Mary E. Mercer, a psychiatrist with whom McCullers fell in love.

McCullers had intended the transcripts to serve as the basis for an autobiography—a project that never came to fruition—but they did convince Shapland that she was right in thinking that McCullers was a queer woman without the words to define herself. Biographers, critics, and friends’ memoirs, she believes, engaged in “retroactive closeting” by refusing to acknowledge McCullers’ love for many women. “I felt,” Shapland says, “that I was rescuing her from misunderstanding by others who hadn’t gotten it and missed what was right there, a huge element of her personal life.”

As sure as she feels about her interpretation of McCullers, Shapland admits that the whole enterprise of biography makes her uncomfortable. She is surprised by biographers who assert what their subject thought or felt. “How do they know?” she asks. Writing about another person feels transgressive; with McCullers, she feels she “came up to the limits of what you can ever know about another person.” In her new project, a collection of essays, she’s sharing some of what she knows about herself. “I’m more comfortable,” she says, “working on my own story.”

Linda Simon, a frequent reviewer for Kirkus, is the author of Lost Girls: The Invention of the Flapper and other books. My Autobiography of Carson McCullers was reviewed in the Oct. 15, 2019, issue.
An Appalachian memoir from a woman who escaped a cycle of violence, substance abuse, and self-loathing in order to find her voice.

Debut author Conn grew up in a Kentucky holler in the 1980s. As a child, she endured a life marked by poverty and abuse, both of which were common in the region. Her father was an alcoholic drug dealer who often beat her and her mother and brother. In order to survive, she silently endured the pain as her distrust for others grew. Soon, Conn fell into her own cycle of drug abuse as well as physical and sexual abuse from her circle of companions. “By the time I became a young adult,” she writes, “I had grown suspicious of my intuition, my judgment, even my own feelings.” She continues later, “I never felt safe to defend myself or to claim any right to be treated differently.” The author discovered that the only way she could stop hating herself; her life, and everyone around her was to become a different person. Fortunately, she was a good student, and she managed to escape to college and then graduate school. However, her past still haunted her. On the encouragement of a mentor, she decided to share her story. At times, the narrative is fragmented and disconnected, perhaps due to Conn’s struggle to make sense of it all, but the author is to be commended for her courage and determination to change her life circumstances.

“I wrote it and rewrote it over the years to come,” she writes, “each time seeing more clearly that I had become the storyteller, I wrote it and rewrote it over the years to come,” she writes, “I had grown suspicious of my intuition, my judgment, even my own feelings.” She continues later, “I never felt safe to defend myself or to claim any right to be treated differently.” The author discovered that the only way she could stop hating herself; her life, and everyone around her was to become a different person. Fortunately, she was a good student, and she managed to escape to college and then graduate school. However, her past still haunted her. On the encouragement of a mentor, she decided to share her story. At times, the narrative is fragmented and disconnected, perhaps due to Conn’s struggle to make sense of it all, but the author is to be commended for her courage and determination to change her life circumstances.

An inspiration for those attempting to come to terms with abuse.

**THE UNDOCUMENTED AMERICANS**

Cornejo Villavicencio, Karla

One World/Random House (208 pp.)

$26.00 | May 19, 2020

978-0-399-59268-3

The debut book from “one of the first undocumented immigrants to graduate from Harvard.” In addition to delivering memorable portraits of undocumented immigrants residing precariously on Staten Island and in Miami, Cleveland, Flint, and New Haven, Cornejo Villavicencio, now enrolled in the American Studies doctorate program at Yale, shares her own Ecuadorian family story (she came to the U.S. at age 2) and her anger at the exploitation of hardworking immigrants in the U.S. Because the author fully comprehends the perils of undocumented immigrants speaking to journalist, she wisely built trust slowly with her subjects. Her own undocumented status helped the cause, as did her Spanish fluency. Still, she protects those who talked to her by changing their names and other personal information. Consequently, readers must trust implicitly that the author doesn’t invent or embellish. But as she notes, “this book is not a traditional nonfiction book….I took notes by hand during interviews and after the book was finished, I destroyed those notes.” Recounting her travels to the sites where undocumented women, men, and children struggle to live above the poverty line, she reports her findings in compelling, often heart-wrenching vignettes. Cornejo Villavicencio clearly shows how employers often cheat day laborers out of hard-earned wages, and policymakers and law enforcement agents exist primarily to harm rather than assist immigrants who look and speak differently. Often, cruelty arrives not only in economic terms, but also via verbal slurs and even violence. Throughout the narrative, the author explores her own psychological struggles, including her relationships with her parents, who are considered “illegal” in the nation where they have worked hard and tried to become model residents. In some of the most deeply revealing passages, Cornejo Villavicencio chronicles her struggles reconciling her desire to help undocumented children with the knowledge that she does not want “kids of my own.” Ultimately, the author’s candor about herself removes worries about the credibility of her stories.

A welcome addition to the literature on immigration told by an author who understands the issue like few others.
even after her presidential bid failed and she left politics three years ago, the attacks continue. Donald Trump alone has issued more than 200 social media attacks on her. Former Newsday journalist D’Antonio, who wrote The Shadow President: The Truth About Mike Pence (2018), among other biographies and histories, explores every one of the accusations, in detail, with the intent of showing why they are all wrong. He vilifies any writer who vilified her, often spending several paragraphs explaining why this or that writer cannot be trusted, either because they have a history of writing erroneous stories, obviously hate Hillary, or are blatant liars. However, while he builds a convincing case that Republicans have treated Hillary with extraordinary unfairness, hateful-ness, and cruelty, the book suffers from its one-sided viewpoint. D’Antonio makes Hillary sound almost like a fairy godmother who can do no wrong; there is hardly a word of criticism throughout the text. Still, just like the author’s previous books, this one is thoroughly researched, clearly written, and often incisive. Hillary lovers will love it; Hillary haters will hate it.

A DROP OF MIDNIGHT
A Memoir
Diakité, Jason
Trans. by Willson-Broyles, Rachel
AmazonCrossing (336 pp.)
$24.95 | Mar. 1, 2020
978-1-5420-1707-7

A memoir from a Swedish hip-hop artist with a multiracial background.

In his debut, Diakité looks at themes such as race, manhood, family ties, and rootlessness with an unusual stance and fresh, sometimes-striking voice. His writing has an ethereal, questioning quality, in sync with his background as the son of an African American man and a white American woman who moved to Sweden and then divorced. “I was never American, never Swedish, never white but never black either,” he writes. “I was a no-man’s-land in the world. I have a complex system of roots that branches across continents, ethnicities, classes, colors, and eras....Must I have just one origin?” Both parents are portrayed as complex, with mixed feelings about their experiences. As his mother notes, “to experience the same ignorance, the same fear, the same hate, in Sweden, weighed heavy on us.” Diakité captures the cruelty of childhood peers alongside his dawning perceptions regarding race, and he reflects on the cultural awakening that led him to success as a rapper in Sweden. “You might call Reagan the godfather of gangster rap,” he writes. “Under his rule was born the music made of hard drums and urgent voices.” The two primary narrative threads are his travels to the U.S., in an attempt to weigh his personal history against a larger story of racial marginalization, and his tenuous relationship with his father. Accompanied by a filmmaker friend, he visited places including rural South Carolina, Harlem, New Orleans, Baltimore, and tourist-oriented slave plantations (and one acknowledging the black perspective). Everywhere he grimly observes hidden narratives of the long-term mistreatment of black communities, tied to the original sin of slavery: “Real people—my forefathers—were whipped, tortured, herded, and sold like livestock.” Diakité explores family history that reflects much African American experience, including Jim Crow, Harlem in its prime, and the embrace of Afrocentrism in the 1960s. While his storytelling is occasionally heavy-handed or repetitive, the author’s prose is often nimble and observant, sharply considering the burdens surrounding race and masculinity.

A vibrant, thoughtful memoir reflecting contemporary black cultural concerns.
THE EQUIVALENTS
A Story of Art, Female Friendship, and Liberation in the 1960s
Doherty, Maggie
Knopf (352 pp.)
$28.95  |  May 19, 2020
978-1-5247-3305-6

The story of the first scholars to participate in a “messy experiment” at Harvard’s Radcliffe college.

The 1950s and ’60s were tough for educated women, especially those who wanted to be writers or artists. Men dominated academia and literature, and women were expected to stay home and care for their husbands and children. So in 1960, microbiologist Mary Ingraham Bunting, Radcliffe president and mother of four, created the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study, a fellowship program to provide a stipend and office space to help “intellectually displaced women” become scholars and artists while also caring for a family. In her debut, Doherty, who teaches writing at Harvard, tells the story of several of the Institute’s first scholars, women who called themselves the Equivalents because the Institute “required that applicants have either a doctorate or ‘the equivalent’ in creative achievement.” The author focuses on three of them: Anne Sexton, who “came from New England wealth” yet endured demons that precipitated several suicide attempts; fellow poet Maxine Kumin, with whom Sexton forged an enduring friendship even though Kumin came from a less privileged background; and writer Tillie Olsen, “a first-generation, working-class American, an itinerant, and an agitator” who named her first daughter Karla after Karl Marx and was the first among her cohort to note that “the true struggle was the class struggle”—i.e., not every woman “had the time, resources, and education” to immerse themselves in creative endeavors. Other Institute scholars, such as sculptor Marianna Pineda and painter Barbara Swan, are also mentioned. Digressions about women peripherally connected to the scholars may have been an attempt to place the graduates’ post-Institute work in a broader perspective, but it feels as if Doherty didn’t have enough material about these scholars to fill an entire volume. When she sticks to her subject, the book is superb, especially when she recounts Sexton’s personal struggles and offers close analyses of each author’s works.

A welcome spotlight on an overdue “experiment.” (31 illustrations)

JEFFERSON’S MUSLIM FUGITIVES
The Lost Story of Enslaved Africans, Their Arabic Letters, and an American President
Einboden, Jeffrey
Oxford Univ. (352 pp.)
$29.95  |  May 1, 2020
978-0-19-084447-9

A history of two documents written in Arabic by enslaved Muslims that came to the attention of Thomas Jefferson in 1807.

Einboden, who has vast experience recovering and translating Arabic slave writings, sets the story of these brief missives against the intricate history of Muslim interactions with the nascent republic and, especially, Jefferson. The author begins with a brief vignette that receives great elaboration in later chapters: In 1807, two men who spoke no English were captured as suspected runaway slaves in rural Kentucky. They seemed unusual to their captors and were also literate, but only in Arabic, an all-but-unknown language in the early U.S. An eccentric traveler, convinced that these men needed to be freed, carried two pages of their Arabic writings to Washington, D.C., presenting them directly to Jefferson. Jefferson’s attempts to have the writings translated make for an interesting story, but the larger tale is that of America’s early interactions with the Muslim world. Beginning with the plight of an American captive in Africa while Jefferson was an envoy to Paris and moving on to the conflicts with Barbary pirates, Einboden shares this complex diplomatic history with an emphasis on the language barrier that further separated America from the Arabic-speaking world. The author highlights many scholars and leaders who were at the vanguard of breaking this language barrier, including Yale’s Ezra Stiles and the University of Pennsylvania’s Robert Patterson, who “was not only a professor of mathematics and inventor of ciphers, but also an anti-slavery activist.” Further, Einboden weaves in the political scandals of the day—e.g., Aaron Burr’s arrest for treason—and, finally, Jefferson’s progressive views on religious freedom. Worthwhile and even fascinating as a history, the book nevertheless suffers from a repetitive, awkward style, as the author consistently rehashes his points and repeats many ideas and even phrases throughout the book. Though he may be attempting to build suspense, it becomes tiresome by the end.

An intriguing history in need of further editing.
An earnest advocacy piece concerning the immigration crisis at the southern border.

Why do migrants travel north from Central America and Mexico to the U.S.? For many reasons, writes Freeman, a former Fulbright fellow in Mexico. Some have to do with economics, with migrants seeking better opportunities in the richer country instead of the $5.45 daily minimum wage in Mexico or the $0.37 in El Salvador. Many are forced to flee from gangs, drug cartels, and sex traffickers, groups that implicate everyone in a community, not just the foot soldiers. As the author notes, “these gangs run through the currents of everyday life, and efforts to avoid them are impossible.” Freeman is strong on sociological data and statistics. She also delivers meaningful portraits of migrants on the move from the vantage point of a shelter in central Mexico. In that business, no one’s hands are clean: One of the workers in that shelter, for example, is caught up in the human trafficking trade while many U.S. agents are nothing short of sadists, energized by Trumpian rhetoric. “If migration were actually a game,” writes Freeman in an apt passage, “it would be a life and death affair where ‘winning’ meant boarding a moving train without getting maimed, killed or assaulted. And the prize for winning would be to be sent home in handcuffs, only to have to play again and again.” Parts of the narrative are less graceful than all that, and too often the story is about the author and not the migrants. Her criticism of writers who have committed “the sort of immersion journalism that pretends that observing the migration phenomenon doesn’t affect it” is unfortunate given her too-frequent presence in the narrative as more than just narrator. For a clearer, more memorable portrait of “the twisted knot of migration,” readers should...
Gretchen Sorin remembers her first look at a little book that launched a long personal journey, both into African American history and her own past. A colleague shared a find with Sorin, a museum curator. “She asked me if I’d ever heard of the Green Book. She told me she’d found one,” Sorin recalled.

It wasn’t much, really—lists of names, addresses, and phone numbers, more a pamphlet than a book, but a lifeline to 20th-century African Americans—places where they could eat and sleep, rest and refuel, while they navigated a segregated country.

Today, the Green Book (full name: The Negro Motorist Green Book) is famous thanks to the Oscar-winning movie. And Sorin is publishing her own book about African American car travel. Driving While Black: African American Travel and the Road to Civil Rights (Liveright, Feb. 11) is the story of the automobile as a liberating force for African Americans, freeing them from the indignities of public transit and the inconvenience, humiliation, and terror of a Jim Crow society. It’s enlivened by Sorin’s memories of traveling with her own family in the 1950s and ’60s. Her research helped her understand the lengths her parents went to nurture and protect her: “My parents were an incredible success story; I’m not sure I realized that until I started work on this book.”

Driving While Black shows how everyday African Americans dealt with the indignities of segregation, especially while traveling. How did the automobile change things for them?

You had a growing black middle class with disposable income. If you were sitting in the back of an automobile, your parents were able to protect you from all that Jim Crow nonsense, from any taunts and cruel language you might hear. It would protect you from what you would be subjected to on a Jim Crow bus or train.

African Americans endured harrowing experiences on the road, from being denied lodging and medical care to assault and even murder. How did they protect themselves?

African Americans drove very large cars, because you didn’t know if you could stop at a garage or a restaurant that would receive you favorably. Your large Buick was a rolling living room. You carried a cooler for food, extra fan belts, blankets, and pillows in case you had to sleep in the car. You carried a pee can because you couldn’t stop in gas station bathrooms. You had to have a good car so you could stretch out in the back, in case you had to sleep in it.

How did your own parents deal with Jim Crow restrictions?

My mother went to a historically black college in North Carolina; her brother and sister paid for her to go. My father, who was drafted, went to Fort Bragg in North Caro-
In part, your book is a history of civil rights seen through the experiences of everyday people. How did they support the work of better-known civil rights workers?

The movement needed food, and it needed money. They had to be housed, they had to be fed. In Montgomery, the bus boycott depended on the automobile. People commandeered their own cars, then the boycott itself bought a fleet of cars. Women made sandwiches and sold food and put the money into the movement; if that were known, they would lose their jobs. They basically bankrupted the Montgomery bus company.

Your book is the basis for an upcoming Ric Burns documentary. How did that come about?

I was one of Ric’s talking heads in the New York documentary project. I’m a curator, and I think in pictures. I had gathered hundreds and hundreds of pictures. We were on a panel together, so I said, we need to have lunch, I need to show you something. I showed him the pictures on my computer at the table. The waitstaff had gathered behind and were looking at the pictures; they thought the pictures were so compelling. We decided then and there, this was important, we need to do it.

Mary Ann Gwinn is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist in Seattle who writes about books and authors for several publications. Driving While Black was reviewed in the Dec. 15, 2019, issue.

The story of an African American superstar who brought jazz roots to the Great American Songbook.

Music historian, journalist, and producer Friedwald offers an admiring and overwhelmingly thorough biography of Nathaniel Adams Coles (1919–1965), better known as Nat King Cole. Performing as a jazz pianist from the age of 18, Cole assembled a trio that included a guitarist and a bassist who, it turns out, gave the group its name: “I thought of ‘Old King Cole was a merry old soul,’ you know, and that’s what gave me the idea of calling him Nat King Cole.” For the next decade, the King Cole Trio was “the most popular ‘combo’ of its era,” not least because of Cole’s singing. Although Cole attributed his success to luck, Friedwald makes much of the “superlative musical intelligence” that informed his savvy decisions about genre, songs, venues, arrangers, and record companies. In 1943, Cole decided to promote the catchy original song “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” which became “a late swing-era anthem” after it was heard on radio and in the Trio’s first recording with Capitol Records. That song “accelerated the Trio’s ascent into the stratosphere” and catapulted Cole to fame. Choosing that particular song “was no accident,” according to Friedwald, but a move made “with the tactical skill and ingenuity of the scientists at Los Alamos”; it “proved that he was the Robert Oppenheimer of pop music.” Chronicling Cole’s career year by year in dense detail, the author examines live and recorded performances, singles, albums, TV shows, and movies, analyzing music, lyrics, and arrangements. As far as Cole’s personal life, he recounts racist incidents against Cole (he once was assaulted onstage in Alabama), his family (residents protested when he bought a house in a wealthy white neighborhood), and his property (a devastating IRS investigation, Cole thought, was racially motivated); portrays his second marriage as deeply loving—until it wasn’t; and defends Cole’s lack of involvement with his children as a consequence of being on the road.

An effusive celebration of a multitalented performer.
A riveting narrative that provides further compelling evidence for the urgency of environmental stewardship.

**FIRE IN PARADISE**

*An American Tragedy*

Gee, Alastair & Anguiano, Dani

Norton (256 pp.)  
$26.95 | May 5, 2020  
978-1-324-00314-8

How climate change and corporate irresponsibility fueled a disaster.

Making a powerful book debut, Bay Area–based *Guardian* journalists Gee and Anguiano draw on their extensive reporting to produce a tense, often moving narrative about the fire that destroyed the northern California town of Paradise. Drawing on interviews with hundreds of residents of Paradise and neighboring towns, public officials, first responders, and scientists, the authors reconstruct a tight chronology of events from the time the fire broke out on the morning of Nov. 8, 2018, through Nov. 25, when it was finally contained, to the weeks and months afterward, when evacuated residents sifted through the debris. The authors focus on many individuals who heroically fought the blaze and helped struggling evacuees and on many whose experiences were emblematic of the community: an elderly man who lived, with his daughter, in the house in which he grew up; a woman who had just given birth by cesarean, evacuated from a hospital tethered to an IV bag, her newborn son on a pillow on her lap; a man so disabled that he was essentially marooned in his own living room. When told to evacuate, the challenge for the town’s disabled and elderly residents “was not simply getting out of Paradise. It was getting out of their own homes.” The town’s evacuation plan proved woefully inadequate: No one had foreseen a fire that would impact the entire town, but the Camp Fire, as it became known, continually jumped firebreaks, whipped by unusual wind patterns. Downed power lines and abandoned, charred cars blocked roads; heavy smoke impeded visibility; embers—“it looked like rain coming down of red and blue,” one woman observed—ignited houses, and entire neighborhoods were quickly reduced to rubble. The fire gained notoriety as “the most expensive natural disaster of 2018” and incited anger against Pacific Gas & Electric for its inadequate oversight of its infrastructure. PG&E became “a byword for negligence and corporate greed,” and Paradise became synonymous with tragedy and resilience.

A riveting narrative that provides further compelling evidence for the urgency of environmental stewardship. (2 maps)

**LOU GEHRIG**

*The Lost Memoir*

Gaff, Alan D.

Simon & Schuster (240 pp.)  
$24.99 | May 12, 2020  
978-1-9821-3239-2

A baseball icon’s rediscovered memoir, enhanced with biographical material by the independent scholar who found it.

While researching another topic, Gaff stumbled upon a series of newspaper columns by Major League Baseball legend Lou Gehrig (1903-1941). Those columns, published by the *Oakland Tribune* in 1927, constitute 90 pages of this book, with Gaff’s brief biography of Gehrig and other related material comprising the rest. Gehrig was only 24 when the columns appeared. They chronicle his youthful years in New York City, unlikely metamorphosis from an awkward wannabe athlete into a Yankees icon, and wide-eyed insights into becoming teammates with, among others, Babe Ruth, who “was the first one to give me advice about keeping in condition.” Divided into nine chapters, the newspaper serial portrays a seemingly uncomplicated young man whose gratefulness for meteoric success contains no hint of jadedness. He lauds baseball at all skill levels as a tonic for the rest. Gehrig was only 24 when the columns appeared. They chronicle his youthful years in New York City, unlikely metamorphosis from an awkward wannabe athlete into a Yankees icon, and wide-eyed insights into becoming teammates with, among others, Babe Ruth, who “was the first one to give me advice about keeping in condition.” Divided into nine chapters, the newspaper serial portrays a seemingly uncomplicated young man whose gratefulness for meteoric success contains no hint of jadedness. He lauds baseball at all skill levels as a tonic for the welfare of the college man. Gehrig advocates for “college men” to consider professional baseball as a career: “I believe [they] can contribute much to the good of the game—and it’s a certain cinch that baseball can contribute much to the welfare and the benefit of the college man.” Gaff’s biographical essay contains strong research and clear prose; his account of Gehrig’s rapid development as a talented slugger is especially inspiring. In 1939, as his athletic skills visibly diminished, Gehrig was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a relentless neurological disorder that is often referred to as Lou Gehrig’s disease. In addition to the biographical information, Gaff also includes some material that will be a treat for Gehrig devotees, including “Lou Gehrig’s Tips on How To Watch a Ball Game” as well as Gehrig’s lifetime statistics and a roster of “the careers of the many players in Lou’s narrative who are now largely unknown.”

A simple gem for baseball fans.

**DUMB LUCK AND THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS**

Gierach, John

Illus. by Wolff, Glenn

Simon & Schuster (224 pp.)  
$27.00 | Apr. 21, 2020  
978-1-5011-6858-1

The latest collection of interrelated essays by the veteran fishing writer. As in his previous books—from *The View From Rat Lake* through *All Fishermen Are Liars*—Gierach homes in on the ups and downs of fishing, and those looking for how-to tips will find plenty here on rods, flies, guides, streams, and pretty much everything else that informs the fishing life. It is the everything else that has earned Gierach the following of fellow writers and legions of readers who may not even fish but are drawn to his musings on community, culture, the natural world, and the seasons of life. In one representatively poetic passage, he writes, “it was a chilly fall afternoon with the leaves changing, the current whispering,
and a pale moon in a daytime sky. The river seemed inscrutable, but alive with possibility,” Gierach writes about both patience and process, and he describes the long spells between catches as the fisherman’s equivalent of writer’s block. Even when catching fish is the point, it almost seems beside the point (anglers will understand that sentiment): At the end of one essay, he writes, “I was cold, bored, hungry, and fishless, but there was still nowhere else I’d have rather been—something anyone who fishes will understand.” Most readers will be profoundly moved by the meditation on mortality within the blandly titled “Up in Michigan,” a character study of a man dying of cancer. Though the author had known and been fishing with him for three decades, his reticence kept anyone from knowing him well. Still, writes Gierach, “I came to think of [his] glancing pronouncements as Michigan haiku: brief, no more than obliquely revealing, and oddly beautiful.” Ultimately, the man was focused on settling accounts, getting in one last fishing trip, and then planning to “sit in the sun and think things over until it’s time for hospice.”

In these insightfully droll essays, Gierach shows us how fishing offers plenty of time to think things over.

ON ACCOUNT OF RACE
The Supreme Court, White Supremacy, and the Ravaging of African American Voting Rights
Goldstone, Lawrence
Counterpoint (288 pp.)
$26.00 | May 5, 2020
978-1-64009-392-8

An expert on constitutional law skewers the U.S. Supreme Court for its failure to strike down practices that disenfranchise black citizens.

As controversies arise in 2020 about Republican Party operatives hoping to win elections by removing potentially hostile voters from election rolls, Goldstone looks back primarily at 19th-century court rulings to demonstrate that the justices—all of them white males—never intended to uphold the true meaning of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. The author’s phrasing is necessarily uncompromising throughout. “In the decades after the Civil War...the Supreme Court,” he writes, “always claiming strict adherence to the law, regularly flexed [its] judicial muscles and chose, in decision after decision, to allow white supremacists to re-create a social order at odds with legislation that Congress had passed, the president had signed, and the states had ratified.” Those rulings rendered Constitutional amendments “hollow and meaningless.” The bigotry and cowardice of the justices allowed Southern states and some Northern states to deny voting rights to blacks with impunity. The shameful behavior extended to justices who have been lionized by historians as beacons of intellectual prowess and fairness. The most significant example is Oliver Wendell Holmes. Goldstone cites Giles v. Harris (1903) as a prime example of how Holmes “distort[ed]...constitutional principles” to deny qualified black citizens the right to vote. In the brief but insightful epilogue, the author wonders whether the morally corrupt justices conceive of the Constitution as a mere assemblage of words or as a grand idea meant to guarantee “fundamental justice” for all U.S. citizens, regardless of race. Without referring directly to the Supreme Court circa 2020, Goldstone posits that democracy can survive only if “all Americans insist that their fellow citizens, no matter what their race, gender, religion, or political belief, be allowed to participate in choosing the nation’s leaders.” Indeed, “it is a simple rule, one ordinary citizens, elected officials, and especially Supreme Court justices should not forget.”

A persuasive case that history matters and that the past is prologue.
A cogent and dispiriting contribution to the growing number of analyses of the ailing American democracy.

**LET THEM EAT TWEETS**

**DEATH BY SHAKESPEARE**

Snakebites, Stabbings and Broken Hearts

Harkup, Kathryn

Bloomsbury Sigma (368 pp.)

$28.00 | May 5, 2020

978-1-4729-5822-8

Chemist, journalist, and blogger Harkup examines the many ways Shakespeare chose to kill off his characters—something that happens in most of his plays. “Shakespeare’s tragedies and histories,” writes the author, “are littered with the bodies of characters who got in the way of someone’s ambition or were cut down because of some perceived insult.” Readers will need a strong stomach to get through many of Harkup’s descriptions: of the process of hanging, drawing, and quartering, for example, where convicted individuals were cut down from the scaffold before death “and were still able to watch as their entrails and heart were drawn out of their abdomen and burnt on a fire in front of them.” Or consider the visceral effects of various mount a compelling, though not groundbreaking, argument that what they call “plutocratic populism”—reactionary economic priorities and right-wing cultural and racial appeals—dominates the Republican Party, undermining democracy. Although Donald Trump is an exemplar of this stance, the authors maintain that Republicans bowed to the ultrawealthy long before the 2016 election. They cite, for example, the 2001 tax cuts, which benefited the rich far more than the middle class and “were sharply at odds with what the majority of voters thought the nation’s budget priorities should be.” Republicans bluntly caved backing from wealthy supporters, with Mike Pence selected as vice president partly to satisfy evangelicals, partly because of his close ties to big donors, notably the Koch brothers. Over several generations, the party’s loyalty to the wealthy caused a shift to cultural issues and outrage in order to attract voters. “The early specialists in outrage-stoking,” the authors assert, “were the Christian right and the NRA,” which both were fueled by “racial backlash.” Increasingly, Republicans have fostered a campaign of “resentment, racialization and rigging” in their pursuit of white voters. In the 2018 midterm elections, however, the party’s losses caused it to shift to “a third option”: to “make voters’ voices less relevant” by turning election rules and redistricting “into finely honed partisan weapons.” Democracy itself is a problem for Republicans “because it threatens the property and power of powerful minorities.” The interests of those wealthy minorities, the authors warn, “diverge from those of their fellow citizens,” making them “more apprehensive about democracy.” The authors are cautiously optimistic that shifting demographics may weaken Republicans’ power, but only Trump’s “decisive electoral defeat” will possibly “motivate a fundamental rethinking of the party’s priorities.”

A cogent and dispiriting contribution to the growing number of analyses of the ailing American democracy.

**ACTING WITH POWER**

Why We Are More Powerful Than We Believe

Gruenfeld, Deborah

Currency (336 pp.)

$29.00 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-101-90395-7

A professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business considers power in the workplace and beyond.

Gruenfeld, a social psychologist, teaches a course that shares a title with her first book. Its premise is that trying out roles of either high or low status—e.g., in plays like David Mamet’s Glengarry Glen Ross or Caryl Churchill’s Top Girls—can help us understand our own complicated feelings about power. While the book doesn’t offer the exercises explored by the author’s students, it does provide an in-depth examination of the ways we all, consciously or unconsciously, “play high or low” (terms that are more common in a theatrical setting) in our everyday life. Gruenfeld then provides useful ways to break out of our ruts. For the author, power is as much about connection as control, and it’s morally neutral, capable of either good or evil effects depending on the players involved and their goals. Using examples drawn from politics, business, and personal life, Gruenfeld suggests ways in which power can be used for the greater good as well as techniques for avoiding becoming a victim of misused power. Perhaps her most original contribution is a chapter on the strategic value, at least on occasion, of “the art and science of playing power down.” As she writes, “like playing power up, playing it down is an act, designed to make us appear less intimidating, less capable...”

A sensible, practical guide to understanding and using personal power.

**LET THEM EAT TWEETS**

How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality

Hacker, Jacob S. & Pierson, Paul

Liveright/Norton (256 pp.)

$26.95 | May 19, 2020

978-1-395-6834-4

How the Republicans’ embrace of economic elites threatens democracy. Political scientists Hacker (Yale) and Pierson (Univ. of California, Berkeley) synthesize many scholarly studies and journalists’ reports to
poisons: Cyanide, for one, causes “massive cell death,” resulting in “headache, dizziness and convulsions, as well as vomiting and rapid pulse, before collapse and death.” Cleopatra’s snake bite was not likely to have been “soft as air,” as Shakespeare described it, since Egyptian cobra bites are very painful, especially on the breast, which is where Cleopatra placed the snake. Most of Shakespeare’s victims die in sword fights; Harkup notes that his actors were expected to be skilled at swordsmanship, and many trained at fencing schools. With battles an important feature in Shakespeare’s histories, it’s no wonder that death by sword occurred, but there were other causes, too, including smothering, beheading, drowning, and suicide. In an appendix, the author provides a chart listing all of the plays’ victims and the means by which they died. A few, like Othello, took their own lives out of guilt; others, like Lady Montague in Romeo and Juliet, died of grief. Besides investigating the plays, Harkup gives historical background about Elizabethan perils, such as executions, plague, syphilis, death in childbirth, tuberculosis, and infected wounds. She speculates about what Shakespeare knew about causes of death; like other contemporary playwrights, he did know that audiences loved violence.

A brisk, informative, and startling look at Shakespeare.

**THE SHAPELESS UNEASE**

* A Year of Not Sleeping
* Harvey, Samantha
* Grove (992 pp.)
* $24.00 | May 12, 2020
* 978-0-8021-4882-7

Sleeplessness gets the Susan Sontag illness-as-metaphor treatment in this pensive, compact, lyrical inquiry into the author’s nighttime demons.

In her attempt to make sense of why she can’t sleep, Betty Trask Award–winning novelist Harvey meditates, often poetically, on a wide range of topics. Her sleep issues began in the summer of 2016. A few months later, the author had self-diagnosed “possible chronic Post Brexit Insomnia” along with the “existence of persistent panic.” She began suffering three or four nights per week of no sleep. She tried everything: sleeping aids, prescription drugs, visits to a CBT sleep clinic, acupuncture, “learning French, making mosaics, playing solitaire, doing jigsaws,” watching episodes of *Poldark* and *The Crown*, and listening to “an audio edition of *Remembrance of Things Past.*” Eventually, Harvey began to feel “increasingly feral, like a wild animal enduring a cage.” She stopped writing and was teaching on zero hours of sleep, and her thoughts fragmented further, a process that she captures with vivid clarity, darkly tinged yet unblurred. The author thought about writing a story about a man who, while robbing a cash machine, loses his wedding ring. It unfurls in sections, floating along in the darkness like quiet waves. “Is the story going anywhere?” Harvey asks herself. Also, is insomnia caused by fear or anxiety? “Anxiety, my hypnotherapist says; you are safe in your bed yet your heart is racing as if a tiger is present. You must learn to see that there is no tiger,” she writes. “But there is a tiger: sleep deprivation. Sleep deprivation isn’t a perceived threat but a real one, like thirst or starvation.” Finally, “one day when you’re done with it, it will lose its footing and fall away, and you’ll drop each night into sleep without knowing how you once found it impossible.” Though the narrative is a highly personal interior monologue, others who have suffered insomnia will find abundant resonance.

An exquisitely rendered voyage into the “shapelessness of a life without sleep, where days merge unbounded.”
In *How We Fight for Our Lives* (Simon & Schuster, 2019), Saeed Jones reflects on being a young, gay black man in 1990s Lewisville, Texas, where he had urgent questions about his sexuality and scant resources. His search for answers was visceral and sometimes violent, leading him to conclude that “being a black gay boy is a death wish.” Jones, a prizewinning poet, won the Kirkus Prize for nonfiction for his fiery coming-of-age memoir, which *Kirkus Reviews* said “marks the emergence of a major literary voice.”

*How We Fight for Our Lives* depicts the profoundly troubled relationship some men have with their own masculinity and sexuality. What did the writing process of this book teach you about masculinity?

The world is on fire and we know why, so let’s be real: *All* men are trouble and are troubled by their own masculinity. I believe that angst is inherent because the power bestowed upon us by our identity is inherent. Any man who is repulsed or outraged by this idea is worse off than he is ready to admit. I used to be one of those men too. I hope this book finds its way to them and that it can be of use. The solution is not to reach the end of discomfort; it’s to reach a point where we can value what having a productive relationship with our discomfort can do for us. America being what it is, all of our lives are tied to men figuring out who they are. We are imperiled in the meantime.

Your relationship with your mother, Carol Sweet-Jones, a loving single mom and Buddhist, seems like it was a salvation. How did she shape your writing?

My mother often said, “Saeed, there are three sides to every story: his side, her side, and the truth.” I’d like to think that worldview manifests in my nonfiction writing. I aspire to honor what I remember and experienced, make space for why the other person might have done what they did or feel what they felt. And then, in the end, I try to leave breathing room for the bigger truth that we’re all living in.

Were you deliberately looking to fill the void of Lewisville, Texas, library stacks in 1998, when all of the books about being gay were tragic depictions of men dying of AIDS?

One of the minor tragedies of the first chapter of the memoir is that I have so many questions about sexual identity and don’t feel comfortable asking the adults around me about them. You see me try with my mom, but she basically runs away from the conversation and hides in her bedroom. At the library, you will notice I decided (without much evidence) that the librarians wouldn’t be able to help me. As an adult, I think I was wrong. I’ve met countless librarians, booksellers, and teachers who are constantly working to get the right books into the hands of the readers who need them. I know for a fact that books like *Giovanni’s Room*, for example, were shelved in that very same library, a few aisles over. I didn’t know to look for those books be-
cause I didn’t feel safe enough to find a guide that would lead me to them. So, yes, I hope that all of my books populate those shelves. But, more broadly, my goal is to change the culture in which all those books and readers live.

The Kirkus review says that your memoir is “written with masterful control of both style and material.” Did you feel in control when writing it, or was it all a glorious chaos that you wrestled into shape?

Honestly, most of the time I was working on the book, I thought the odds were 50-50 on whether I’d survive the process. I’m deeply grateful to have finished the book and to be proud of what I created. Even still, it feels like I did it by the skin of my teeth.

Karen Schechner is the vice president of Kirkus Indie. How We Fight for Our Lives received a starred review in the June 15, 2019, issue.

ENGINEERING AMERICA
The Life and Times of John A. Roebling
Haw, Richard
Oxford Univ. (640 pp.)
$34.95 | May 1, 2020
978-0-19-066390-2

A hefty biography of John A. Roebling (1806-1869), renowned for designing and constructing suspension bridges and other engineering marvels.

Haw builds on his previous research on the Brooklyn Bridge to create this dense, prodigiously researched portrait of Roebling, who designed numerous projects but is perhaps best known for his initial plans for the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge before his death. Roebling grew up in Germany and came to the U.S. in 1831, leading fellow German settlers to unclaimed land in rural Western Pennsylvania, where they tried to establish a self-sufficient town despite unfavorable soil and bad weather. Butler County became a base of operations for Roebling, his growing family, and later immigrants from Germany. In this mostly chronological narrative, Haw establishes early on that Roebling exhibited visionary tendencies across a wide range of disciplines. As the author notes, “he was fundamentally a seeker and a believer….So much of John’s life had been spent reaching toward a goal that was just out of reach, be it another shore or a new way to build or to organize society or the afterlife.” Haw also explains that some of those visions could be considered crackpot, aggravated by Roebling’s sometimes cruel and even violent behavior. As the countless details of Roebling’s life unfold, some readers are likely to tire of his unpleasant personality. Fortunately, those elements arrive in relatively short bursts, and Haw devotes lengthy sections to the art and science of suspension bridge building, not only by Roebling, but also by his engineering rivals. The “times” of Roebling’s life, as depicted by the author, are often more interesting than the life itself. For example, Haw explores how the fates of developing cities rose and fell depending on Roebling’s bridge-building successes and failures. The bridges even played a role in the Underground Railroad, and for a few compelling pages, Harriet Tubman appears in the narrative, which is grounded in massive research that may be overwhelming for general readers.

A sturdy scholarly biography that will appeal most to Roebling devotees and civil engineering buffs. (photos and illustrations)
By concentrating on telling a colorful, absorbing story rather than proving a point, Herrera moves and transports us.

**UPPER BOHEMIA**

_A Memoir_

Herrera, Hayden
Simon & Schuster (272 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-9821-0528-0

Memories of a chaotic, peripatetic, and often magical childhood in the 1940s and '50s. In the preface to this excellent memoir—Herrera’s first, after acclaimed biographies of Frida Kahlo, Henri Matisse, Maxim Gorky, and others—the author explains that she and her sister, in their 80s, have never been able to decide whether their mother was wonderful or terrible. “Our terrible mother gave [us] a wonderful life,” she writes. “And, she was not the only terrible mother.” Both of their parents, each married multiple times and only briefly to one another, were members of a class her mother called “upper bohemia.” Born into privilege from about 1908 to 1920, these free spirits dedicated themselves to artistic and intellectual pursuits as well as to their own pleasure. When it came to raising children, they were usually inconsistent and haphazard. Herrera’s parents “were stars within their own community. They were talented and intelligent, but their most important asset was their beauty.” For the remainder of the book, the author slips beneath the surface of her childhood, spent on Cape Cod and in Manhattan, Boston, and Mexico. She maintains the perspective she had on events at that time, vividly evoking the little girl at the center of this story: her curiosity, pain, constant concern about her weight, disappointment in her father, and idolization of her mother. In 1940, when the girls were with their father in Cape Cod, their mother appeared in a car she called the “Coche de Mama” and drove them straight down to Mexico. The author’s accounts of the drive and the years in Mexico are highly cinematic, and Herrera avoids the excessive commentary, analysis, blame, and self-pity common in this type of memoir, allowing readers directly into the experience. In a satisfying epilogue, the author fills in the rest of the story up to the present day. The black-and-white photos attest to the beauty of the settings and all the people in them.

_By concentrating on telling a colorful, absorbing story rather than proving a point, Herrera moves and transports us. (b/w photos throughout)_

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**MBS**

_The Rise to Power of Mohammed bin Salman_

Hubbard, Ben
Tim Duggan Books/Crown (384 pp.)
$28.00 | Mar. 10, 2020
978-1-9848-2382-3

Hubbard, the _New York Times_ Beirut chief who has been reporting from the Middle East for more than a decade, is perfectly positioned to observe the rise of Mohammed bin Salman since the accession of his father to the role of king in 2015. Mohammed, the favored son though far from being the eldest, had stuck by his father’s side throughout his early years, eschewing a foreign education for a Saudi incultation in the ways his father, then the governor of Riyadh Province, preferred. When his father became king, writes the author in this authoritative biographical picture, he put MBS in command of “the kingdom’s most important portfolios: defense, economy, religion and oil. Then, shoving aside older relatives, he became the crown prince, putting him next in line to the throne. His father remained the head of state, but it was clear that Prince Mohammed was the hands-on ruler, the kingdom’s overseer and CEO.” At first, some international leaders admired the prince as a “game-changer” in a sclerotic Saudi male hierarchy, young and unafraid to “defang” the dreaded religious police and lure investors. The mood had shifted by November 2017, however, when the young prince engineered the imprisonment of hundreds of the richest men in the country in the Ritz-Carlton of Riyadh and forcibly shook them down. Sentiment continued to turn with the Oct. 2, 2018, murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the most prominent critic of MBS and the royal family. “Khashoggi’s killing was a wake-up call,” writes Hubbard. “In a few weeks, it flushed away much of the goodwill and excitement that MBS had spent the last four years generating.” Throughout, the author, synthesizing information gleaned from hundreds of interviews, displays his impressive diligence as a journalist continually blocked by censorship and intimidation.

_As complete a portrait of an elusive autocrat as can be expected._

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**SHORTLISTED**

_Women in the Shadows of the Supreme Court_

Jefferson, Renee Knake & Johnson, Hannah Brenner
New York Univ. (304 pp.)
$30.00 | May 12, 2020
978-1-4798-9591-5

Two law professors collaborate to tell the political and personal sagas of women publicly considered for appointment to the Supreme Court but never actually nominated by a president.

Before the 1981 confirmation of Sandra Day O’Connor as the first woman Supreme Court justice ever, it appeared that several presidents would remove the gender barrier. However, political partisanship as well as misogyny scuttled every potential nominee. Though three women have followed O’Connor—Ruth Bader Ginsburg (1993), Sonia Sotomayor (2009), and Elena Kagan (2010)—Jefferson and Johnson rightfully remind readers that this is far from satisfactory in terms of both equity and common sense. No woman received a license to practice
law in the U.S. until 1869, and that same year, “Washington University in St. Louis became the first law school to admit women.” For a time, it appeared either Herbert Hoover or Franklin Roosevelt would nominate Florence Allen, “the first woman whose name appeared on official lists of possible candidates for appointment” to the nation’s highest court. Unsurprisingly, however, Hoover and Roosevelt opted for yet another white male. After those missed opportunities for Allen, only five women received public consideration before Ronald Reagan nominated O’Connor. In the first section of the book, Jefferson and Johnson focus on the political maneuvering behind the consideration of each candidate. In the second section, the authors examine the personal and professional attributes of the shortlisted women, hoping to identify relevant lessons about the “gendered consequences” of being publicly considered but not nominated. The lessons involve successfully battling tokenism; overcoming stereotypes about motherhood or, alternately, childlessness; being subjected to examinations of sexuality, including the character of romantic partners; dealing with discrimination regarding older women; and navigating objections that women justices decide judicial disputes differently from men, and perhaps inappropriately.

With fresh research, the authors effectively humanize the women who never received the nominations they deserved. (b/w illustrations and tables)
**SUNNY DAYS**
The Children's Television Revolution That Changed America
Kamp, David
Simon & Schuster (288 pp.)
$27.50 | May 12, 2020
978-1-5011-3780-8

A cultural history of how children's TV, once criticized for banal programming, changed dramatically in the 1960s.

In 1961, the chairman of the FCC asked, “Is there no room on television to teach, to inform, to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacities of our children?” It was a question that Joan Ganz Cooney and Fred Rogers answered with a resounding yes. Each found jobs in newly established educational-TV stations, and, with determination and imagination, developed groundbreaking children’s shows: *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, which made its national debut in February 1968; and *Sesame Street*, which debuted in November 1969, attracting an audience of some 2 million households. Drawing on news articles, oral histories, and the archives of the Children’s Television Workshop, Fred Rogers Center, and Jim Henson Company, longtime *Vanity Fair* contributor Kamp offers a brisk, lively account of the challenges faced by Cooney and Rogers in realizing their shows, the criticism that they incited, and the many programs that emulated their success, such as *The Electric Company*, *Free to Be…You and Me*, and *ZOOM*. Although different in tone—“slow pace versus fast, small cast versus large, low production values versus high”—both *Mister Rogers* and *Sesame Street* were shaped by findings in developmental psychology and pedagogy. Rogers saw himself as “the child’s adult friend” who “would introduce experiences of all kinds” and help children to articulate their feelings. Cooney and her *Sesame Street* team aimed to engage young children—especially those living in the inner city—in learning, with a multicultural, interracial cast. Getting Jim Henson on board “was a coup,” Kamp acknowledges. “The Muppets conferred upon the nascent show a visual and spiritual identity that would set it apart from other children’s programming: “furrier, featherier, weirder, cleverer.” Writing about the evolution of *Sesame Street*, the author reports some surprising blowback from feminists who objected to its portrayal of women and from viewers who complained “of both racism and reverse racism.” But nothing stopped the show’s impact on children’s culture. Questlove provides the foreword.

An appreciative and informative chapter of TV history.

**NO SHADOWS IN THE DESERT**
Murder, Vengeance, and Espionage in the War Against ISIS
Katz, Samuel M.
Hanover Square Press (352 pp.)
$28.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-335-01383-5

Middle East security expert Katz offers a revealing account of how Jordan, the United States, and global allies engaged in covert acts of vengeance to eliminate top leaders of the Islamic State group.

In 2014, a young Jordanian Air Force pilot was captured and burned to death by terrorists after his fighter aircraft crashed near Raqqa, Syria, during a combat sortie aimed at destroying an arsenal and other targets. In the carefully staged and filmed execution, the airman was caged, covered with gasoline, and set afire. Terrorists hoped the “horrifying” death, later broadcast widely, would rally Muslims to their cause. Instead, writes Katz, it prompted retribution that lit “the fuse of the Islamic State’s destruction.” In this absorbing narrative, the author uses the story of the pilot and the subsequent killing of top IS leaders responsible for his capture and murder (including the war minister and the social media guru) as a way to explore the inner workings of the international anti-terror alliance, especially the close military intelligence ties between the CIA and Jordan, deemed a “buffer that helped an unstable region maintain periods of peace and status quo.” Against the background of the terrorist organization, which “caught everyone by surprise,” Katz details the fall of oil-rich Mosul; the complex relationships within the multinational anti-terror coalition, with its many air forces held together by electronic communication; and the coalition’s combat sorties against terrorist targets in Iraq and Syria. The author draws on interviews with soldiers and intelligence officials to recount decision-making inside the CIA “espionage hub” at Amman Station, Jordan’s top-flight anti-terrorist agency the General Intelligence Directorate, and the ruling council of IS, whose massive media operation (“likened to CNN and Britain’s BBC”) worked ceaselessly to win Muslim allies and recruit “middle-class jobless college-educated sons in the kingdom.”

An authoritative book that captures a critical moment in the war against IS and underscores the group’s ruthlessness.
LEAVE ONLY FOOTPRINTS
My Acadia-to-Zion Journey Through Every National Park
Knighton, Conor
Crown (336 pp.)$28.00 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-9848-2354-0

A chronicle of the author’s year exploring all 59 national parks located in the United States and its territories. Nursing a recent breakup with his fiancée, Emmy-winning CBS Sunday Morning correspondent Knighton hit upon an adventurous plan to take his mind off his troubles. He decided to visit every one of the country’s national parks, occasionally producing segments for CBS. Noting that the National Park Service manages more than 400 “units,” the author “decided to focus on the ‘official’ national parks. I knew I’d be excluding some amazing places, but it seemed like a more manageable list.” Knighton is a companionable guide, light on his feet, with a steady store of hit-or-miss jokes—during a visit with ancient trees in California’s White Mountains, he remarks, “Age on the inside isn’t always apparent on the outside. Just ask Keanu Reeves”—some excellent descriptive passages, good background material, and a few sweeping insights as to why national parks are so essential. The author groups a few parks together for each chapter according to a defining feature, which may be literal—trees, water, ice, volcanoes, caves, mountains—or something more abstract, such as God, forgiveness, love, or disconnection. Too infrequently, he tackles wider subjects with particular zest, especially so in the case of the lack of diversity in both visitors to and employees of the national parks. Knighton examines climate change through the disintegration of glaciers and then ponders the immensity of time through the cutting of a deep canyon. Every park presents him with some unique feature for him to celebrate: a synchronous display of firefly blinking, the knees of cypress trees, the uncanny blueness of Crater Lake. Then there is the elemental brilliance of the national park system. “Each one,” writes the author “is an example of how we have fought against our selfish, destructive impulses.”

A fine tour d’horizon of our national grandeur. (2 full-color photo inserts)

EVERYBODY (ELSE)
IS PERFECT
How I Survived Hypocrisy, Beauty, Clicks, and Likes
Korn, Gabrielle
Atria (272 pp.)$17.00 paper | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-9821-2776-3

Debut essays from the director of fashion and culture at Refinery29.

Though Korn, the former editor-in-chief at Nylon Media, worked at women’s magazines throughout her 20s, their constant use of thin, cisgender cover models often collided with her ideals of diversity, inclusivity, and body positivity. Before the concept of being “woke” gathered steam, the author promoted change, penning viral columns on subjects like body hair. “As women’s media grapples with how to be more positive and inclusive while covering topics like fashion and beauty,” writes the author, “I frequently find myself caught between two worlds—the world of empowerment culture and the world of perfectionism.” In addition to chronicling her rapid rise to the top of Nylon Media, Korn offers intimate forays into her struggles with anorexia, coming out as a lesbian, and finding meaningful love. The narrative serves as a poignant insider’s look at women’s digital media as well as a tender retrospective on growing into adulthood in the early 2000s. The author is honest about her enviable position as a tastemaker, though some readers may not muster sympathy for her depictions of salary negotiations or dressing for Fashion Week. In the breezy, clever “Low-Rise,” denim trends inspire reflection on the complexities of sexuality, body image, gender presentation, progressive politics, and social media. “I was coming of age in a time when everything was
hypersexualized,” she writes, “but I didn’t understand the relationship between that and actual sex, a disconnect that’s one of the main reasons I didn’t realize I was gay until after high school: it was like being disembodied.” Particularly incisive is Korn’s essay on feminist language being co-opted for profit while one of the author’s themes—that feminism and aesthetics needn’t be at odds but that the beauty and fashion industry still need to change—is keenly observed, if familiar. Korn also offers darker reflections about personal and wider pressures on women.

A confident, confessional modern account of breaking free from image obsession.

**FUNNY WEATHER**

**Art in an Emergency**

Laing, Olivia

Norton (272 pp.)

$26.95 | May 12, 2020

978-1-324-00570-4

A stellar collection of essays and reviews from the award-winning London-based writer.

Laing, the winner of the 2018 Windham-Campbell Prize for nonfiction, is often described as a cultural critic, but insofar as the term suggests a sole focus on the arts, it belies the wider sweep of these pieces, most of them previously published. A graceful stylist and superb reporter, the author is a journalist in the spirit of Michael Dirda, who calls himself “an appreciator” rather than a critic, and Laing includes no negative reviews here. Nonetheless, there’s plenty of first-rate arts criticism in her appreciations of painters like David Hockney and Jean-Michel Basquiat and novelists Patricia Highsmith and Sally Rooney along with musings on topics like gardening and a standout essay on the surrealistic horrors faced by an asylum-seeking refugee who spent 11 years “trapped in Britain’s infinite detention system.” Laing’s aesthetic tastes lean toward idiosyncratic or transgressive work that involves links between art and disaster, whether a crisis imperils the human body or the body politic. Disease and death stalk her pages—Kathy Acker’s breast cancer, Freddie Mercury’s AIDS, Georgia O’Keeffe’s agoraphobia, and Hilary Mantel’s migraines—but she brings a fresh and humane eye even to ills exhaustively covered elsewhere, such as David Bowie’s cocaine addiction. Afflicted with corneal edema, the painter Sargy Mann “took a hair dryer to the National Gallery, plugged it in and calmly dried his soggy, waterlogged eye in order to see the paintings.” Laing sinks only briefly into lit-crit jargon in discussions of “reparative reading,” and sometimes her enthusiasms run away with her. Were the 700 or so poems by Frank O’Hara truly “as original and lovely as anything of the century”? Still, the author’s praise never appears less than genuine or unsupported by deep observation, and she consistently shows the talent James Wood ascribed to Mantel: She has “the maddeningly unteachable gift of being interesting.”

A bracingly provocative collection perfect for our times.
SING BACKWARDS AND WEEP
A Memoir
Lanegan, Mark
Da Capo (552 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-306-92280-0

The frontman of the Screaming Trees gives a bloody, brawling, dope-fueled tour of his personal battlefields. By any reckoning, Lanegan should be long dead alongside beloved friends like Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, Kristen Pfaff of Hole, and Layne Stanley of Alice in Chains. By either miracle or stamina, the author is still alive to offer a blisteringly raw self-portrait of life not just as an excessively self-indulgent rock star but also a victim of his own hubris. It’s hard to remember in this age of social media, semiclean living, and legalized marijuana, but Seattle circa 1990 was practically a combat zone, thrust into the zeitgeist by the success of grunge rock, especially Nirvana, Soundgarden, and other bands on the Sub Pop label. Lanegan recounts the formation of the Screaming Trees with drummer Mark Pickerel and brothers Gary Lee and Van Conner in the late 1980s, and while their stardom was sudden, the author clearly hasn’t forgotten long, brutal tours in a fetid van, featuring stories that recall Henry Rollins’ Black Flag diary, Get in the Van (1994). There’s plenty of friction behind the music, but the narrative’s primal thread is addiction, from Lanegan’s early alcoholism to a heroin and crack addiction that would later find him dealing to junkies from his Seattle crash pad. His temper would also find him contemplating murdering Courtney Love and beating Liam Gallagher to death backstage. Elsewhere, the missed opportunities are tragic—blowing a gig on the Tonight Show, turning down an invitation to play Nirvana’s fabled MTV Unplugged episode, and ignoring a chance to score a movie. This isn’t just a warts-and-all admission; it’s a blackout- and overdose-rich confessional marked by guilt and shame. It’s also not a redemption song, but the narrative’s primal pulse of Scandinavian society, discussing such topics as child abuse, obsessive references to original art, a scarcity of Jewish as well as female and gay cops, and sadism (“the worst sadist in all of Scandinavian literature is Karin Fossum,” whose novels are disturbing in a way that is “manipulatively, personally, intentionally pain-inducing”). In the second section, Lesser broadly discusses all the novels via nifty alphabetically sequenced topics, from alcohol, erotica, and religion to xenophobia and zealots. She clearly has her finger on the pulse of Scandinavian society, discussing such topics as child abuse, obsessive references to original art, a scarcity of Jewish as well as female and gay cops, and sadism (“the worst sadist in all of Scandinavian literature is Karin Fossum,” whose novels are disturbing in a way that is “manipulatively, personally, intentionally pain-inducing”). In the second section, Lesser switches to third person as “she” describes a personal tour of the three countries. She feels at home in Sweden; Stockholm is “even lovelier than she expected.” In Oslo, a policeman tells her they only have about 12 homicides per year, and “compared to Oslo or Stockholm, Copenhagen is definitely a bit grungy.” Lesser’s opinionated Appendix summarizes the series that she has read, and her recommended list of TV adaptations is user-friendly as well.

Perfect for any die-hard fan of Scandinavian mysteries and culture.

SCANDINAVIAN NOIR
In Pursuit of a Mystery
Lesser, Wendy
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (288 pp.)
$27.00 | May 5, 2020
978-0-374-21697-9

An enthusiastic guide to the mysteries and the countries.
Threepenny Review founder Lesser, whose biography of Louis Kahn, You Say to Brick (2017), won multiple awards, has been a huge fan of Scandinavian mysteries since college. She shares her “eccentric and personal” excitement for them in this comprehensive and insightful assessment of noir novels from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. “What I have constructed here,” she writes, “is a map, or a portrait, or a cultural history of a place that both exists and does not exist.” Early on, Lesser shares how the ten-book series about Swedish homicide detective Martin Beck, written together in alternating chapters by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö, “changed my life.” Beck’s friend Lennart Kollberg is “one of the great characters of detective fiction.” In Lesser’s opinion, the only series that approaches Beck’s in its “persuasively real experience” is Henning Mankell’s Kurt Wallander series. The author found Stieg Larsson’s uber-popular Lisbeth Salander series “un-putdownable” even though she “despised the cheap feminism of the books.” In the first section, Lesser broadly discusses all the novels via nifty alphabetically sequenced topics, from alcohol, erotica, and religion to xenophobia and zealots. She clearly has her finger on the pulse of Scandinavian society, discussing such topics as child abuse, obsessive references to original art, a scarcity of Jewish as well as female and gay cops, and sadism (“the worst sadist in all of Scandinavian literature is Karin Fossum,” whose novels are disturbing in a way that is “manipulatively, personally, intentionally pain-inducing”). In the second section, Lesser switches to third person as “she” describes a personal tour of the three countries. She feels at home in Sweden; Stockholm is “even lovelier than she expected.” In Oslo, a policeman tells her they only have about 12 homicides per year, and “compared to Oslo or Stockholm, Copenhagen is definitely a bit grungy.” Lesser’s opinionated Appendix summarizes the series that she has read, and her recommended list of TV adaptations is user-friendly as well.

Perfect for any die-hard fan of Scandinavian mysteries and culture.

GALILEO AND THE SCIENCE DENIERS
Livio, Mario
Simon & Schuster (304 pp.)
$28.00 | May 5, 2020
978-1-5011-9473-3

A fresh biography of Galileo (1564-1642). Books on Galileo are not scarce, but the latest from astrophysicist Livio features the author’s unique insights as well as his concern about the current fashion for giving ideology priority over truth. Livio rocks no boats by describing Galileo as history’s first scientist. The Greeks believed that understanding the universe required thinking; they despised research because human senses are imperfect. In contrast, Galileo wondered about natural phenomena, observed carefully, performed experiments (in a time before thermometers, stopwatches, and even minute hands), meticulously recorded the results, and—most importantly—publicized them widely in lectures, letters, and books. For 40 years, he was the most famous scientist in Europe, a position he maintained even after his disastrous conflict with the church, after which he spent his final decade under house arrest. This isn’t just a warts-and-all biography of Galileo (1564-1642). Books on Galileo are not scarce, but the latest from astrophysicist Livio features the author’s unique insights as well as his concern about the current fashion for giving ideology priority over truth. Livio rocks no boats by describing Galileo as history’s first scientist. The Greeks believed that understanding the universe required thinking; they despised research because human senses are imperfect. In contrast, Galileo wondered about natural phenomena, observed carefully, performed experiments (in a time before thermometers, stopwatches, and even minute hands), meticulously recorded the results, and—most importantly—publicized them widely in lectures, letters, and books. For 40 years, he was the most famous scientist in Europe, a position he maintained even after his disastrous conflict with the church, after which he spent his final decade under house arrest.

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arrest. Most readers know that the Inquisition condemned Galileo for claiming that the sun did not revolve around the Earth. That the biblical passage describing Joshua stopping the sun (emphasized by prosecutors) proved him wrong seems wacky, but Livio points to several current beliefs that are no improvement. The author’s criticism of science denial and a long section marshaling evidence in favor of climate change and evolution will neither enlighten science-minded readers nor persuade those who disagree. Livio is not alone in believing that people with a deeply held false belief will change their minds if presented with facts. However, research studies invariably show that they won’t. The author truly excels in his explanations of Galileo’s findings as well as his descriptions of the culture of Renaissance Italy. Popular histories extol the scientist’s use of the just invented telescope to galvanize Europe with astronomical discoveries—the moons of Jupiter, phases of Venus, and the mountains on Earth’s moon—but Livio gives equal time to his revelations of the laws of motion, which marked the birth of modern physics.

An expert life of a giant of science. (8-page, 4-color insert)

BUDDHA TAKES THE MOUND
Enlightenment in Nine Innings
Lopez Jr., Donald S.
St. Martin’s Essentials (192 pp.)
$19.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-250-23791-0

The acclaimed Buddhist scholar discusses how Buddha invented baseball to show us the “path,” which may travel through as much misery as exultation.

In baseball, there is an extremely fine line between delight and suffering (one of the Buddha’s four noble truths). Consider: A team that loses 4 of every 10 games during the Major League Baseball season goes to the playoffs, while a team that loses 5 of every 10 never does. Lopez—a professor of Buddhist and Tibetan studies at the University of Michigan who has written extensively on the subject and translated several works by the Dalai Lama—first establishes his bona fides as a lifelong student of baseball and fan of the New York Yankees. Baseball is a Buddhist game, and only those seeking enlightenment ever reach nirvana (the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York). Lopez digs into the eternal truth of suffering by telling us there will be baseball happiness in ample supply. An American foundation helped at first, but it was popular writing, beginning with his 1988 bestseller, A Brief History of Time, that enabled him to bear the massive expenses associated with this care. Einstein’s iconic 1905 theory of special relativity, with its revelations on time, mass-energy, and light, have revolutionized our daily lives and technology. However, Hawking concentrated on Einstein’s 1915 theory of general relativity, which explains how gravity and space deviate from Newton’s simpler laws only at extremes—the massive gravity of stars and black holes or cosmic distances and times. As a result, scientists largely ignored it until Hawking took an interest in the 1960s. His controversial findings on the nature of black holes galvanized fellow physicists. The Big Bang idea originated in 1927, but Hawking’s calculations provided evidence that it happened. Mlodinow doesn’t delve deeply enough into Hawking’s unique brilliance, but he provides an illuminating portrait of perseverance and determination.

A valuable account of an extraordinary man, although most readers will have to accept Hawking’s genius on faith.

STEPHEN HAWKING
A Memoir of Friendship and Physics
Mlodinow, Leonard
Pantheon (240 pp.)
$25.00 | May 12, 2020
978-1-5447-4868-5

Our era’s leading physicist receives an insightful send-off.

Stephen Hawking (1942-2018) was the world’s most famous scientist. Sadly, it was his paralysis, rather than his discoveries, that made him almost universally recognizable. In 2003, Hawking contacted physicist and author Mlodinow to help with his popular science writing. Here, the author recounts their friendship as well as Hawking's earlier life and makes an earnest attempt to explain his work. In 1963, beginning doctoral studies at Cambridge, Hawking developed amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a progressive nerve degeneration that leads to paralysis and death. This devastating news, writes Mlodinow, left Hawking with “the choice of wasting away in spirit as well as body or finding a world of the mind in which he could still function. Where some in his situation found God, Stephen found physics.” Almost completely paralyzed by 1990, he continued work despite requiring 24-hour care. An American foundation helped at first, but it was popular writing, beginning with his 1988 bestseller, A Brief History of Time, that enabled him to bear the massive expenses associated with this care. Einstein’s iconic 1905 theory of special relativity, with its revelations on time, mass-energy, and light, have revolutionized our daily lives and technology. However, Hawking concentrated on Einstein’s 1915 theory of general relativity, which explains how gravity and space deviate from Newton’s simpler laws only at extremes—the massive gravity of stars and black holes or cosmic distances and times. As a result, scientists largely ignored it until Hawking took an interest in the 1960s. His controversial findings on the nature of black holes galvanized fellow physicists. The Big Bang idea originated in 1927, but Hawking’s calculations provided evidence that it happened. Mlodinow doesn’t delve deeply enough into Hawking’s unique brilliance, but he provides an illuminating portrait of perseverance and determination.

A valuable account of an extraordinary man, although most readers will have to accept Hawking’s genius on faith.
During World War I, women physicians saw an opportunity to aid the war effort and prove their professional worth. Drawing on rich archival material, including letters and memoirs, London-based journalist Moore crafts a compelling history of the challenges faced by women doctors in the early years of the last century. The author focuses primarily on two indomitable women—surgeon Louisa Garrett Anderson and physician and anesthetist Flora Murray—who both had trained at the London School of Medicine for Women and who became lifelong companions. They, like their colleagues, faced widespread hostility; the British Medical Journal complained that the profession was being “besieged by fair invaders.” Nevertheless, determined to set up a hospital for wounded soldiers, the two women raised funds from friends, family, and fellow suffragettes, and many young women came forward eager to serve as doctors, nurses, and orderlies. First establishing a hospital in France, soon their success came to the attention of the British War Office, which invited them to run a 1,000-bed military hospital in a former workhouse on Endell Street in London. Unlike any other British Army hospital, Moore writes, “it would be run solely by women, with an almost entirely female staff.” The author’s chronicle of the Endell Street hospital highlights the barbarity of the war: In its four and a half years of existence, the hospital treated tens of thousands of patients and performed more than 7,000 surgeries, treating injuries—such as wounds from powerful artillery and high-explosive shells and the horrific effects of chlorine gas—that many physicians had never before seen. Its reputation was stellar despite incredulous reports about a hospital run by “mere women.” Many medical schools, facing a dearth of male students, at last opened their doors to women. After the war, though, “women doctors were sidelined again into low-status, low paid jobs” in maternity, child care, asylums, and workhouse infirmaries, and medical schools again barred women; “peace had seemingly brought their value to an end.”

An absorbing history of courage and carnage. (16-page b/w insert)
These days, the author writes, Americans aren’t good at being alone can be a healthy thing—that in turn produces loneliness, the inability to summon human contact when human contact is wanted, even if one is in a room full of people. These days, the author writes, Americans aren’t good at being with others, and it doesn’t help that social media thrives on our voracious appetite for news it didn’t even know it had.”

For more than a century,” writes Murthy, “the physicians holding this office [the surgeon general’s] have addressed national health crises ranging from yellow fever and influenza outbreaks to the aftermath of hurricanes and tornados to the terrorist attacks on 9/11.” The epidemic he was called on to address took more insidious forms: eating disorders, depression, opioid and other chemical addiction, and suicide. All have in common a source in social dislocation—but not isolation, since the numbers are meaningful. As the author observes, there are more lonely or socially isolated people in America today than there are smokers, smoking having been a health problem that never mind the tobacco lobbyists. Loneliness is more difficult to spot than a curl of smoke, and for that, Murthy offers some useful prescriptions, including teaching people “self-compasion,” which “is what shields us from—or at least softens the blow of—the judgment and ridicule of people who don’t understand us.” Other measures for young people, who bear much of the weight of the epidemic, include setting aside more family time and encouraging offline as well as online play.

A page-turning hybrid of biography, media analysis, and business history. O’Donnell, a former political correspondent at Bloomberg, debuts with a wrenching family story that spreads across much of the landscape of World War II. The principal figure in the story is Inge, the author’s grandmother, who died in 2017; throughout the author’s youth, Inge was reticent, even secretive, about her experiences during the war. “Silence has always dominated women’s experience of war,” writes the author. Inge’s experiences, she writes, comprise “a story of love and family, of a girl from a vanished land who lived through a time when Europe, and its humanity, collapsed.” Inge and her family lived comfortably in the Prussian town of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia) near the Baltic Sea. The author

At the center of this tale, of course, is Ted Turner (b. 1938), the unpredictable Atlanta-based billboard advertising tycoon who refused to believe the countless observers who argued that a 24-hour news network was a crazy idea that would never last. Throughout the 1970s, Turner began acquiring obscure, underperforming radio and television properties. As he gradually learned about the dissemination of news, he wondered whether the burgeoning cable-TV technology could become the foundation for nonstop news from around the world. With masterful reporting and clear prose packed with memorable anecdotes, Napoli, who began her career in 1981 as an unpaid intern at CNN in New York and whose previous book chronicled the lives of Ray and Joan Kroc, crafts a multipart business thriller: How will Turner raise adequate money to back the risky venture? Will his lack of diplomacy, bizarre personal behavior, and sometimes-offensive beliefs sabotage his ability to hire anyone capable of making his vision a reality other than visionary Reese Schonfeld (co-founder of CNN and the Food Network)? Is there enough news to fill the screen 24/7? Will an adequate number of potential viewers install cable TV to sustain CNN beyond the first year? As the author develops the journalistic and financial angles related to the development of CNN, she skillfully works in tangential ventures, such as Turner’s strategic purchase of the Atlanta Braves and his travels to Cuba, where he met with Fidel Castro. The narrative starts to wind down in 1987, when Turner sold a major stake in his empire to Time Warner. (His marriage to Jane Fonda receives little attention.) AT&T purchased Time Warner in 2018, “but CNN survives,” writes Napoli in closing, “and not even the mighty phone company can obliterate its founding story, nor the spirit of exploration that created it.”

A touch too pat at times but, overall, a well-considered diagnosis of a real and overlooked crisis in public health.
Thorough analysis of a challenging problem executed with a personal touch that makes it highly readable.

**WHEN WE DO HARM**

A Doctor Confronts Medical Error
Ofri, Danielle
Beacon (904 pp.)
$26.95 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-8070-3788-1

A doctor examines the causes behind medical errors and how to minimize them.

Ofri is a clinical professor at NYU School of Medicine who has also treated patients at Bellevue Hospital for more than 20 years, and her popular books about medicine and the doctor-patient relationship include *What Doctors Feel* and *What Patients Say, What Doctors Hear*. In her latest, she combines extensive research with stories of patients who have been harmed and enhances the narrative with details of her own disconcerting experiences as a clinician. What makes this book special is Ofri’s perceptive and compassionate nature; she sees her own patients as real people and is candid with readers about her concerns and vulnerabilities. The heart of the narrative focuses on the cases of two men who died while being hospitalized—one with leukemia and one with severe burns. Through Ofri’s research, it becomes clear that poor communication and technology played roles in their deaths. Sandwiched between accounts of the specifics of the medical care of these two men, the author looks broadly at errors in diagnosis, biases, malpractice suits, unsafe working conditions, impossible workloads, malfunctioning technology, and the impact of electronic medical records. Patients, of course, expect zero errors in their medical care; however, in our modern health care system, notes the author, a more realistic goal is not perfection but harm reduction. She recommends revamping the system to make it less possible for people to commit errors, and she lays out the concept of a necessary culture shift. In the final chapter, Ofri provides examples of what that shift would entail and some of the problems it would encounter. For patients, the author has a number of practical recommendations: Make sure every medical professional who touches you washes their hands; take your pill bottles with you; ask questions and take notes; and, if possible, have another person with you.

Thorough analysis of a challenging problem executed with a personal touch that makes it highly readable.
**THE HABSBURGS**

*To Rule the World*

Rady, Martyn

Basic (416 pp.)

$32.00 | May 12, 2020

978-1-5416-4450-2

A sweeping chronicle of the rise and fall of the Habsburg dynasty.

In this ambitious overview, Rady, a professor of Central European history and author of *The Habsburg Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (2017), delivers a mostly chronological journey through the Habsburg dynasty from the 13th to the 20th centuries while contextualizing the times in which it flourished and, eventually, faded. Because the empire over which the Habsburgs reigned was enormous (“the Habsburgs were the first rulers whose power encompassed the world”), nonacademic readers may find it difficult to keep track of all the names and dates. Nevertheless, Rady valiantly attempts to give the principals some distinct accomplishments and traits: Maximilian (1459-1519), a self-promoter “who oversaw the composition of three allegorical autobiographies in which he depicted himself as the most chivalric and accomplished of knights,” brought Spain into the empire. Charles V, Maximilian’s grandson, attempted to outlaw Protestantism and eventually conceded that the Spanish Habsburgs would be split off from the Austrian Habsburgs and ruled respectively by his son Philip and brother Ferdinand while he retired to a monastery. Rudolph (1552-1612), a great art collector, employed Johannes Kepler as his astrologer, and Maria Theresa (1717-1780) instituted schooling for all children, frowned upon alchemy, and banned vampirism, which fascinated the media at the time: “There were stories of ‘the undead feasting on the living, of exhumed bodies oozing with the blood of victims, and of stakings and beheadings.’” Franz Joseph, whose nephew and heir would be assassinated in 1914, ruled for almost 70 years and created the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Though Rady is quick to acknowledge the Habsburgs’ missteps and weaknesses, he concludes that “their legacy survives...as a vision that combined power, destiny, and knowledge, and blended earthly and heavenly realms in a universal enterprise that touched every aspect of humanity’s temporal and spiritual experience.”

A comprehensive and, at times, lively chronicle, but not for casual readers with no prior knowledge of European history. (maps; family trees)

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**DIARY OF A DRAG QUEEN**

Rasmussen, Crystal with Rasmussen, Tom

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (432 pp.)

$17.00 paper | Apr. 14, 2020

978-0-374-53857-6

A British queer performer’s account of the tumultuous year that became their defining moment.

In this gloriously outrageous memoir, Rasmussen, who speaks both as “Tom” and their performance alter ego “Crystal,” tells stories about the tribulations and triumphs of life as a drag queen. Born to a working-class family in Lancaster, Rasmussen went to Cambridge to study veterinary medicine. When the book opens, the author has graduated and is working in the New York fashion industry: “It’s a fairly usual First Job in Fashion: latte runs, bollockings for eating too much at breakfast, being reminded I’ll never make it in this business.” On the side, Rasmussen dragged, worked as a journalist, and had copious sex while pining for their best friend/love of their life, Ace. Rasmussen returned to England to make their career in London and be close to family and friends. At first, the obstacles seemed overwhelming. Ace was in love with a man, steady dragging work was nowhere to be found, and Rasmussen was forever overdrawn at the bank. Then the author slept with a “handsome brunette bear” writer and editor who helped them begin making connections in the world of journalism. They accepted a job as an intern at an influential London fashion magazine only to be “gently dismissed” shortly afterward for telling magazine editors their work was racist. While Rasmussen’s journalistic career, which would eventually blossom, temporarily stalled, their performing career and personal life began to take off. Their queer performance group played Glastonbury, where, high on ecstasy, Rasmussen and Ace began the journey toward a committed relationship after their “first sexual experience together,” in a Portalo. Soul-baring, shamelessly explicit, and wickedly funny, Rasmussen’s relentlessly entertaining book gets beneath the glitter and drama of drag to reveal how a practice often dismissed as misogynistic can serve as a kind of salvation for many nonbinary people. Ultimately, it is a revolutionary “kind of self-care that makes you totally healed, a complete person, even if just for a night.”

A sharp-eyed and hilarious memoir.

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**WE NEED TO TALK**

*A Memoir About Wealth*

Risher, Jennifer

Xeno/Red Hen Press (280 pp.)

$26.95 | May 5, 2020

978-1-939096-46-3

A philanthropist and dot-com–boom millionaire broaches the topic of extreme affluence by exploring the impact sudden wealth had on her life.
Risher joined the Microsoft human resources department in 1991 after leaving a fledgling career in advertising. At $26,000, her starting salary was modest. But the stock options that came with her job began to skyrocket less than two years later, and her 1995 marriage to a Microsoft executive catapulted her into stratospheric heights of wealth. Yet her new life was no fairy tale. The daughter of middle-class parents who inculcated the importance of frugality, she suddenly discovered her own greed. She remembers, for example, how her nearly one-carat diamond engagement ring only whetted an appetite for a “bigger, flawless, colorless, perfectly-cut stone.” But Risher worked on moderating her desires. Rather than buy a McMansion, she and her husband settled on a house that fit their status as urban professionals. When she eventually left Microsoft to raise children, she worried about lacking deeper purpose and alienating middle-class friends and family members. Aware that the public education system was broken, the author enrolled her children in a private school where parents “sized one another up” and competed to make the largest donations. Eventually, Risher became involved in charitable giving projects. She also connected with other affluent women who made her realize that feeling insecure and struggling to speak openly about money with friends and family were part of the price one paid for being newly wealthy. The naiveté and guilt the author demonstrates may frustrate some readers, but her honesty about the personal dark sides that sudden wealth covered her own greed. She remembers, for example, how her nearly one-carat diamond engagement ring only whetted an appetite for a “bigger, flawless, colorless, perfectly-cut stone.”

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Not for everyone but candid and topical.

**REEF LIFE**
*An Underwater Memoir*

Roberts, Callum
Photos by Mustard, Alex
Pegasus (368 pp.)
$28.95 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-64313-329-4

A leading ocean scientist examines the mostly bad news concerning the health of the world’s coral reefs in a blend of polemic and memoir.

Roberts, a winner of the Rachel Carson Award and the Mountbatten Award, has been a student of marine biology for more than four decades. “When I began my career as a marine biologist,” he writes, “we knew little about this hidden world.” About the object of his specialized study, he adds, “but as we have come to know coral reefs with ever greater intimacy, we have learned that this world is fragile and increasingly endangered, by us.” The author begins in 1982 with his explorations of the reefs of the Red Sea as a student surrounded by a motley collection of scientists, including a field manager Roberts describes as “a whip-thin bundle of nervous energy.” The odd-ball types are constants of the field, but knowledge of the oceans has increased considerably during the author’s career. As for the fish—well, he reveals that “an old ichthyological adage says that the average fish lives ten minutes, given the billions of eggs spawned and the miniscule number that make it to adulthood.”

A healthy population of seaweed-munching fish is critically important to the health of a reef, and, all things being connected to all other things, the overfishing of reef dwellers means a decline in reefs. In the author’s words, “it is the high intensity of reef herbivory that keeps reefs coral-dominated.” Roberts examines failing reef systems such as those in the Caribbean and particularly the Great Barrier Reef off Australia. Can they be saved? Yes, answers the author, but only if we give up fossil fuels and “embrace renewables with great urgency,” which means that the answer is likely really no.

A charming, well-written introduction to coral-reef ecology and the scientists who uncover its mysteries. (24 pages of color photos)
An impressive blend of dispassionate reporting, pungent condemnation of public welfare, and gritty humanity.

**THIS IS ALL I GOT**

A New Mother's Search for Home

Sandler, Lauren

Random House (352 pp.)

$27.00 | Apr. 28, 2020

978-0-399-58995-9

A closely observed chronicle of a year in the life of a homeless single mother as she negotiates the system of public assistance. Brooklyn-based journalist Sandler shadows Camila, a 22-year-old Dominican mother of a new-born living in New York City without a supportive family or a stable place to call home. As the author writes, she "wanted to witness and understand how deepening inequality is lived in America, and particularly in New York, a city that gets richer as the poor get poorer." Throughout the narrative is an over-arching indictment of the catastrophe of financial inequality in America, where “most people in poverty are women, specifically women of color. Furthermore, they are single mothers.” Sandler displays her journalistic talent by unerringly presenting this dire situation: the vanishing safety net, the stubbornness of entrenched racism, and the snowballing burdens of poor women. As galling as the statistics are—e.g., 2.5 million homeless children in America—it is following in Camila's footsteps that drives the story home. She possesses an agile mind and a flabbergasting degree of patience, but her circumstances are dictated by the sum of her paperwork. Camila is a force, but force only goes so far as she experiences progressive brutality. Showing how public assistance programs have continually been cut back—in 1970, the average check was $1,125 a month; in 2015, it was “barely more than two hundred bucks”—the author also pays close attention to Camila’s particular circumstances amid a bizarre bureaucracy. These included the loss of child care payments, Medicaid, eligibility for emergency shelter, child support payments, and numerous temporary homes. “Respect had always been the most important thing to her,” writes Sandler, “but taking a stand for it had become a luxury she couldn’t afford.” Remarkably, Camila manages to juggle caring for her young son, attending school (a two-hour commute) and work-study, and desperately trying to establish ties with her exploded biological family.

An impressive blend of dispassionate reporting, pungent condemnation of public welfare, and gritty humanity.

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**THE DOUBLE X ECONOMY**

The Epic Potential of Women’s Empowerment

Scott, Linda M.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (368 pp.)

$28.00 | May 5, 2020

978-0-374-14262-9

The roles women play—and should play—in the world's economy. “Everywhere, the barriers to women's economic inclusion reach beyond work and salary to encompass property ownership, capital, credit, and markets,” writes Scott, the founder of the Global Business Coalition for Women’s Economic Empowerment. When these issues are combined with sexual harassment and violence, women find themselves disadvantaged at every level, which in turn creates an imbalance in the world’s economies. In this in-depth, highly revealing analysis, the author dives headfirst into the multiple layers of hardship that prohibit women from obtaining equal status with men. These issues can be simple, like the lack of feminine hygiene products for young girls in developing African nations. Without them, they are unable to attend school, which puts them behind their male counterparts, leading to a high dropout rate, and “once a community knew that a girl had menstruated, men would begin following her to and from school”—a trend that often leads to sexual violence. Furthermore, women own less than 20% of global land, so safety and security are often in men's hands. If women choose to become mothers, they often leave the workforce—or never enter it in the first place—in order to raise their children, which puts them in a dependent position. Throughout, Scott backs her arguments with hard data and numerous charts and graphs, showing unequivocally that women are not being treated fairly regarding nearly every aspect of the global economy. Fortunately, Scott shares plenty of easily implementable ideas to change the situation—e.g., using women's purchasing power to boycott companies that refuse to change to make the world a more equitable environment for all. (33 graphs and illustrations)
ADMINISTRATIONS OF LUNACY
Racism and the Haunting of American Psychiatry at the Milledgeville Asylum
Segrest, Mab

A penetrating study of color-line injustices in the realm of psychiatry.

Some 25,000 bodies lie buried behind the Central State Hospital in Milledgeville, Georgia, the world’s “largest graveyard of disabled people,” part of the world’s largest mental asylum. Founded in 1842 and operational until a decade ago, it was part of a system that, as with other institutions in the Deep South, was divided by race. Mentally ill (or so declared, at any rate) African Americans were put to work in fields and factories and deprived of books, writing materials, and personal items; mentally ill whites were given more leeway and greater privileges. Social justice activist Segrest interrogates the records to give specific weight to such charges. She notes, for example, that when it came to calico dresses at the time of the supposedly separate-but-equal tenet of Plessy v. Ferguson, “white women got one thousand and colored women got a negligible thirty-five.” (The term “colored,” she explains in the opening pages, is a term of art of statisticians of the period, as are such designations as “imbeciles” and “lunatics.”) Valuably, the author also examines psychiatric files to investigate presumed offenses that brought African Americans to Milledgeville in the first place. Many women, for their part, were hospitalized with what would now likely be characterized as PTSD following physical abuse, rape, and other assaults. The hospital operated on “modern” theories promulgated by specialists who were likely in the early 20th century to advocate sterilization of the mentally ill in the interest of eugenics, with Georgia standing at “the epicenter of race and psychiatry” in inflicting this punishment on African Americans disproportionally. For those who suppose that all is well now, Segrest concludes, pointedly, that the “struggle for equity in medicine and health in the United States and globally is not won, and may not be for a while.”

A valuable contribution to the history of mental health care and of the racist applications of medicine.

WHEN BLOOD BREAKS DOWN
Lessons From Leukemia
Sekeres, Mikkael A.
MIT Press (328 pp.) $29.95 | Apr. 21, 2020 978-0-262-04372-4

Three patient stories illuminate the “malignant golem” of leukemia.

“People are both terrified and fascinated by leukemia in all its forms,” writes Sekeres, the director of the Leukemia Program at the celebrated Cleveland Clinic. “It is a monster... that grows out of control and invades the organs within our own bodies. It is metastatic at its genesis.” The events described are real, but the accounts are composites drawn from the author’s patients. Joan is a 48-year-old surgical nurse; David, a 68-year-old retired factory worker; Sarah, a 36-year-old pregnant woman. Each has a different type of leukemia, but their symptoms all reflect the uncontrolled growth of cells in bone marrow, which contains the cells that give rise to the red blood cells that carry oxygen, the white blood cells that are part of our immune system, and the platelets that aid in blood clotting. When the white cell progenitors become cancerous, they proliferate rapidly, crowding out red blood cells and platelets. However, the white cells do not mature, remaining functionless. Consequently, leukemia patients become anemic from lacking red blood cells, risk internal bleeding from loss of platelets, and suffer from a weakened immune system, making them prone to infection. Standard chemo treatment to kill the cancerous cells comes with side effects such as hair loss, skin rashes, nausea, and vomiting. What makes this narrative so compelling is the author’s ability to bring readers with him on his rounds as he meets each patient and family member, discusses treatment options, and follows them through weeks of treatment, reviewing lab results and bone marrow biopsies, and, when necessary, discussing next steps such as bone marrow transplants. These plot points, in addition to an epilogue, allow Sekeres to review leukemia research, including immunotherapy and the potential for more personalized therapies targeting specific genetic abnormalities. Nevertheless, leukemias remain among the most complex and difficult-to-resolve cancers, with no obvious causes and often brutalizing treatments.

That three patient narratives should prove so effective a lesson is a tribute to Sekeres as both storyteller and physician.
As anti-Semitism surges once again, this page-turning history reminds us of the sanguinary consequences of unchecked hatred.

THE GOOD ASSASSIN
How a Mossad Agent and a Band of Survivors Hunted Down the Butcher of Latvia
Talty, Stephan
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (320 pp.)
$28.00 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-328-61308-0

The compelling story of the pursuit of a man responsible for the murders of at least 30,000 Latvian Jews during World War II.

Talty, whose bestselling books include The Black Hand and A Captain’s Duty (which was made into the Oscar-winning Tom Hanks vehicle Captain Phillips), remains true to his technique, delivering thoroughly researched, engaging nonfiction in a thrillerlike narrative style. The author has several stories to tell, including that of Latvian murderer Herbert Cukurs, who transformed from a heroic civil aviator to a brutal executioner; the Holocaust in Latvia in general; Zelma Shepshelovich, a young Jewish woman who managed to escape capture and deportation; and Nazi hunters Tuviah Friedman and Simon Wiesenthal. Talty weaves these stories throughout the text, creating a rich narrative. The Holocaust accounts—degradations, torture, murder, etc.—are difficult to read yet nonetheless important. “Cukurs of the time period and the slender rays of hope that occasionally occurred more than 40 pages before the end of the text; the final intense climax of the action (the death of Cukurs) was hardly unique; there were many men like him in Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, and elsewhere,” writes Talty. “But in his local context, he was the leading monster.”

As anti-Semitism surges once again, this page-turning history reminds us of the sanguinary consequences of unchecked hatred. (8-page b/w insert)

THE COMPTON COWBOYS
The New Generation of Cowboys in America’s Urban Heartland
Thompson-Hernández, Walter
Morrow/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$28.99 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-06-291060-8

A year in the lives of 10 inner-city men fighting to keep black cowboy culture alive and well even as their personal lives are in disarray.

By the time New York Times reporter Thompson-Hernández caught up with them, the Los Angeles–based Compton Cowboys seemed to be experiencing a wishful and elegiac pall. The equine outpost, which had always served as refuge and home away from home throughout the crew’s often tumultuous and traumatized childhoods, was in dire straits. Mayisha Akbar,
the indomitable force of nature who founded the Compton Junior Posse in 1988, was heading toward retirement, and the big-money donors that had kept the expensive operation afloat were slowly disappearing. The mantle of ranch leadership was about to shift to Randy, Mayisha’s nephew. While Randy understood what was required to allow the group to blaze a new trail into the future, the stakes were high: keeping alive the legacy and heritage of men like Nat Love and Bill Pickett, real-life black cowboys who, despite Hollywood’s whitewashing of history, were integral in establishing what became known as the Wild West. However, regardless of their determination to pass down the black cowboy tradition to the next generation of new riders, the CJP members had to cope with the daily realities of life on the gang-scarred streets of Compton. In his intimate yet sober-eyed narrative, Thompson-Hernández never shies away from those realities. All of the Compton Cowboys, to some degree, have struggled with the PTSD associated with the neighborhood’s dangerous landscape. Across the board, there continues to be unresolved anger and alcoholism, self-doubt and trepidation. Describing Mayisha’s retirement party, the author writes, “the future of the ranch was uncertain and everyone in attendance looked at the cowboys for answers that they did not have.” The author’s fondness and respect for the CJP crew is consistently patent (only occasionally overly so), and he tells their story straight, no matter how much it hurts.

A gritty and somber chronicle of an often overlooked community. (16-page color photo insert)

**They Knew They Were Pilgrims**

**Plymouth Colony and the Contest for American Liberty**

*Turner, John G.*

Yale Univ. (464 pp.)

$30.00 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-0-300-22550-1

A professor of religious studies argues for reinstating the Plymouth Pilgrims at the forefront of the fight for “liberty of conscience” on American soil.

Usually relegated to the margins of academic history as the “smallest, weakest, and least important of the English colonies” compared to John Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, notes Turner, forged the first sense of American identity and mythology in terms of a participatory political framework and fierce commitment to liberty. But what did the concept of “liberty” mean to them? Separating from what they perceived as the corruption of the Church of England—from the “bondage” to “monarchs, magistrates, bishops, or synods”—they were determined to form their own congregations and elect their own officers. They were continually hounded for these desires, especially under the new king, James VI of Scotland, who ascended to the throne in 1603 and was unsympathetic to puritanism because he associated it with “limits on royal prerogatives.” Moving to the Netherlands did not prove satisfactory in the long run. Wherever they went, notes Turner, the author of *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (2012), “English separatists were disunity specialists.” Making the arduous journey across the Atlantic Ocean, however, was an act of pure faith, and their “Mayflower compact” was an attempt at establishing “a civic body politic” that did not hinge on church membership. On one hand, they were able to fashion an important defense treaty with Massasoit, which benefited both the settlers and Wampanoags and established the settlers as “the foremost military power in the region.” On the other hand, church attendance was compulsory, and the colony’s leaders banished anyone who wanted to worship by other principles, such as the Quakers. Ultimately, Turner concludes, the “Colony leaders took it for granted that some groups of people were entitled to more liberties than others.” Though rather dry, the author’s study offers original scholarship that academics will appreciate.

A sturdy history of an insular people that will appeal mostly to students of early American history. (b&w illustrations)

**SQUARE HAUNTING**

**Five Writers in London Between the Wars**

*Wade, Francesca*

Tim Duggan Books/Crown (432 pp.)

$28.99 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-0-451-49779-6

A group portrait of five celebrated female writers who declined to ride shotgun for the men who drove British literary life from World War I through 1940.

Debut author Wade, who edits the London-based *White Review*, puts a new spin on the old idea of topographical resonance—the belief that you are what you inhabit—in a book about trailblazing women who lived on Mecklenburgh Square in Bloomsbury at times that occasionally overlapped. The author uses Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* as a touchstone for the social and intellectual equality her subjects craved when they moved to the square, drawn partly by its cheap rents and proximity to the British Museum. Economic historian Eileen Power, one of them, scoffed at the idea that “the ideal wife should endeavor to model herself upon a judicious mixture of a cow, a muffler, a shadow, a mirror,” a variation on a sentiment that others in the book seemed broadly to share, if they expressed it less bluntly. The poet H.D. briefly shared her flat with D.H. Lawrence and his wife, Frieda. The detective novelist Dorothy Sayers wrote her first Lord Peter Wimsey mystery in Mecklenburgh Square, five years before the arrival of the intrepid classicist Jane Harrison, who visited ancient ruins and smoked a pipe on the steps of the Parthenon. The unlucky Woolf moved in a year before the first bombs fell on London and, after an explosion destroyed her house, found “mushrooms sprouting on the carpets.” At times, Wade overreaches or strains to link the women, most of whom weren’t friends: Each, she writes, “sought to reinvent her life” in the square, a brute-force
cliché at odds with her subjects' more original thinking. But the author has a jeweler's eye for sparkling anecdotes, and Bloomsbury ultimately emerges as far more than an anchorage for bohemians who "lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles."

Engaging profiles of women who found metaphorical rooms of their own in interwar London.

AND THEN THEY STOPPED TALKING TO ME
Making Sense of Middle School
Warner, Judith
Crown (320 pp.)
$27.00 | May 5, 2020
978-1-101-90588-3

In this call for change, a bestselling author examines the often painful middle school years and offers parents sound advice that will enable their children to become more empathetic, caring, and resilient.

This book stems from Warner's unrelenting desire to find good explanations for what her middle school–age daughter was experiencing, why the parents and other children were behaving as they were, and what she could do to improve the situation.

Over the course of two years, the author interviewed more than 100 people, including experts, educators, parents, and nonparents, from a wide variety of backgrounds and ages. With few exceptions, what she found was a shared sense of social struggle. In order to provide a better understanding of the middle school years, Warner begins by exploring the societal history of the 11- to 14-year-old age group from Colonial America to the present. She points out that the view of this age group has shifted over time and that mass media has contributed to many of the myths and negatives stereotypes often associated with middle schoolers.

Certain relief, for middle schoolers and their parents, from the discomfort associated with a difficult period in life.
WHAT YOU BECOME IN FLIGHT
A Memoir
Whittet, Ellen O'Connell
Melville House (240 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-61219-832-3

An essayist/lecturer and former ballerina tells the story of how a career-ending injury forced her to confront the violence of the art form she loved and past traumas she had suppressed.

Dance was Whittet's first passion: "As soon as I was walking I was dancing." As a little girl, she dreamed of becoming Gelsey Kirkland in The Nutcracker and began ballet lessons after her parents moved to England. There, she learned the "rigorously classical" British Royal Academy of Dance technique, which she continued to study after her family returned home to California. Whittet reveled in the joy brought about by "disciplining and strengthening my muscles, stretching them so that I had a greater range of movement." However, the older she grew, the more evident the exacting nature of classical dance became. Competitive and demanding, ballet forced dancers to seek perfection of movement regardless of personal cost. By the end of college, Whittet had suffered multiple injuries, including a spinal fracture that ultimately crushed her hopes of ballerina stardom. The end of a cherished dream was not the only trauma she suffered. After her final injury, Whittet was also raped by a boyfriend. Physically and emotionally broken from ballet, the author began a long and difficult period of rehabilitation in which an "obsession with restricting food [intake]" replaced the one she had for dancing. She eventually found a renewed sense of purpose in writing and earned an MFA. Later, and shortly after she met her future husband, Whittet became aware of a snake phobia that therapy revealed was tied to repressed memories of her rape. Throughout the narrative, the author offers a fascinating portrait of the patriarchal victimization she sees as one of the underlying connections between ballet dancing and sexual violence, but that thread sometimes gets buried in the narrative. Nonetheless, Whittet's candor and elegant prose make this book a genuinely absorbing read.

Not without blemishes but unquestionably powerful and poignant.

LINCOLN ON THE VERGE
Thirteen Days to Washington
Widmer, Ted
Simon & Schuster (640 pp.)
$35.00 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-4767-3943-4

On Feb. 11, 1861, three weeks before his inauguration, President-Elect Abraham Lincoln boarded a train for Washington, D.C. This lively account describes that eventful journey.

“Lincoln's safe delivery," writes Widmer, “would become, over the next thirteen days, a powerful symbol for the survival of democracy in America. As he traveled his circuitous route, Lincoln carried the aspirations of millions on his shoulders. Around the country, they were waiting for him.” No one doubted the occasion's historical significance, so the train overflowed with reporters, officials, friends, and fans. The author describes Lincoln's wandering, 1,900-mile journey, with well-wishers lining the tracks and huge crowds whose members clambered to shake his hand and hear a speech. Not every speech was memorable, nor were the many encounters, mishaps, and demonstrations, so Widmer wisely cuts away to deliver histories of the cities and states along the route, their citizens' reactions to the impending crisis (multiple states had already seceded from the Union), and the impressions of witnesses. Plenty of Southern sympathizers proclaimed murderous intentions, and newspapers published breathless reports of hidden bombs, efforts to sabotage the rails, and cabals of sharpshooters. Concerned railroad officials called on Alan Pinkerton, head of the famous detective agency, whose operatives swarmed over the route and reported numerous plots to harm Lincoln. Widmer is not certain if any competent assassins were at work, but Pinkerton and rail officials had no doubt. They convinced a reluctant Lincoln to depart from his schedule at the end of his trip and travel incognito through Maryland to Washington on an ordinary passenger train. This passed without incident, but news of the furtive journey produced an avalanche of bad publicity before greater events took over. While general readers may lose interest during the journey, Lincoln buffs will undoubtedly devour the book.

A colorful, richly detailed overture to Lincoln's odyssey. (b/w images)
THE DANCER, THE DREAMERS, AND THE QUEEN OF ROMANIA
How an Unlikely Quartet Created America’s Most Improbable Art Museum
Wiegand, Steve
Bancroft Press (288 pp.)
$27.95 | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-61088-494-5

Pleasantly spun tale of a museum with an unlikely history—and collection.

Located some 100 miles east of Portland, Oregon, the Maryhill Museum (dedicated in 1926) contains an offbeat assemblage of artifacts, ranging from Native American crafts to a lock of Queen Victoria’s hair, a huge collection of chess sets, and 87 pieces by Auguste Rodin. That all these things, plus a full-size concrete replica of Stonehenge, should be in the same remote place speaks to the strange genius of Sam Hill, who, retired journalist Wiegand writes, “depending on whom you asked… was either a visionary or crazier than an outhouse rat.” A world traveler and railroad executive, Hill built a 5,300-acre Shangri-La, with a palatial home intended for a mentally ill daughter, along the banks of the Columbia River while planning “quixotic” projects such as a peace arch spanning the border of the U.S. and Canada. Into his orbit had fallen Queen Marie of Romania, who boasted, “I am said to be the most beautiful woman in Europe,” and whose friend Loie Fuller, an actress and dancer whose “life overflowed with exclamation points,” convinced Hill to turn that home into a museum. Fuller used her connections with French artists such as Rodin to fill the place with art, using funds contributed by another partner. Fuller herself had been hospitalized for mental troubles, and everyone involved had colorful histories, but somehow everything came together. Beyond the founders, the Maryhill Museum survived but never exactly thrived: Its “nearly nonexistent acquisitions budget” required it to be innovative without becoming, Wiegand writes, “the kind of roadside tourist trap that parked a covered wagon on the lawn and sold grape Slushies at the ticket booth.” As the author observes, the museum endures, though it derives more of its revenue from the sale of alfalfa and wind power than from ticket sales.

A treat for fans of off-the-beaten-track places as well as odd corners of art history. (photo insert)

THE LANGUAGE OF BUTTERFLIES
How Thieves, Hoarders, Scientists, and Other Obsessives Unlocked the Secrets of the World’s Favorite Insect
Williams, Wendy
Simon & Schuster (240 pp.)
$26.00 | May 12, 2020
978-1-5011-7806-1

A merry jaunt through the past, present, and future of butterfly pop science.

In her hybrid history/science/travel text, science journalist Williams, whose previous book was a historical and scientific and cultural exploration of horses, leads readers through the body of human butterfly knowledge, driven by a guiding question: “What is it about butterflies that so easily and so universally catches the fancy of Earth’s Homo sapiens?” In the first section, the author profiles the early pioneers in butterfly breakthroughs. The second elaborates on the questions that contemporary science is currently trying to answer. The third section, urgent but not alarming, focuses on the environmental threats to the “goddess of color” and what we can do to ameliorate them. To keep the science and history accessible rather than overwhelming, Williams wisely selects key characters, transformational moments, and illustrative species. Most of the protagonists of her story are women, such as “the inestimably brave” German naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) and an American mother-daughter butterfly-tagging team. Readers should keep their computer or phone handy, as the reverent descriptions of the insects’ beauty may require visual satisfaction. Williams paces a geological event like an action movie, and her animated storytelling skills, coupled with her orientation toward universal themes like the nature of beauty, will appeal to a broad audience. The author views butterflies as emblematic of the natural world as a whole. “The world’s favorite insect,” she writes, “unites us across generations and across space and across time. They are elemental. A butterfly is an entire universe, right there in the palm of your hand.” Just as efforts to rescue endangered butterfly species have restored ecosystems, the innate human fascination with butterflies becomes a unifying factor in divided times. Our awe for them, Williams suggests, can motivate us to treat each other and the planet better, and the author guides us on our way as she informs, entertains, and rallies readers to the conservationist cause.

Expect this book to awaken the dormant butterfly enthusiast within. (photos)
Srinivasa Ramanujan was a self-taught genius whose original insights into number theory still inspire mathematicians today.

Ramanujan was born in 1887 into a Tamil family in South India. Before his birth, his grandmother dreamed that the goddess Namagiri “would write the thoughts of God on his tongue.” As a young boy growing up in temple towns, Ramanujan hated traditional classrooms and often ran away from school, but he was captivated by numbers, big and small. Gorgeous watercolor spreads show how “numbers came whispering in dreams” and “would rush across the pages in circles and packs.” He pondered complex ideas such as infinite series, number partitions, and primes; he entered high school at 10 and solved college-level problems at 15, but he couldn’t focus on anything except math. He failed college and lived in poverty and isolation, still pursuing his research with mystical zeal, “trying to learn the thoughts of God.” Eventually, his persistent attempts to find a kindred spirit paid off. Following Namagiri’s promptings, he sailed away to share his work with the best mathematicians in England.

Alznauer is a mathematician herself, and her loving tribute evokes Ramanujan’s early years with rich and authentic detail, which Miyares’ luminous compositions bring vividly to the page. All characters are Indian and have brown skin and hair.

A fascinating story beautifully told. (author’s note, bibliography) (Picture book/biography. 6-10)
I knew as soon as I'd drawn breath that I had made a terrible mistake.

I had selected the new picture book Where Lily Isn't (Godwin Books/Henry Holt, Jan. 21) to promote during the editors' segment of our Jan. 21 episode of Kirkus' weekly podcast, Fully Booked. It's a lovely picture book that explores a perennially necessary topic: the death of a pet.

In the narratorial voice of a young white child, Julie Paschkis' clear, empathetic text introduces the titular Lily in the past tense: “Lily ran // and jumped / and barked / and whimpered / and growled / and wiggled // and licked / and snuggled.” Over 2 ½ double-page spreads, Margaret Chodos-Irvine shows the child playing with Lily, a scruffy little brown dog whose enthusiasm and incessant motion is captured both in her exuberant, doggy posture—depicted in 14 variations—and a broad, continuous swoosh of green paint that lets readers know Lily rarely stops, except for the aforementioned licking and snuggling—until the right-hand page that faces those final two verbs: “But not now.” Those three words appear on an all-white, otherwise blank page that calls painful attention to Lily's absence. The rest of the book details all the many places Lily is not: the rug next to the narrator's bed; at the kitchen table “waiting for some food to fall”; at the door to bark at the letter carrier and savage the incoming mail; at the park, where “every bush is un-sniffed.” But Lily still is “inside me,” concludes the narrator: “that's where Lily is, // and where she will always be.”

In the background, as I readied myself to speak, my little dog snored. (I submit there is no more comforting sound in the world than little-dog snores.) This is the same little dog who'd come home from the vet with a terminal diagnosis a couple of weeks earlier. Clearly my choice of Where Lily Isn't was guided by some diabolical Freudian need to process my upcoming bereavement. I choked and sniffled my way through the recording.

Losing a pet is a big deal, and it’s perhaps a bigger deal for children than for anyone else. For many young children, the death of a pet is their first experience with mortality and grief, and for almost any young pet owner, bereavement is an inevitability. (Families with pet parrots and pet tortoises may be exceptions to this, depending on where their particular animal is in its life span.) To imagine that the loss of a pet is not a profound experience is to diminish both the capacity of a child to feel and the special place a pet holds in a family. And that is why we have books like Where Lily Isn't to help them.

Judith Viorst and Erik Blegvad's The Tenth Good Thing About Barney (Atheneum, 1971) has perhaps become the gold standard. The protagonist’s parents’ suggestion that he think of “10 good things” about his deceased cat, Barney, has prompted countless “10 good things” lists in bereft homes for decades. Indeed, 30 years after its publication it was the measure used by Kirkus’ reviewer in our assessment of Robbie H. Harris and Jan Ormerod’s Goodbye, Mousie (McElderry, 2001), itself an essential book; in a category dominated by stories about dogs and cats, the emotional needs of children grieving small pets are often overlooked. Phoebe Wahl's Sonya's Chickens (Tundra, 2015) likewise acknowledges the strong attachments felt by children with more-unusual pets, and it also stands out for its depiction of a bereaved child of color (Sonya is biracial). (For a selection of recent titles, see our online list of 8 Outstanding Books To Help Children Through the Loss of a Pet.)

No family wants to need one of these books, but so very many families do. Thank goodness we have them. —V.S.

Vicky Smith is the children's editor.
The large, generously set type makes this discomfiting text more accessible.

PLASTIC SEA

A Bird’s-Eye View
Blom, Kirsti & Gabrielson, Geir Wing
Trans. by Goldman, Helle Valborg
Cornell Lab Publishing Group (64 pp.)
$18.95 | Apr. 5, 2020
978-1-943645-50-3

The problem of plastics in the ocean is worldwide in scope, but it can be addressed by individuals.

This disturbing but somewhat hopeful account of an increasingly pressing environmental concern caused by humans is framed by the experience of a pair of northern fulmars, Canadian seabirds. An opening section introduces the fulmars, feeding and raising their family, and recounts the death of the female due to plastic ingestion. The second addresses the problem this useful material has created in our oceans, from the visible trash to microplastics and toxins in sea creatures and the water around them as well as the garbage whirlpools forming in our oceans. A third section suggests ways readers can help and gives examples of progress. A final spread describes the lone male, displaced from his nest but soaring off to find a new mate. The text is clearly organized, usually one topic to a spread. The large, generously set type makes this discomfiting text more accessible. There are striking, memorable photographs and vignettes and some full-bleed full-page and full, wordless double-page spreads. This effective presentation is the joint work of a versatile Norwegian writer and the Norwegian representative to the United Nations Environment Program in the area of marine litter. It was first published in Norway in 2016 and has been smoothly translated for this American edition.

A clear explanation of a pressing problem and an invitation to take action. (word list) (Nonfiction 9–13)

ONCE UPON A UNICORN’S HORN
Blue, Beatrice
Illus. by the author
Clarion (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 5, 2020
978-0-358-22926-1

A little girl learns that inner confidence can make everything around you shine.

In a magical forest lush with foliage, fairy lights, and trendy triangle bunting strung along the eaves and trees, a tiny tot named June roams in search of adventure. With patched overalls and a hooded cape, she’s ready. June discovers a grand castle (a treehouse) and a magic wand (a twig), but nothing prepares her for the sight of tiny horses who are learning to fly: “They shook their soft fur, / fluttered their sparkly tails, // and whizzed into the air.” Blue’s horses look an awful lot like wispy-tailed bunnies (with long ears and plump bodies sitting on their haunches), but this is an origin story, so unknowns are easily forgiven. Amid the wonder, June finds one sad little horse who is still on the ground, unable to fly. June wants to help. She waves her wand and wishes a great wish...but nothing happens. Her parents help her realize the magic is in being a good friend. A well-intentioned accident suddenly gives the tiny horse the power he needs, along with a fancy new horn to boot. The cozy forest and sincere narration thrum with the possibility of magic. But June knows: “My magic is deep inside. I don’t need a wand to fly.” June and her family present white.

Nonclloying but still incredibly sweet, this unicorn story bucks the trend. (Picture book 3–6)

VINNY GETS A JOB
Broder, Terry
Illus. by the author
Aladdin (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 26, 2020
978-1-5344-1356-6

A French bulldog named Vinny tries to get his first job, with humorous results.

Vinny lives in a big-city row house with his owner, a young white woman he calls Mom, and his “adopted brother,” a cat named Lester. The cat explains that Mom is gone all day at her job, so Vinny slurps up leftover soup, displaced from his nest but soaring off to find a new mate. The text is clearly organized, usually one topic to a spread. The large, generously set type makes this discomfiting text more accessible. There are striking, memorable photographs and vignettes and some full-bleed full-page and full, wordless double-page spreads. This effective presentation is the joint work of a versatile Norwegian writer and the Norwegian representative to the United Nations Environment Program in the area of marine litter. It was first published in Norway in 2016 and has been smoothly translated for this American edition.

A clear explanation of a pressing problem and an invitation to take action. (word list) (Nonfiction 9–13)
Mundane objects unleash wild, inventive stories.

BE YOUR BEST SELF
Life Skills for Unstoppable Kids
Brown, Danielle & Kai, Nathan
Illus. by Kerr, Joanna
Button Books (120 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 1, 2020
978-1-78708-039-3


Similar to many self-help books for youth, this asks readers to brainstorm their goals, to cultivate a “resilient mindset,” and to identify role models that are examples of inspiration. The authors also briefly address challenges young people often face, such as peer pressure and bullying. Most of the topics are addressed in brief passages that are frequently accompanied by quotes from famous people like Michelle Obama, J.K. Rowling, and Beyoncé. Callout boxes labeled “Nathan says…” or “Danielle says…” offer anecdotes about how they approach risk-taking, self-care, and dealing with failure, among other experiences. Though this book is a commendable achievement, especially for the then-7-year-old Kai, the sound bites of advice gloss over the heart of the many challenges presented in the book. Kerr’s upbeat, graphically simple illustrations feature diverse kids who represent different races and backgrounds, but the authors don’t tackle real-life issues these kids might face daily, such as racism, religious intolerance, ableism, and gender-identity challenges. None of the advice is inappropriate, but in not acknowledging these issues, it does both children who experience them and those who might be their allies a real disservice.

A positive life-skills book that is not truly adequate to help kids meet 21st-century challenges. (Nonfiction. 8-12)

TINY BIRD
A Hummingbird’s Amazing Journey
Burleigh, Robert
Illus. by Minor, Wendell
Christy Ottaviano/Henry Holt (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-62779-369-8

Naming his exemplar protagonist Tiny Bird, Burleigh chronicles its pre-migration feeding, its travels southward to the Florida shore, its perilous journey across the Caribbean (a convenient fishing boat provides a resting spot), and its arrival in its tropical winter home. The simple narrative is set in short, poetic lines. There’s suspense: “Over the first pounding waves, / it begins its nonstop flight of more than twenty hours. / Can Tiny Bird make it? Many hummingbirds never do.” The traveler just misses being eaten, first by a hawk and then by a large fish, and weathering a storm. And there’s expressive language, with alliteration, occasional rhyme, and plentiful imagery. After the successful trip, “Tiny Bird rests and feeds, / flickering from flower to flower / like an emerald spark flashing in the bright sun.” While the writer ascribes no gender to his character, Minor’s colorful paintings show a male. In images that feature huge flowers or the vastness of the ocean, the bird is appropriately small, but he’s magnified, reflecting his enormous courage, as he flies through the storm. Information about hummingbird size, flight, and feeding habits is sprinkled throughout the narrative and further developed in a final page of “fun facts”; there’s a map and additional facts on the endpapers.

A fine addition to “sense of wonder” collections. (tips to help hummingbirds, resources) (Informational picture book. 3-7)

IMAGINE THAT!
Burleigh, Tom
Illus. by Sanchez, Sara
Tiger Tales (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-68010-192-8

A young boy learns to expand his sense of wonder.

When Elliot leaves to go to school one rainy morning, he’s surprised to see his new neighbor, an irrepressibly cheerful girl, skipping and jumping behind him. When Elliot questions what she is doing, she patiently explains, “I’m trying to avoid these portal puddles, of course. And you should, too. You never know where you might end up.” She spins a fantastical yarn about how she was transported to Capt. Blackbeard’s ship the last time she stepped in one. The next day, she spies the pebble Elliot is kicking and declares it must be a shrunk space ship, filled with tiny ET’s. Elliot rolls his eyes, but he can’t help thinking about those space travelers throughout the day. As the week goes on, Ruby’s tales grow, and so does Elliot’s curiosity: Mundane objects like a piece of newspaper, a fallen branch, and a stinky garbage can unleash wild, inventive stories—with Elliot finally joining in. Wavy-edged pictorial thought balloons depict the imagined adventures while real life occurs in full-bleed images. Sanchez cleverly portrays Ruby and Elliot with large, off-kilter heads and expressive eyes, which makes one speculate about the many stories filled to the brim inside. Diversity is only found in the background; both protagonists present white, though Elliot is a smidge darker than Ruby.

Imaginative play at its most fun. (Picture book. 3-6)
DEAR BEAST
Butler, Dori Hillestad
Illus. by Atteberry, Kevan
Holiday House (80 pp.)
$15.99 | May 12, 2020
978-0-8234-4492-2

Epistolary dispatches from the eternal canine/feline feud.

Simon the cat is angry. He had done a good job taking care of his boy, Andy, but now that Andy's parents are divorced, a dog named Baxter has moved into Andy's dad's house. Simon believes that there isn't enough room in Andy's life for two furry friends, so he uses the power of the pen to get Baxter to move out. Inventively for the early-chapter-book format, the story is told in letters written back and forth; Simon's are impeccably spelled on personalized stationery while Baxter's spelling slowly improves through the letters he scrawls on scraps of paper. A few other animals make appearances—a puffy-lipped goldfish who for some reason punctuates her letter with “Blub...blub...” seems to be the only female character (cued through stereotypical use of eyelashes and red lipstick), and a mustachioed snail ferries the mail to and fro. White-appearing Andy is seen playing with both animals as a visual background to the text, as is his friend Noah (a dark-skinned child who perhaps should not be nicknamed "N Man"). Cat lovers will appreciate Simon's prickliness while dog aficionados will likely enjoy Baxter's obtuse enthusiasm, and all readers will learn about the time and patience it takes to overcome conflict and jealousy with someone you dislike.

An effective early chapter book conveyed in a slightly overdone gag. (Fiction. 6-8)

HOW LONG IS FOREVER?
Carey, Kelly
Illus. by Zhuang, Qing
Charlesbridge (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-58089-578-1

Forever is a long time to wait.

Mason grumbles that waiting for Nana's blueberry pie “is taking forever.” Amused—and eager to distract his grandson—Grandpa asks Mason if he knows how long forever is. Has Grandpa owned his tractor forever? Did it take forever for Nana's roses to grow up to the chimney? Is it as long as water “has been racing down the stream”? Forever must be as long as “the great elm tree has been here.” Nope, says Grandpa, but waiting's over; pie’s ready! After devouring a slice, Mason declares it was worth the wait. Now, his understanding is clearer. Forever, he asserts, is how long he’ll love Nana's pie. Even better—it’s how long he’ll love Grandpa and Nana. This simple story sweetly portrays a realistic, loving relationship. Listeners on laps or in group settings will eagerly volunteer examples of how long forever is and when they had to wait for desired things. Commendably, the tale helps youngsters approach an abstract math concept—time—concretely and creatively. The watercolor-and-colored pencil illustrations are warm and expressive, depicting lush backgrounds. Mason has light-brown skin; his grandparents' skin is pale. Grandpa has stark white hair and white facial hair; Nana looks less stereotypical, with a blonde bob and red specs. The author provides a link to some luscious recipes.

It won't take forever for kids to return to this one. (Picture book. 3-7)
GENIUS JOLENE
Cassidy, Sara
Illus. by Ohua, Charlene
Orca (112 pp.)
$7.95 paper | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-4598-2529-1

Jolene accompanies her trucker dad on a job to Los Angeles.
It’s time for Jolene’s annual adventure with her dad—she has been making long-haul trips with him since she was 4. She loves camping out in the cab, eating road-stop food, and being together on the road—just the two of them. For this trip, she’s looking forward to rating onion rings together. Things are different this trip, though, because in the last year her parents got divorced when Jolene’s dad came out as gay. She now alternates weeks living with her mom in their old apartment and with her dad in the new apartment he shares with his boyfriend, Joey. These are big changes, but unfortunately, the author doesn’t dive deep into how Jolene is feeling about them, and it seems like a missed opportunity for exploration of identity and feelings as well as a way to model emotional communication in difficult situations. Grayscale illustrations every few pages help pace new chapter-book readers through the story. The text contains no reference to race or ethnicity for Jolene and her parents; the illustrations show a freckle-faced Jolene with brown skin while her mom has dark skin and her dad has white skin. Joey is Coast Salish, and there is an explanation of what “Indigenous” means but not much further exploration of this identity either. Backmatter includes recipes for onion rings, aioli, and spruce-tip syrup.

An unremarkable father-daughter bonding story in a remarkable setting. (Fiction. 6-8)

THIS IS GUS
Chatterton, Chris
Illus. by the author
Penguin Workshop (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 19, 2020
978-0-593-09736-6

A grumpy basset hound is unhappy with his life until a puppy arrives to cheer him up.

Gus has grouch written all over him. His brow is furrowed, his eyes are glowing, and his posture is stiff and unyielding. He “doesn’t like much of anything,” including walks, sticks, balls, and making friends. He doesn’t even enjoy his own birthday party. Midway through this litany of woes, a perky basset pup shows up as one of the birthday presents. The unnamed puppy is revealed as the first-person narrator of the story, changing the negative focus to a positive one. The appealing pup declares that Gus now likes activities such as bathtime and hide-and-seek, though the looks on Gus’ face don’t match that narrative. The surprising climax involves a huge bowl of sausages, with the gradually thawing Gus saving just one sausage for the hopeful young dog. Comical illustrations use bold shapes and bright colors against uncluttered backgrounds, and sausages decorate the endpapers in an amusing touch. The simple story has a droll, tongue-in-cheek sense of humor that will be understood by preschoolers and appreciated by older children as well. This funny tale has wide appeal, from younger children just learning to listen to a real story to beginning readers who can decode the easy, repetitive text.

Give grumpy Gus and his positive puppy pal another sausage and invite them back for a sequel. (Picture book. 3-7)

GEOMETRY IS AS EASY AS PIE
Coppens, Katie
Tumblehome Learning (40 pp.)
$17.95 | Mar. 15, 2020
978-1-943431-52-6
Series: Piece of Cake

Why use pie charts to demonstrate basic principles of geometry when actual pies will do?

In her equally scrumptious follow-up to Geology Is a Piece of Cake (2017), Coppens once again keeps the focus on the food—linking introductions to seven fundamental concepts of geometry, including “Symmetry,” “Tessellations,” and “Angles,” by quickly turning each topic pie-ward: “How does rotational symmetry relate to pie?” “How do polygons relate to pie?” “How does Pi (π) relate to pie?” The illustrations offer a similarly enlightening mix of simple diagrams and color photos (most by the author herself) of beautifully decorated pies, sliced or whole as required for demonstrative purposes. Clear, simple line diagrams complement these photos and ably help to integrate the content. A discussion of right, complementary, acute, and obtuse angles (and more) yields explorations of both equitable slicing and relative appetite size. Recipes? Of course...eight in all, ranging from appetizer-sized samosas and a savory quiche to a butterscotch pie and a lattice-topped apple masterpiece (demonstrating parallel and perpendicular lines, natch). All come with detailed instructions, though for all but the final array of miniature berry pies, pre-made dough or crusts are recommended. The author closes with 20 challenging review questions (about geometry, but cast in pie-centric language) and a final photo gallery labeled “Just Desserts” to drool over.

A cute angle any way you slice it. (Glossary) (Nonfiction. 9-12)
Rebellion sometimes comes in surprising packages....

Umbrellas are considered perfectly acceptable and commonplace today, but in the 1750s in England—where “On some days, it drizzled. On others, it muzzled. On others, it pelted and showered and spat”—they were considered foolish and ridiculous. “It’s not what we do,” the people of London said, until a man named Jonas Hanway was inspired to keep dry by taking a stand and pulling out his own umbrella, much to the consternation of those around him. Lively and colorful watercolors combine with bouncing onomatopoeia and other wordplay to show the cranky Hanway, a man who disliked change yet hated rain so much he traveled around the world in search of a place where it didn’t exist. When he sees umbrellas in action in Persia, he falls in love. His use of the seemingly frivolous object eventually causes its adoption into genteel English society. This deceptively simple historical selection lightly touches on originality, innovation, xenophobia, and cultural sharing and change while explaining how perception and reality can conflict. In the 18th-century scenes, characters are depicted as white in England and with brown skin in Persia, but a scene of modern London is appropriately diverse (and rainy). Endnotes include a brief history of the umbrella.

Both a bubbly historical account of umbrellas and a lighthearted tale of embracing change. (Informational picture book. 4-8)
The protocol that poet Naomi Shihab Nye employs to pick up trash on streets isn’t excessively elaborate: Before going on a trash walk—like a walk the rest of us would take, except she picks up trash—she gathers an empty garbage bag, cotton garden gloves, and tongs. These aren’t extra-long tongs with pincers at the end, designed for picking up trash; these are kitchen tongs. “The bending is part of the rhythm to me,” she writes in the introduction to Cast Away: Poems for Our Time (Greenwillow, Feb. 11), her collection of poems about trash. “It’s trash yoga.” It takes a “surprisingly short” amount of time to fill up a bag with trash that belongs to other people, she says.

If she’s not in San Antonio, where she lives, Nye will sometimes grab an extra bag hidden in the trash can in her hotel room; Nye has collected trash in cities across America and around the globe as she travels to teach and read from her work (she is currently the Poetry Foundation’s Young People’s Poet Laureate for 2019-2021). Anything that looks like a full meal she’ll leave where it is. She also doesn’t disturb the evidence of “certain pharmaceutical transactions.” After her walks in San Antonio, she puts other people’s trash in her own trash bin.

If it seems strange that a respected poet who will receive the National Book Critics Circle’s lifetime achievement award in March and is the poetry editor for the New York Times Magazine crouches over the smelly refuse people can’t bother to throw in a trash can, to Nye it seems quite natural. She hypothesizes about her habit in Cast Away: “Perhaps this stems from being bicultural, belonging nowhere and everywhere at once, being a ‘pleaser,’ always trying to make my parents and friends happy, or perhaps it’s a result of my preference for clean spaces.”

One thing it is not is a waste of time. The poems in Cast Away go straight to the heart of what our trash reveals about us. In “At the Bus Stop,” Nye writes:

How gloomy we Americans are these days, lost in conflict, lonesome for pride, hunched up beside sacks that once held chips.

Political pundits talk about how divided America is now and how each of us should converse with Americans who aren’t exactly like ourselves. Or maybe the venting Nye does in “New Year” is also an option. It’s a poem about being in downtown San Antonio on New Year’s Day, when “[n]ot even a single day / has stretched its arms out yet.” Near some trash bins, Nye sees her first stranger of the year; he’s wearing a sweatshirt that says “All I care about is hunting and maybe like 3 people and beer,” which prompts Nye to think, “All year I can say to myself / He is not my father. / I am not...
There’s defiance in this thought. Nye is proud of espousing values that some conservatives call “snowflake” values, that lazy, hackneyed term.

Nye has increased her trash routine as she’s felt more depressed about the difficulty of political change during the Trump administration and as she laments “the loss of a sense of principle, of value of a certain kind.” Trash removal is a “therapeutic act,” she says. “If I felt overwhelmed with all the things I could not change in my nation, I could go out and pick up trash.” She remarks that she lives just three hours from facilities along the Texas-Mexico border that detain migrants, “and we can’t change that as much as we might hate it.” If we can’t change the injustice near us, “how can we be expected to solve Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Gaza, Yemen, all those tragedies?” she asks. “So yeah, [trash] has taken on new significance for me.”

Filling trash bags with garbage makes Nye feel better about the world, politically, but it also evokes truths that are apolitical. “You’re able to feel the tangibility of all of our lives, how temporary it is, how delicate, how fragile it is,” she says. “Trash is a ritual of intimacy through which I experience the reminder of how delicate everything is. And when I drive down my street and there’s no trash, I feel personal joy.”

Claiborne Smith, former editor-in-chief of Kirkus Reviews, is the literary director of the San Antonio Book Festival. Cast Away received a starred review in the Nov. 1, 2019, issue of Kirkus.

MRS BIBI’S ELEPHANT
Dalvand, Reza
Illus. by the author
Flying Eye Books (32 pp.)
$16.95 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-912497-16-4

It would be possible to believe that Iranian author/illustrator Dalvand spent a lifetime painting this picture book. Almost any page of this story contains enough characters to fill another book—but not necessarily the same book. A decorated military man might have come off the album cover of Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. A woman in red resembles Carmen Sandiego. Few of the characters have quite the same skin tone; some of the colors on the artist’s palette may not even occur in nature. But in a way, all of these townspeople are the main characters here. The entire population of Mrs Bibi’s neighborhood thinks she should give up her pet elephant and focus on something sensible, like the newspaper or the stock market. Their closed-mindedness is comically cartoonish. Mrs Bibi leaves the book with her elephant surprisingly early, taking some of the drama with her even as those left behind come to understand what they’ve lost. But at moments, the story achieves the elegant simplicity of a fable—or, perhaps, a lost chapter of The Little Prince. Many readers will feel liberated by the ending, in which every child gets a new pet, but the real appeal is in the impossible details. A house is covered—like a quilt—with an elaborate floral pattern. The capital R in the type even resembles a tiny elephant.

LITTLE TURTLE AND THE CHANGING SEA
Davies, Becky
Illus. by Poh, Jennie
Tiger Tales (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 10, 2020
978-1-68010-199-7

A sea turtle sees her beloved ocean undergoing worrisome, even dangerous, changes. Seemingly pitched to incite mild alarm rather than anything stronger in young audiences, this tale follows Little Turtle on an idyllic life course from hatching to maturity. One day, in the course of a pleasant journey back to the beach where she was born, she notices that colors are fading on the reef, and there are more and more “strange new creatures”—plastic bags, in Poh’s bubbly, shimmering undersea scenes—floating everywhere. “The ocean no longer [feels] like a friend,” particularly after she is caught in a drift of netting. In the nick of time, though, two (white) divers “[emerge] from the strangeness” to free her and to restore the sea floor to its former natural beauty. “Thank you,” she says, paddling away with a delighted smile on her delicately featured anthropomorphich face. The more emphatic tones in Michelle Lord’s The Mess That We Made, illustrated by...
Julia Blattman (2020), or Deborah Diesen’s *Pout-Pout Fish Cleans Up the Ocean*, illustrated by Dan Hanna (2019), more effectively capture the urgency of the issue. Still, the light touch here offers a less-pressured—and arguably more developmentally appropriate—invitation to absorb the information about the causes and dangers of plastic pollution that Davies places in a closing note.

A call to save our oceans, gentler than most. (print and web resources) (Picture book. 5-7)

**SUPERLUMINOUS**

*De Haes, Ian*  
*Illus. by the author*  
Annick Press (36 pp.)  
$18.95 | Mar. 10, 2020  
978-1-77321-380-4

Nour’s inner light doesn’t feel special when she starts school, but when she shares it with her baby sister, she is reassured of its value.

Nour was born “luminous. She glows. She sparkles. As though a little sun was shining right inside of her.” Nour’s light “makes her feel special,” and she uses it to light up dark corners and to chase away monsters and ghosts. On her first day of school, Nour is nervous but excited. Her light draws attention, but soon the other kids minimize her glow, and one even asks her to turn it down. Nour believes the other kids and decides she’s “not that special.” She starts to wish she were invisible, and she begins to hide her light so she won’t be noticed. One night, when her light is “almost out,” she hears her baby sister crying. She cuddles up with her sister and falls asleep wanting to give her light to her. After a wordless spread showing a room alight with the glow from the crib, they awake to find that sharing her light has not only spread it to her sister, but increased her own light. Soft yellows, browns, and greens with dynamic lines draw readers’ eyes to the pages of this lovely story, whose emotional depth stands up to many readings. Nour—which means “light” in Arabic—and her sister are brown with curly hair; their mom presents white, and their father is brown.

Warm and satisfying. (Picture book. 4-9)

**TRAVEL GUIDE FOR MONSTERS**

*Degman, Lori*  
*Illus. by Szalay, Dave*  
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)  
$16.99 | Apr. 15, 2020  
978-1-53411-037-3

Buckle up and get ready for a rollicking road trip with merry monsters.

This cast of joyful monsters in bright colors with myriad different sizes, shapes, facial features, and appendages is guaranteed to make young readers giggle. In this tour of urban and nature-based tourist attractions, the rhyming west-to-east journey connects U.S. cities, including San Francisco, Hollywood, Nashville, Orlando, and the nation’s capital, with national parks such as the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, the Everglades, and the Cape Cod National Seashore (with one generic amusement park tossed in for good measure). Most destinations merit a double-page spread with scrapbook border and the state name emblazoned across a federal highway marker. Lively illustrations capture a monster’s mischief at every stop. The San Francisco cable car turns one monster slightly green with nausea. Another grinning monster mugs for the camera as the fifth face on Mount Rushmore while a third gets its “15 seconds’ fame” compliments of Wrigley Field’s Kiss Cam. Decked out in sunglasses and floral swim trunks, a daring monster boogie boards over Niagara Fall. But who knew another would get dizzy atop Lady Liberty? In a quiet feminist statement, readers are admonished that “should you meet the president, / assure her he [the monster] won’t bite.” Background illustrations show tourists with a range of skin tones and ages, and the aforementioned president is white.

A giggly geography lesson for trip planners and daydreamers. (Picture book. 5-8)

**PRINCESS JILL NEVER SITS STILL**

*del Mazo, Margarita*  
*Illus. by Fragoso, José*  
*Trans. by Dawlatly, Ben*  
*nubeOCHO (40 pp.)*  
$16.95 | Apr. 7, 2020  
978-84-17123-83-3  
Series: Somos Ocho

The energetic adventures of a princess who can’t stay in place. When the newborn princess Jill is introduced to a joyous, unnamed kingdom, it’s all cheers and happiness. But then the king and queen discover that their child can’t be contained, forever bouncing and twirling across throne rooms and kitchens and gardens. It’s amusingly conveyed in two-page spreads on which the tiny Jill’s paths are marked in heavy red crayon over sprightly cartoons. The various experts of the land—witches, warlocks, wise men—make their diagnoses (“Your Highnesses, Princess Jill has a case of I-can’t-keep-my-bottom-still”) and prescribe a series of ineffective treatments. What finally solves the dilemma is the introduction of another royal from a different kingdom, a boy named Pablo who is also perpetually bouncing up to the chandeliers, just like Jill. Unfortunately, the story abruptly ends there, leaving readers without much to hold onto other than the idea that Jill’s acrobatics are acceptable so long as someone else of importance does the same thing. Also worth noting: Jill never actually speaks; she’s only spoken about by other characters concerned about her actions. It’s a muddled message (or lack thereof) in an otherwise quick-moving jaunt. The Spanish-language original suffers the same issues but under a different name: Jill is Sara in that version, which is titled, *La princesa Sara no para* (literally, “The princess Sara doesn’t stop”). All characters present white.

Energetic visuals and tight text—but more exhausting than engaging. (Picture book. 3-7) (La princesa Sara no para: 978-84-17123-82-6)
Sato adds intricate 3-D imagery constructed from cut paper, fabrics, and other materials.

GOLDEN THREADS
Del Rizzo, Suzanne
Illus. by Sato, Miki
Owlkids Books (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Apr. 15, 2020
978-1-77147-360-6

A stuffed fox becomes broken in a storm.

Emi and her stuffed fox live and play high on a Japanese mountain under a ginkgo tree. One day, when the first ginkgo leaf turns gold, a huge storm hits. The wind and rain bring down one of the tree branches and snatch the fox up into the midst of the storm, casting it down far away. Torn and broken and with a yellow ginkgo leaf in its pocket, the fox sits alone longing for home. Soon, it is found and brought to Kiko, a young girl in a wheelchair, who cleans and mends the fox with golden thread. Over the next year, Kiko and the fox play, heal, and become happy together. When autumn comes around again, it brings golden ginkgo leaves, and Kiko must decide if she should return the fox to his home. Del Rizzo creates a beautiful story inspired by the Japanese art form of kintsugi, mending broken pottery with gold. Feelings of brokenness, being unwanted, healing, and happiness are told from the fox’s point of view. Illustrator Sato adds intricate 3-D imagery constructed from cut paper, fabrics, and other materials. The little details, like Kiko’s leg healing over the year and the kintsugi pottery in both girls’ homes, add to the charm of the story. All characters are Japanese, with some Japanese incorporated into the text.

A beautiful story of healing and strength. (author’s note) (Picture book. 4-8)

DOUBLE TROUBLE
Dyer, Sarah
Illus. by the author
Tate/Abrams (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 24, 2020
978-1-84976-659-3

Twins go in search of trouble—and find it!

The text doesn’t assign Ellis and Erin pronouns but does identify them as twins. The siblings have light-brown skin, and Ellis wears glasses and has short, curly, dark hair; Erin’s hair is the same color but straighter and longer. These differences in appearance will help readers keep the twins straight as they cause playful chaos in their search for “trouble.” To no avail, they “rummage through the bags and boxes in the garage” and look for “trouble” at the bottom of trash bins and up a big tree. Splashing in a mud puddle brings glee and perhaps an assumption on readers’ parts that this muddy mess is, at last, where the twins “find trouble.” But they continue their search only to dejectedly go inside, “disappointed they couldn’t find trouble.” Dyer’s bright, lively collage art shows the children, dirty and disheveled, tracking mud and detritus into the house, which may again prompt readers to shake their heads knowingly—clearly these children have found trouble, whether they think so or not. But a twist ending, textually reliant on an avoidance of capitalizing Trouble as a proper noun in prior pages, reveals that Trouble is the name of the children’s cat. They find her in a satisfying culmination of their (perhaps) inadvertently mischievous search.

Delightful—and not the least bit troublesome. (Picture book. 3-6)

THE GREAT PET HEIST
Ecton, Emily
Illus. by Mottram, David
Atheneum (256 pp.)
$17.99 | May 12, 2020
978-1-5344-5536-8

Five spunky pets go to extraordinary lengths to save themselves from abandonment.

The pets: wiener dog Butterbean; Walt, nee Lucretia, a secretive black cat; Oscar, a dignified mynah; and Marco and Polo, an exuberant pair of rats. The hapless owner: an elderly woman affectionately dubbed Mrs. Food. The incident: a bad fall (entirely Butterbean’s fault, though she hates to admit it) that lands Mrs. Food in the hospital and sends the pets scrambling to become “independently wealthy” lest they be removed from her apartment to the shelter. The accidental discovery of the wealthy Coin Man leads them to plot the “heist of the century” with the assistance of an octopus named Chad and vent-dwelling Wild Rat Wallace. Ecton tells the story from the pets’ perspectives, which, while impressively executed, proves to be this madcap adventure’s biggest shortcoming. The limited experience of the pets ensures that the human issues depicted—international crime, care of the elderly, deployed caregivers, deception of Child Protective Services—are treated more flippantly than their gravity merits. The scenes dealing with the kidnapping of a child are particularly dire; the character of the Coin Man feels almost too sinister for an otherwise lighthearted children’s novel. Yet lighthearted it is: Bantering dialogue, the distinct personalities of the pets (expressively illustrated by Mottram), and the whimsical premise make for an exciting caper. Mrs. Food and the Coin Man present white; the pets’ temporary caregiver has Korean heritage.

Hilarious but haphazard. (Fantasy. 8-12)
**The Yawns Are Coming!**

Eliopoulos, Christopher  
Illus. by the author  
Dial (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | Apr. 28, 2020  
978-1-9848-1630-6  

Two friends fight personified yawns, dozes, and snoozes in order to get through their to-do list at their sleepover.

A small black child has invited best friend Noodles, a taller, white child, over for a sleepover. “We were planning to stay up all night long.” Their list of fun things to do extends over two pages. Dressed in animal onesies, they play games, jump on the trampoline, and catch fireflies. But then, as they are playing cards, it happens. Noodles cries, “The YAWNS are coming! RUUUUUN!” The kids dash this way and that, trying to lose the adorable, smiling, round blue creatures that pursue them. But to no avail. The yawns catch them. The kids try to resist, but then a big, oozy doze lands on Noodle’s head. And then the snores arrive, with wings. In the morning, the duo find that all is not lost: They make a new to-do list and get to it. Expressive cartoon illustrations set in simple colors against white space combine with varied typesetting to play up the urgency of the situation. Every child who has had a sleepover can relate to this silly tale, which turns the important aspiration of staying up all night into an adventure. The chase will have youngsters giggling all the way through and asking for another read.  

Hilarious bedtime fun, ideal for sharing—provided the dozes hold off. (Picture book. 4-9)

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**Happy Paws**

Fang, Vicky  
Illus. by Nishiyama, Christine  
Scholastic (80 pp.)  
$4.99 paper | $24.99 PLB | May 5, 2020  
978-1-338-58289-5  
978-1-338-58290-1 PLB  
Series: Layla and the Bots, 1  

Meet Layla and her Bots—Beep, Bop, and Boop—stars of this new, STEM-centric series.

Beep is the knowledge manager, Boop is the engineer, and Bop is the software developer. The quad resides happily in Blossom Valley, working tech by day and then moonlighting as rock stars performing in “all sorts of cool places.” A gig at the Happy Days Amusement Park presents their first challenge, when Layla and her mechanical friends learn that the park may have to close down due to low patronage. Naturally, Layla and the Bots decide to investigate. Layla discovers that her Blossom Valley neighbors all appear to be hanging out with their dogs at the local dog park. The team utilizes the skills of the bots to research the number of families in Blossom Valley and brainstorm reasons why they may all be going to the dog park. After talking to the owner of Happy Days, Layla concludes that to bring back the park’s customers, it needs to become a place where people and dogs can have fun together. This easy-to-predict story, told in a mix of text and speech balloons, will give new readers confidence while imparting solid STEM lessons of research and implementation, and it’s great to see a young girl of color portrayed as a confident inventor (and rock star).

A solid introduction for an appealing new chapter-book character. (Graphic science fiction. 5-7)

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**The Popularity Code**

Faris, Stephanie  
Aladdin (256 pp.)  
$18.99 | Apr. 28, 2020  
978-1-5344-4520-8  

A middle schooler unintentionally becomes complicit in cyberbullying.  

Seventh grader Faith already feels uncomfortable at school, caught between a former friend, Tierra, who knows about her coding skills, and her popular new friends, Janelle and Adria. Then SlamBook, a social media version of the old-fashioned comment book, goes viral, and Faith’s first-person narration, driven by dialogue, chronicles its dangerous effects. At first only a few classmates are targeted and the comments seem harmless. When the comments turn vicious, ranging from body-shaming to racist attacks against Adria’s Filipino background, Faith uses her coding skills to identify the offenders. (Faith and her other friends seem to be white.) And when she discovers that her once-friendly classmates are posting scathing remarks about one another under the cover of anonymity, she feels compelled to post her own biting comments. It’s a deserved revenge, and no one will know, right? And it’s not really cyberbullying as a poster suggests—or is it? Faith’s wavering sense of her culpability is spot-on realistic, as is one student’s anonymous threat of suicide after too many attacks. While readers can glean many lessons about the perils of social media, Faris never crosses into preachy territory, grounding characters in the tough decisions facing young girls today. In addition to Adria, Faith’s Asian coding mentor, Ms. Wang, brings further racial diversity to the story and acts as a welcome female STEM role model.

Readers will find this look at social media habits eye-opening and accessible. (Fiction. 9-13)
TRESPASSING. The sea "fiddles" with Swashby’s message. The only neighbor Capt. Swashby has ever wanted was his old friend the sea, so when new neighbors began to take over the beach—and even Swashby’s deck—without permission, he leaves a message in the sand for the interlopers that reads, “NO TRESPASSING.” The sea “fiddles” with Swashby’s message and washes away most of the letters, leaving the word “SING,” which the little girl does “while dancing up and down [along] Swashby’s deck.” It changes two other unwelcoming messages to invitations for the girl and her granny to “WISH” upon a starfish and “PLAY” in the sand. Then, after building a sand castle (following Capt. Swashby’s grudgingly delivered advice), the girl is washed out to sea—to be rescued by the old salt, beginning a wholehearted friendship. The feeling of place is solidified by Martinez-Neal’s use of color, which breathes the life into this story; the muted beige, blue, and turquoise palette is perfect for a beach tale. The cantankerous old coot is depicted as a white man with an enormous gray beard while the girl and her granny are depicted with brown skin, exuberant Afros, and enormous spectacles.

This sweet story of friendship is sure to win over even the grumpiest of listeners. (Picture book. 4-7)

Fleischman profiles a merry, idiosyncratic (and by no means comprehensive) selection of 26 (of course) philologists, linguists, etymologists, and gamesters who have tinkered with letters, words, and books in surprising and entertaining ways.

None featured was born more recently than 50 years ago. Most are white. Three women are profiled, including Wampânötsąak language inventor Marc Okrand, “stylometrist” David Wallace (who used a computer to analyze the writing styles of the authors of the Federalist Papers), obsessive diarist Robert Shields, and Georges Perec, whose “erotic” (a word that goes undefined) novella Les Revenentes uses no vowels but “e.” Sweet’s illustrations accompanying each three- to five-page profile provide a beautiful pacing and design for the book, with precisely detailed backgrounds that often incorporate lined paper; maps and diagrams and cartoon interpretations that are both amusing and elucidating; and splashes of her signature warm reds and pinks that energize here and calm there. The ebullient charms both of Fleischman’s breezy accounts and of the work of those profiled are considerable but possibly not universal. Yet for anyone who enjoys words, or books themselves, there’s much to love here in the catalog of serious and silly ways in which language and letters have been deployed, reworked, reanalyzed, and improved on. The backmatter includes source notes and a list of resources for “Further Entertainment.”

Marvelously diverting. (Nonfiction. 10-14)
Michael Rex has written and illustrated over 40 children’s books and employs a variety of styles in his work. *Facts vs. Opinions vs. Robots* (Nancy Paulsen Books, Feb. 11) invites young readers to consider the difference between what is provable and what is personal. He recently answered some questions about the book.

**Who—or what—is your favorite fictional robot?**

My favorite fictional robot would have to be R2D2. I’m 51. I was 9 years old in 77 when *Star Wars* came out so that was kind of ground zero for that creative thing for me. I wanted to learn how to draw, I wanted to learn how to make things, I wanted to learn how to tell stories because of that.

**Was there a particular moment when you realized that you wanted to address the topic of facts and opinions?**

I have two boys. They’re now 13 and 15, but as they were growing up there were a lot of conversations in the house about facts vs. opinions. My son would say “No one can eat broccoli; it’s disgusting,” and I would say, “Other people like it.” And he’d say, “That’s impossible!” Working with kids you see this thing about things that they think are facts.

A lot of my books sort of creep up on me. I’d had this idea to do something that used the picture book to teach [the difference between] facts and opinions, designed so that there would be facts on the page: A whole classroom can look, and everyone can agree that there are three robots on the page. And then you can say, well, which color is best for a robot? And that’s opinion and a discussion.

I didn’t want it to be a narrative, a story, where a child learned the difference between a fact and an opinion. I really wanted it to be a discussion, and I really wanted it to function as a picture book.

**Is this the first time you’ve worked entirely in digital art?**

Yes! Everything else I’ve done has been hand drawn and then colored and finished digitally. This time I really wanted to do something that looked completely different, that felt completely different, and I had done these robots like a year earlier that were 100% digital. I said this is what I want it to look like.

You know I’m very lucky. I’ve had a long career, and now one of my goals is I want every book to look as different as possible! Just to keep me interested and because I’m not selling a style, I’m selling the idea of the book.
Whose humor do you most enjoy; who makes you laugh?

One of the first writers that made me laugh was Douglas Adams, the [Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy] books that probably hit me around eighth grade or ninth grade when they were coming out. As far as picture-book people, I love Syd Hoff; he’s really funny; he’s one of my favorites. And then contemporaries: Nick Bruel cracks me up.

A lot of the people I like are author/illustrators, a lot of the people that really sort of influenced me as a kid. I grew up on Syd Hoff, H.A. Rey, Richard Scarry — those were the ones that really spoke to me. Laurie Keller is very funny; I love picture books, you know like Jon Agee, where it’s just like “this wouldn’t work without the drawing.”

There is a different kind of writing when you’re writing and drawing yourself, because you’re doing a setup in the text, and the drawing tells the rest of the joke as opposed to someone who’s sort of writing a funny narrative and then it’s being illustrated. When I see picture books that don’t really do it for me, it’s just really that they are illustrated manuscripts. I love picture books that the text and the image work in tandem to tell the story. That’s what I aspire to when I’m making a picture book.

Kathie Meizner manages a public library in Maryland and reviews children’s books for Kirkus Reviews and the Washington Post. Facts vs. Opinions vs. Robots received a starred review in the Nov. 15, 2019, issue.
Going succeeds with witty banter and young small-town characters that are both sophisticated and accessible.

**THE NEXT GREAT JANE**

Aspiring novelist Jane Brannen likes to think she will be the “next great Jane”—Austen, that is. Unfortunately, the 12-year-old’s aspirations suffer a blow in the form of a rejection letter from *Girl Power* magazine. Hoping to get some pointers, she is determined to meet her favorite romance writer, J.E. Fairfax, who has just moved to Jane’s seaside hometown of Whickett Harbor, Maine. Fairfax’s arrival coincides with a hurricane’s landfall, kicking off a series of challenging events that begin when Jane meets Fairfax’s arrogant son, Devon. In school, the two adversaries are paired to work together on a science project. To make matters worse, Jane’s absentee mother, herself an aspiring actor, unexpectedly arrives from Hollywood with her new fiance. Their arrival is a further disturbance to the peaceful life Jane has shared with her ocean-scientist father. Life in this small Maine village is full of drama, enough so that it spurs Jane to deepen her writing, make new friendships, and fortify the strong bond she has with her father. Appropriately for a novel that name-checks Austen, Going succeeds with witty banter and young small-town characters that are both sophisticated and accessible. Brazilian-born, British-raised Fairfax and her son are some of the few people of color in this mostly white village. This humorous tale is led by a young writer who is, like Jane Austen, quite determined. (Fiction. 10-14)

**THE MOUSE WATCH**

**Gilbert, J.J.**

Disney-Hyperion (256 pp.)

$16.99 | May 26, 2020

978-1-368-05218-4

Series: Mouse Watch, 1

A young mouse earns her place among a secret society of world-savers. Bernadette is a small rodent with big ambitions: joining the Mouse Watch, an elite team of mice that protect the world from evil while keeping themselves secret from humans. Bernie has long dreamed of joining her idol, Gadget Hackwrench (the female lead of Disney’s popular cartoon *Chip & Dale: Rescue Rangers*), and going on gizmo-filled, adrenaline-fueled adventures. As a new recruit of the Watch, Bernie befriends Jarvis, a sensitive rat with puzzle-solving skills to spare. The two rodents flit from set piece to set piece, uncovering a dastardly plot concocted by the devilish Dr. Thornpaw that could turn the world upside down. Readers familiar with *Rescue Rangers* will find similar rhythms here: a precise blend of jokes, action, and plucky young heroes ambitious to prove themselves. The novel is smartly paced, keeping readers pushing forward but with just enough assurance that everything will turn out OK in the end. It’s a comfort read, one that tees up a sequel in its final pages and points back just enough to reassure fans that the world isn’t quite as blue as it may seem.

A fun little adventure brimming with Disney intellectual-property synergy. (Fantasy. 8-12)

**FREDA AND THE BLUE BEETLE**

**Gilmore, Sophie**

Illus. by the author

Owlkids Books (32 pp.)

$17.95 | Apr. 15, 2020

978-1-77147-381-1

Thanks to an oversized, mute blue beetle, a girl gets a lesson in the importance of following her own advice.

Freda is fed—and ignores—a series of dire warnings from the townsfolk in her small community. She enjoys exploring outdoors, knowing that avoiding their dogmatic advice leads to “wonderful discoveries.” She befriends a broken-winged beetle, giving it food, companionship, and a name. Ernest heals, grows in size and strength, and assists in the fields. When the townsfolk tire of his need for sustenance and wrongly accuse him of a crime, Freda sadly escorts Ernest out of town. Gilmore takes the townsfolk’s paranoia to an extreme (if you swim there, carp will eat you, they declare) to accentuate her point about the value of heeding one’s own instincts. Freda, feeling shame for having bowed to ridiculous demands, remembers that sometimes we should “listen to ourselves.” Gilmore’s palette is a muted, earth-toned one save for the bright cobalt blue of Ernest. Freda is an olive-skinned girl, and the townsfolk are primarily white with some diversity included—a couple of dark-skinned people, a woman who could be Asian, and a man in a turban. In the end, not only does Freda remember to follow her heart, but Ernest also saves the day in this oddball tale. (Insects that grow larger than humans, anyone?)

This story about thinking for oneself is sweetly quirky and far from saccharine. (Picture book. 4-10)

**978-1-77147-381-1**

$17.95 | Apr. 15, 2020

**Kathy Dawson/Penguin (240 pp.)**

$16.99 | May 19, 2020

978-0-8037-3475-3

Aspiring novelist Jane Brannen likes to think she will be the “next great Jane”—Austen, that is. (Fiction. 10-14)
The ritual of a bedtime story pairs with activities to calm body and mind. Children of various racial presentations perform mindfulness exercises just before bedtime. The text promises a “good-bye to the wriggles and the fidgets” and to “let the calm feelings in.” Most of the double-page spreads contain two key elements: a greatly abbreviated account of a classic Greek myth that inspired particular constellations, complete with literal and symbolic images of the stars, and instructions for mindfulness exercises that relate to the tale in some way, textually identified by a lavender crescent moon. Activities include conscious breathing, body stretches, and/or visual imagery. For example, the page with Draco the snakelike dragon accompanies an exercise to stretch out on the bed then breathe out with a hiss. “Notes for Grown-Ups” bookend the text, relating suggested reading strategies and the benefits of mindfulness. The tales are made kid-friendly (“Zeus fell in love again”) but include just the barest minimum of storyline. There is a nice variety of calming exercises with easy transitions from the tales, forming a cohesive presentation. Blues and yellows blanket the pages, with accenting pinks, creams, and browns. The pictures appear as if they were sometimes made with crayon or cut paper, helping to create a childlike style, with lots of details to peruse in the backgrounds of bedrooms or night skies.

A mindful realization of many elements makes a useful centering guide. (Picture book. 4-7)

A wordless picture book ponders love. Mia, a white girl with auburn hair, rises in the morning, says a little prayer (Matthew 5:14), reads a book, and then puts on her colorful scarf to greet the gray world outside. A rainbow wash of color emanating from her feet is symbolic of love as it spreads to others she encounters along her path, bringing brightness and life to her world. It begins with a simple friendly greeting to a friend across the street, but her light soon grabs others as well. Each day she heads out into the world with a different article of cozy clothing, the only real hint at a timeline, and spreads love to yet another person she encounters until the whole neighborhood is no longer gray and sad but vibrant. Her transitions from the street to the inside of her home are abrupt and seemingly inexplicable. One moment she is outside meeting someone new while headed nowhere in particular, the next she’s back home, then bundling up to head out the door again. Equally confusing are the relationships among Mia and the other characters: Are these friends, family members, or perfect strangers met out on the street? Though the watercolor illustrations have a cozy vintage feel reminiscent of Quentin Blake’s, each spread seems to stand on its own rather than contributing to a narrative whole.

A sweet message lost in a rather confusing storyboard. (Picture book. 4-8)

When third graders Pablo, Violet, and Deepak enter the Maker Maze, their new friendship—and their knowledge of science—is put to the test. Pablo is looking forward to third grade. He’s got a spaceship T-shirt that matches his sneakers, he’s in the same class as his best friend, Violet, and he is ready to learn about his favorite subject: science. But new student Deepak’s wearing the exact same outfit and starts to make friends with Violet. Pablo feels jealous, but before he can process his feelings, he, Violet, and Deepak discover a mysterious riddle. Solving it together sucks them into a magical scientific world where a rainbow-haired white woman named Dr. Crisp tells them that they must solve a series of puzzles to get out of the Maker Maze. Using their knowledge of ecosystems, the three must finish in time—which they can only do if Pablo puts aside his resentment of Deepak. The book features a diverse and likable cast. Pablo’s Puerto Rican and speaks Spanish, Deepak is South Asian, and Violet appears black in the illustrations. The language in this chapter book is light and easy to read, and the scientific content is accurate, interesting, and well presented. At times, the conflict between Pablo and Deepak feels forced, but the momentum of the maze challenge carries the story past a few awkward moments. The backmatter offers two science activities.

An educational and entertaining series opener. (Science fiction. 6-9)
Sea otters, nearly driven to extinction by human fur-hunters, have bounced back and surprised scientists with their importance to their environment.

In this account of species survival, part of the Orca Wild series, writer and wildlife photographer Groc argues forcefully for the importance of sea otters to their ecosystem, not only along the coasts of the northern Pacific Ocean, but also in its estuaries. She describes the nature and habits of these intriguing sea mammals as well as the historical effect of their loss on their surrounding natural world. When the otters disappeared, so did the kelp forests, but sea urchins, clams, and other invertebrates thrived. With their reintroduction, the kelp grew rapidly, and the invertebrates became more difficult to harvest or disappeared. Though clearly on the side of the otters as “ecosystem engineers” at the top of the food chain, she also presents the points of view of fishermen and Indigenous peoples who had relied on the shellfish. “In the Field” sections introduce scientists (both male and female, mostly white-presenting), citizen-science volunteers, and First Nations members, offering a variety of perspectives. The text flows smoothly and often includes personal examples. Groc’s photographs, taken in Alaska, British Columbia, and California, demonstrate the animal’s appeal. Patricia Newman’s Sibert Honor book Sea Otter Heroes (2014) focuses on the estuary research; this well-researched portrayal is a broader look suitable for the same audience.

A thorough introduction to an appealing keystone species. (glossary, resources, acknowledgments, index not seen) (Nonfiction. 10-13)

An in-depth look at the events that led to the connected stories of the United States flag, the national anthem, and an important military victory.

The United States was a vulnerable young nation when the War of 1812 plunged it into conflict with Great Britain. The British navy targeted the Chesapeake Bay and the city of Baltimore for attack, both for its proximity to Washington and the shipbuilding that occurred there. Grove provides comprehensive background about both nations’ underlying military strategy. The actual story about the commission of the flag that flew over Fort McHenry is explored in great detail, as is the confluence of events that found Maryland-born attorney Francis Scott Key on a ship during battle, the aftermath of which inspired him to write the words that became the national anthem. Grove provides a page-turning narrative that enhances the familiar aspects of this story and fills in those little-known areas. He paints a full picture of Key’s attitudes toward slavery as well as of Mary Pickersgill and how she came to take on the task of making a somewhat unusual flag. In addition to details about shipbuilding and military planning, he weaves in the role of enslaved fighters who ran away to the British, who promised freedom, forming the Colonial Marines. Generous archival illustrations and the rich and varied backmatter make this a boon for fledgling historians.

A well-researched and spirited slice of history. (Nonfiction. 10-13)

Readers follow a child through wordless scenes that suggest famous paintings and occasionally incorporate sculptural and architectural wonders.

The child sleeps in an off-kilter van Gogh bedroom, into which a starry night seeps—literally—through the window. Awakening to a Dalí timepiece, the child shuffles down the hall to a Duchamp “fountain” (clearly depicted as a urinal). Descending the Escher staircase, the kid greets a Modigliani mom, whose outstretched hand containing an apple obscures the face of a Magritte dad. So it goes until the protagonist arrives at and makes a contribution to a towering sculpture composed of bits and pieces of the art previously viewed. According to the jacket flap, this was originally published in Italy for a festival celebrating European art, both past and future. The inspirations, identified in a concluding spread, are by white, mostly male artists, primarily from the 19th and 20th centuries. The protagonist likewise presents white and male. Guasco creates graphic unity by imposing an overarching futurist or cubist aesthetic on his colorful compositions, employing stylized figures and geometric forms. Does this succeed as a children’s book? Wordless books offer valuable opportunities for inventing narrative, and this one is no exception. Artistically inclined adults and older children will enjoy the challenge of finding all the embedded references; others will simply be perplexed.

Short on plot and strong on design, the book relies on the eye of the beholder for its success. (Picture book. 4-12, adult)
Fish. Solving the 100-year-old mystery of what causes them to disappear, Cam (all together they are HenRoCam), to help. These three director Rosie Flynn is determined to make a documentary about her town's Miracles and premiere it at its Festival of the Fish. Every year one person in Glimmer Creek survives great danger, after which they seem to acquire subtle magical abilities. Spurred in large part by a longing to impress the actor father she's never met, right now filming only two hours away, 12-year-old budding film director Rosie Flynn is determined to make a documentary about her town's Miracles and premiere it at its Festival of the Fish. Solving the 100-year-old mystery of what causes them would prove she has real talent as a filmmaker. But Rosie, who has secretl invited her father to the showing, has only 17 days to make the movie! She enlists her two best friends, Henry and Cam (all together they are HenRoCam), to help. These three have always been there for one another, but everything seems to be different once they start seventh grade. Hackney authentically covers a lot of middle school ground in this well-crafted debut. Rosie grapples with changing friendships, worries that the characters into new, treacherous mysteries. In this sequel, Haddix explores themes of honesty and love as the children compare their experiences to those in the alternate universe. Natalie struggles with her relationship with her parents, who are divorced in one world and married in the other. The third-person perspective shifts chapter by chapter among the characters; the Greystone kids present white, and Natalie is biracial, with a Mexican mom and white dad. At times, the setting is logistically disorienting, such as the maze of secret passages and the multilevel glass-roofed event space somehow hidden behind a curtain in the basement of Natalie's house in the alternate world.

**A perilous, high-action plot—with a cliffhanger.** (Science fiction. 8-12)

Hackney authentically covers a lot of middle school ground in this well-crafted debut.

**FOREVER GLIMMER CREEK**
Hackney, Stacy
Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-5344-4484-3

Four kids rush to rescue their families from the clutches of a tyrannical government in an alternate dimension.

In series opener *The Strangers* (2019), four siblings Finn, Emma, and Chess escaped the parallel world into which their mother disappeared, but they still failed to reunite their family. During their desperate flight from danger, the Greystone siblings' friend Natalie Mayhew lost her mother there, too. Their only path between worlds, a lever stuck to the wall of the Greystones' basement, broke. Now all four kids must work together to reopen the tunnel to a dangerous dystopia and decipher the secret code that Kate Greystone left for her children to solve. This sequel never slows in pace, thrusting the characters into new, treacherous mysteries. In this sequel, Haddix explores themes of honesty and love as the children compare their experiences to those in the alternate universe. Natalie struggles with her relationship with her parents, who are divorced in one world and married in the other. The third-person perspective shifts chapter by chapter among the characters; the Greystone kids present white, and Natalie is biracial, with a Mexican mom and white dad. At times, the setting is logistically disorienting, such as the maze of secret passages and the multilevel glass-roofed event space somehow hidden behind a curtain in the basement of Natalie's house in the alternate world.

**A perilous, high-action plot—with a cliffhanger.** (Science fiction. 8-12)

**THE DECEIVERS**
Haddix, Margaret Peterson
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (448 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-0-06-283840-7
Series: Greystone Secrets, 2

He chronologically presents five significant movements, focusing on leaders who fostered the resources of aggrieved people—their bodies, courage, and persistence—to oppose injustice nonviolently. Mohandas K. Gandhi, initially among Indian workers in South Africa, then in India, adopted techniques of nonviolent resistance to gain independence from British colonial rule. The American suffragist Alice Paul, drawing on her Quaker upbringing, led the "Silent Sentinels": banner-wielding women who demonstrated at the White House. These activists endured beatings, arrests, incarceration, forced feedings during hunger strikes, and more in their determined quest for their full rights as citizens. The chapter on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. credits his many mentors and collaborators, presenting their arduous work in planning and executing civil action in Birmingham. In early May 1963, thousands of demonstrating Birmingham youth endured water cannons, police dogs, and widespread arrests, stunning the nation. Chapters on Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers movement and Vaclav Havel and Czechoslovakia's astounding Velvet Revolution round out the volume. The author deftly connects these movements: far from avoiding conflict, each leader actively engaged in it, helping people reassure the power previously ceded to their oppressors. A concluding section cogently illuminates Greta Thunberg's urgent work on the climate crisis.

**This excellent, timely overview will open eyes and deserves a wide readership.** (other notable movements, source notes, bibliography, index) (Nonfiction. 10-14)
An owl and a mouse are really close friends—kind of.

Mouse and Giant Owl have lived together ever since Giant Owl caught Mouse—er, brought Mouse to the tree, where Giant Owl is generous with the doughnuts. The thing is, while Mouse appreciates the friendship, some alone time would occasionally be nice, yet Giant Owl seems always to be around. Mouse reasons this is “because Giant Owl loves me so much.” It must be why Giant Owl gives great birthday gifts like a house (read: cage) equipped with its own lock, whose key Giant Owl carefully holds onto. Then, after a sleepover, Mouse wakes up in an unidentifiable, dark, round space. Giant Owl’s nowhere to be seen—by Mouse, that is. However, hilarious illustrations show readers exactly where Giant Owl is and what’s going on. Giant Owl’s on a branch, battling severe dyspepsia and making wretched gastrointestinal noises before letting out an otherworldly belch (printed in oversized type that takes up a page). As a result, Mouse blasts out of Giant Owl’s roiling innards and, still clueless, thanks Giant Owl for the rescue. This riotous tale is truly a hoot, owl or no. The wittily dry narration, simply expressed in Mouse’s sweetly naïve voice, is comically adorable, and the colorful, very expressive mixed-media illustrations serve the rollicking shenanigans perfectly.

Here’s a book to make best friends with—but be careful on those sleepovers. (Picture book. 3-6)

A timely fairy-tale adventure about one child’s quest to defeat a giant.

On a tiny island, a child and her knight father live in isolation. Then the knight leaves to fight a dangerous giant terrorizing the land by turning people into stone. Days pass, but the knight never returns. Finally, the girl embarks on her own journey to save her father with nothing more than a red dress, knife, mirror, and umbrella. Höglund, a contemporary Swedish children’s-book creator, points to a story by legendary author/illustrator Elsa Beskow as this book’s inspiration. Translated from Swedish, the third-person text, always printed on verso and surrounded by generous white space, is brief yet specific, prompting ponderous pauses throughout. True to fairy-tale tradition, everyday objects possess the key to salvation. However, in a contemporary twist, it is not an adult or knight in shining armor but the child who does the rescuing, not through beauty or kindness but with fortitude and determination. With the exception of a few double-page spreads, illustrations appear opposite text on recto. Employing precise copper-plate etching overlaid with nearly monochromatic watercolor washes, they create a desolate, shadowy world. This constant feeling of danger underscores the girl’s worry and subsequent bravery in the face of the unknown. The cloth binding and stamped lettering make this small, rectangular volume feel special.

Read aloud or explored independently, this original fairy tale will whet the appetite for more Swedish imports. (Picture book. 4-9)

A found toy triggers a crisis of conscience.

While playing in his yard, Jesse accidentally acquires the perfect toy: He spots a black horse tumbling out of a wagon pulled by passers-by. Impulsively, the boy reaches through the fence and grabs it. The shiny, black horse on wheels captures Jesse’s imagination right away. Instantly dubbed “Wind” by the delighted boy, the toy inspires a whole new world of make-believe adventure. Wind by name and wind by nature, the horse races everywhere, “across the tabletop prairie and up and over the rolling cauliflower hills while Jesse ate supper.” The fantasy permits him to swim and dive in the bathtub, to gallop up the slide, and to splash “through puddles at glorious speed.” Jesse lies to his mother, telling her that Grandma gave him the horse. However his conscience starts to trouble him when he sees signs at the library and on the footbridge about a lost horse. He realizes he must do the right thing and return the toy to its rightful owner. Hutchins and Herbert’s text is vivid, specific, and evocative; Petričić’s pencil-and-watercolor illustrations have a fun, cartoonish quality that perfectly suits the story, investing the nominally inanimate toy with a huge personality. Jesse is white; there is diversity in the crowd scenes.

Another child’s toy gained by mischance is a perfect vehicle for gently conveying the importance of honesty. (Picture book. 3-6)
SUMMER IN THE CITY
Hyman, Fracaswell
Sterling (288 pp.)
$16.95 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-4549-3394-6
Series: Mango Delight, 2

Mango Delight’s summer takes a
detour when she is asked to star in an off-
off-off-Broadway musical in New York City.

Mango, a 12 ½-year-old black girl, is
just about to settle into her summer vacation routine, babysit-
ing her toddler brother and hanging out with her best friend,
when the director of the school musical she starred in in her
eponymous debut (2017) invites her to star in the same play—
but this time with professional actors in NYC. Once her par-
ents give permission, Mango must contend with her own fears
and homesickness, and she faces obstacles including obnoxious
cowars, a case of imposter syndrome, and long-distance fights
with her best friend. And the boy she likes is staying in the city
too, which makes things even more exciting—and confusing.
Mango is a very imperfect, sympathetic protagonist whose
humorous perspective is fun to share as she stumbles from one
adventure to another, trying to stay true to herself in the pro-
cess; she peppers her narration with text-message transcripts.
Believable secondary characters and lighthearted middle school
angst make this journey worth the ride, but Mango’s fascination
with white beauty standards detracts a bit from the fun story-
line. Mango’s Jamaican dad is a chef trying to get a catering com-
pany off the ground while her mom, who has a prosthetic leg,
works at Target in order to afford the family’s insurance.

Readers will swallow this book whole, appetites whet
for the next installment. (Fiction. 11-13)

WISHES, DARES, & HOW TO
STAND UP TO A BULLY
Jacobson, Darlene Beck
Creston (275 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-939547-62-0

With his father missing in action in
Vietnam, 11-year-old Jack faces a long,
lonely summer at his grandparents’ home.
While the enthusiasm for life his
younger sister, Katy, displays does much
to lift his spirits, it’s the companionship of his new friend, Jill,
that makes all the difference. She’s dealing with major problems
of her own. Ever since their mother recently struck up a dys-
functional relationship with a manipulative man, Jill’s brother,
Cody, has turned into a severe bully. Jack and Jill, apparently
white, become convinced that the wishes they make over a one-
eyed fish they repeatedly catch have real power—but a badly
worded wish can seemingly have devastating consequences.
Jack’s afraid to wish for his father’s return from war for fear he
might come home dead. Jill’s tentative wishes to resolve Cody’s
nastiness only gradually reveal the true nature of the boy’s prob-
lems and what the real solution involves. The tale is related in
free verse, short lines and spare prose cascading narrowly down
the pages, conveying a powerful message of bully management:
“Bullies need our permission to / rule over us.” This realization
is enhanced by insight Jack’s own dad provides through a boy-
hood diary suggesting that even bullies might need friendship.
Although it’s set in the 1960s, the story reflects timeless issues
that will resonate with modern readers.

A fresh, inspiring exploration of a daunting issue. (His-
torical verse fiction. 9-12)

WHEN STARS
ARE SCATTERED
Jamieson, Victoria &
Mohamed, Omar
Illus. by Jamieson, Victoria with
Geddy, Iman
Dial (264 pp.)
978-0-525-5391-5
978-0-525-5390-8 paper

A Somali boy living in a refugee camp
in Kenya tries to make a future for himself and his brother in
this near memoir interpreted as a graphic novel by collaborator
Jamieson.

Omar Mohamed lives in Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya
with his younger brother, Hassan, who has a seizure disorder,
and Fatuma, an elderly woman assigned to foster them in their
parents’ absence. The boys’ father was killed in Somalia’s civil
war, prompting them to flee on foot when they were separated
from their mother. They desperately hope she is still alive and
looking for them, as they are for her. The book covers six years,
during which Omar struggles with decisions about attending
school and how much hope to have about opportunities to
resettle in a new land, like the United States. Through Omar’s
journey, and those of his friends and family members, readers
get a close, powerful view of the trauma and uncertainty that
attend life as a refugee as well as the faith, love, and support
from unexpected quarters that get people through it. Jamie-
sen’s characteristically endearing art, warmly colored by Geddy,
perfectly complements Omar’s story, conjuring memorable and
sympathetic characters who will stay with readers long after
they close the book. Photographs of the brothers and an after-
word provide historical context; Mohamed and Jamieson each
contribute an author’s note.

This engaging, heartwarming story does everything
one can ask of a book, and then some. (Graphic memoir. 9-13)
LOUDER THAN WORDS
Kacer, Kathy
Annick Press (240 pp.)
$9.95 paper | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-77321-354-5
Series: Heroes Quartet, 3

A Christian family housekeeper puts herself at risk when she becomes the main caretaker for three Jewish sisters in World War II Ukraine.

Twelve-year-old Eldina “Dina” Sternik is a Jewish girl living in Proskurov, in Soviet Ukraine, when the Nazis take over in 1941. Dina’s first-person narrative brings readers directly through the loss of freedoms experienced by Ukrainian Jews, as the park, school, and market become off-limits and Jews must wear yellow Stars of David on their clothing whenever they go out. After a fire leaves them homeless, Nina, their Christian housekeeper, registers the children as her own so that the Sternik family may receive alternative housing and not be identified by their true religion. The contrast between Nina’s treatment of the Sterniks and the hostility shown by Dina’s estranged uncle’s Christian wife speaks volumes of the importance of the righteous individual. Nina treats them as the family that she never had and cares for the children for several years once their mother is imprisoned in the Jewish ghetto. Reminiscent of Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars* (1989), this is Kacer’s third novel in the Heroes Quartet series and is based on the true story of Nina Pukas, named one of the Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

An accessible and absorbing portrait of empathy, character, and moral courage, relevant for modern times. (author’s note) (Historical fiction. 9-12)

PLAYING WICKED
Kahler, Alex R.
Illus. by Whitehouse, Ben
Whitman (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 1, 2020
978-0-8075-8739-3

Dante delights in gender-bending dress-up—will his new friend play along?

Dante, a peach-skinned child with short brown hair, is passionate about “playing make-believe.” With his friends, Dante enjoys dressing up in heroic costumes, sometimes being “a wizened wizard” or “regal royalty.” But Dante isn’t always interested in being one of the good guys: “Sometimes, he wanted to be… / wicked.” By himself, Dante revels in deliciously villainous roles, complete with wigs, makeup, and gowns. Though he obviously loves his “devilish dresses,” Dante doesn’t feel they are “ready for the eyes of others” until he creates a dress (and a character) he is particularly proud of: “a water witch in her gossamer gown.” Unable to resist keeping this outfit to himself, Dante decides to share his wicked character with his parents in their backyard. Their doting smiles indicate clear support of Dante’s gender nonconforming play, but Dante fears rejection when a passing child spots his feminine outfit over the garden fence. Luckily, the child, who appears black, proves to be an accepting new friend, who celebrates Dante’s multigendered dress-up without judgment. In this straightforward story, author Kahler models how fun and simple it can be to accept one another. However, the juxtaposition of wicked versus heroic and feminine versus masculine is a bit clunky:

A valiant message but not a terribly satisfying one. (Picture book. 4-8)

EAT YOUR ROCKS, CROC!
Dr. Glider’s Advice for Troubled Animals
Keating, Jess
Illus. by Oswald, Pete
Orchard/Scholastic (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-338-23988-1

Dr. Glider diagnoses ailing animal patients and dispenses intriguing biology facts.

The author of *Pink Is for Blobfish*, illustrated by David DeGrand (2016), and its equally engaging sequels has adopted a new persona: Dr. Glider, a sugar glider, who travels the world in a variety of costumes and vehicles to explain to ailing animals why they feel bad and what they can do about it. The titular crocodile, for example, needs to swallow rocks (as do many birds, seals, and sea lions) to help with digestion. Each spread introduces a different animal species, with a different problem to be solved by the Oxford-educated doctor. The formatting of the text, with the serious facts set in a staid typeface and foolery in a somewhat more playful one, will help readers distinguish between fact and fancy. Keating’s language is full of puns, but her science is spot-on. Oswald’s cartoons add humor. Dr. Glider’s patients range from Will de Beest (an opportunity to introduce the concepts altricial and precocial) to Myrtle Meerkat (matriarchy and teamwork). They’re all identified with Latin names in the backmatter, where there is also a profile of Dr. Glider and a glossary that reveals the broad array of concepts and terms covered, from adaptation to venom.

Frankly fantastic but fact-filled fun. (Informational picture book. 6-9)
Each diorama relies on illusions of depth to balance intricately detailed cutouts with stark backgrounds.

**A LAST GOODBYE**

Kelsey, Elin
Illus. by Kim, Soyeon
Owlkids Books (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Apr. 15, 2020
978-1-77147-364-4

Kelsey and Kim's latest brings author and illustrator together to spark conversations about an ineffable, arduous subject: death.

Scientifically sound and philosophically profound, Kelsey's spare, graceful first-person text directly addresses a dying dearest while Kim's visuals provide insights from fellow life-forms' mourning rituals. Readers may watch through tears as elephants support the frail with trunk and trunk, whales lift their loved ones to the ocean's surface for a final breath, and chimps lay the ailing down to groom their hair. Forthright, euphemism-free language refreshes: These animals are indeed dying, and it's wise to acknowledge this fact. As life leaves the body, readers bear witness to howler monkeys crying out, hyenas sorrowfully cuddling, and gorillas silently tending to their beloved's final moments. Suspended from fishing wire in wooden frames, Kim's ink-and-watercolor illustrations are suffused with softest blacks and deepest blues, luxuriant greens and gentle magentas. Each diorama relies on illusions of depth to balance intricately detailed cutouts with stark backgrounds. Soon, mourners gather as a community. Orcas, elephants, and chimps assemble in a splendid spiral to pay respects while magpies and elephants place flowers and leaves as tokens of their affection. Eventually, melancholy melts into a sensitive celebration of the life cycle as bodies decompose and serve as staging grounds for new beginnings; “our lives plant a long line of love in this wild, thriving planet.”

*Staggering. (author's note, website)* (Informational picture book. 5-12)

**SMALL MATTERS**

The Hidden Power of the Unseen
Kim, Heather Ferranti
Millbrook/Lerner (32 pp.)
$19.95 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-4415-7814-2

Sharks can swim speedily and birds can fly because of physical structures too minuscule to see.

Electron-microscope images accompany simple text observations about the importance of unseen, tiny attributes in the physiology of 11 animals: sea snail, shark, blue morpho butterfly, bird, snake, water strider, honeybee, cat, cicada, toucan, and gecko. (Specific species aren’t identified for the shark, bird, or snake.) Aspects of strength (tensile and hardness), speed, color, agility, and cleanliness and protection are attributed to fibers and bumps that are invisible to the eye but amazing at very high levels of magnification. Close-up, lower-magnification photos of each animal are also included. A photo of what is presumably a gecko’s foot, highly magnified, is one of the best, though it appears on an introductory page and not with the nanoscale microscopic image of the gecko’s bristly toes. The backmatter yields some good information and adds factual substance to this visual sampling of microscopic discoveries in biology—a paragraph of explanation for each creature expands on the earlier text; “nanoscale” is defined with an accompanying graph; and the scanning electron microscope is briefly described. Photos are attributed to stock libraries. The “wow” factor in seeing variations in animal adaptations revealed through electron microscopy is compelling.

*A solid invitation to find out more.* (Nonfiction. 4-9)

**ORCAS OF THE SALISH SEA**

Leiren-Young, Mark
Orca (32 pp.)
$19.95 | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-4415-7814-2

Orca whales living in the Pacific Northwest region are introduced through brief text and full-color photographs taken throughout the area.
Morals printed in gold add sumptuous notes to the tersely rendered fables.

THE FABLED LIFE OF AESOP

Several individual orcas and the three named pods in the region are discussed along with information about orca movements, social behavior, and communication. While interesting facts are presented with a peppy writing style, many basic facts about orca whales are not included. Orcas are not identified as mammals with the common characteristics of all mammals, for instance, and other pertinent aspects are not included such as orca breathing and definition of body parts like fin, fluke, and blowhole. The cultural significance of orcas to First Nations and Native American cultures is also not addressed. Critical orientation is provided by a map reproduced on both the front and back endpapers, which shows the home waters and range of the southern resident orcas. The area of the Salish Sea is included as part of the map, but this term—so important to the focus of the entire book—is not also explained within the text. The photographs are the volume's best feature, showing orcas in movement in many different settings. These high-quality photos make this a logical choice as a supplemental resource for study of orca whales.

An inadequate text is elevated by intriguing photos of these fascinating creatures. (author's note) (Informational picture book 6-10)

THE FABLED LIFE
The Extraordinary Journey and Collected Tales of the World's Greatest Storyteller
Lendler, Ian
Illus. by Zagarenski, Pamela
HMH Books (64 pp.)
$18.99 | Mar. 10, 2020
978-1-328-58552-3

Messages both overt and hidden in the life and preserved wisdom of an enslaved storyteller.

Yes, Lendler acknowledges, Aesop's fables are generally interpreted as "simple lessons on virtue and good values," but on closer looks, "many of them are actually practical advice on how to survive in a world in which some have power and some do not." As evidence, he selects 13 to retell—most ("The Ant and the Grasshopper," "The Boy Who Cried Wolf") well known, others, such as "The Donkey and the Lapdog" and "The Lion and the Statue," less so. Some are embedded in an imagined account of Aesop's life based on legends from later centuries. In this narrative, the child of enslaved parents learns to speak "in code," impresses one master but is sold to a second, and, after some years, wins freedom at last with the story of a wolf who would rather go hungry than be collared like a dog. Zagarenski places light-skinned, delicately expressive humans and graceful animals (the latter often in anthropomorphic dress and postures) into golden-toned settings. The book is highlighted by a lyrical trio of climactic freedom scenes in which morals, titles, and lines from fables become decorative elements, swirling exuberantly through dense crowds of figures. Morals printed in gold add further sumptuous notes to the tersely rendered fables.

Lovely art comes with unusual perspectives on familiar tales about lions, mice, and trickster foxes. (afterword, bibliography) (Folktales 7-10)

THIS WAY, CHARLIE
Levis, Caron
Illus. by Santoso, Charles
Abrams (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-4197-4206-4

A standoffish goat forms a unique bond with a partially blind horse.

Jack, a solitary goat, lives at Open Bud Ranch, where “all kinds” of animals come for space to “heal, rest, and grow.” Jack, who likes “keeping his space to himself,” is initially irritated when a horse named Charlie arrives, accidentally invading that space. Gradually, Jack realizes Charlie’s blind in one eye. He watches Charlie greet everyone, sniff honeysuckles, and follow sunlit patches—but also bump into things and seem lost, scared, even lonely. One day, Jack beckons him: “This way, Charlie,” guiding Charlie to his favorite grazing field. Soon Jack leads Charlie everywhere, and they become friends. After Charlie loses sight in his other eye, Jack simply moves closer to lead Charlie on their walks. Despite Charlie’s urgent, injuries from Jack’s abused past prevent him from engaging other animals until Charlie’s in danger and Jack must ask others for help. Inspired by a real-life relationship between a horse and a goat at an Oklahoma wildlife rescue and rehabilitation center, this gentle story’s positive messages about patience, kindness, and friendship are reinforced in soft illustrations that resemble impressionistic watercolors. Touching scenes of isolationist Jack watching Charlie from a distance gradually give way to upbeat scenes of Jack actively leading Charlie into a mutually healing friendship.

Memorable and moving. (author’s note) (Picture book 4-8)

THE VILLAGE BLACKSMITH
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth
Illus. by Karas, G. Brian
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$16.99 | May 12, 2020
978-1-5362-0443-8

A day in the life of a modern-day blacksmith.

The poem begins: “Under a spreading chestnut tree / The village smithy stands.” The illustrations show that a neighbor’s wrought-iron gate is broken, but the “mighty” blacksmith, with arms “strong as iron bands,” is up to the task of fixing it. After he collects scrap metal and drives it back to the smithy, he begins his work. The “bellows blow.” He swings his heavy sledge “with measured beat and slow.” When his three children come home from school, they visit their dad in his smithy. They try to “catch
Karas’ blacksmith son, the book beautifully parallels Longfellow’s 19th-century poem. The textured illustrations deftly utilize cool, desaturated colors, making the reds, oranges, and yellows of the smithy pop. Backmatter explains the tools of the trade and offers a short history of blacksmiths. Dedicated to Karas’ blacksmith son, the book beautifully parallels Longfellow’s own familial inspiration for the original poem. The blacksmith and his family present white; their neighbor has brown skin.

**THE KITE OF DREAMS**
López Ávila, Pilar & Merlán, Paula
Illus. by Pasamar, Concha
Trans. by Brokenbrow, Jon
Cuento de Luz (27 pp.)
$16.95 | Apr. 1, 2020
978-84-16733-68-2

Children all over the world play with real and imaginary kites, buoying their hope and resilience.

In a series of international vignettes, López Ávila and Merlán describe the titular Kite of Dreams—a metaphorical toy that “gather[s] the hopes and dreams of children” and helps them “dream of a better world.” Full-bleed watercolor-and-pencil illustrations offer glimpses from the lives of 15 kids in places such as Bolivia, Haiti, Ukraine, and the Philippines. Each child has their own wishes, and each uses literal or make-believe kites to weather challenging circumstances. In one scene, a Mexican girl named Lis “finds a piece of cloth” that triggers a “daydream of flowers, butterflies, and forests.” Using her sewing skills, she crafts a kite for herself and her brother, who then “pretends a kite is carrying her up into the air” to distract her from the scary parts of the trek. The Kite of Dreams represents children’s capacity for “hope,” “love,” and “joy,” no matter what hardships they face; unfortunately, the overworked symbolism makes for a somewhat threadbare arc. Though the author writes most of the vignettes as open-ended slices of life that avoid feel-good conclusions, the book’s ending may strike readers as disappointingly sentimental.

Despite its uplifting message, this effort doesn’t quite get off the ground. *(Picture book. 4-9)*

**TAKING TIME**
Loring-Fisher, Jo
Illus. by the author
Lantana (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-911373-08-7

Children around the globe marvel at the simple, stunning beauty encountered in moments of everyday life.

Author/illustrator Loring-Fisher has created something truly special with this picture book. Each double-page spread includes one line of text and a stunning mixed-media illustration. The illustrations are deeply saturated with color and respectful in their inclusive representations of multicultural children and the cultures, landscapes, and living creatures that make up their sensory worlds. The text on adjacent spreads form couples, creating a read-aloud experience that is pleasing for both reader and listeners: “Taking time to listen to a bird’s song on the breeze. / Taking time to gather up the blossom dancing free.”

The final spread shows all of the children sharing their wonderings, playing peacefully together in a beautiful green space. This image and the closing line, “Taking time to cherish you, and also cherish me,” provide a hopeful close to the book’s celebration of the natural, spontaneous mindfulness of children. The endpapers extend the options for interactivity by encouraging readers to match small details from the illustrations with each child’s home, including Alaska, Ecuador, the U.K., Norway, Russia, Egypt, Tanzania, India, Nepal, China, and Japan. Adults will benefit every bit as much as young readers (if not more!) from these reminders to pause and notice.

*A must-have for anyone sharing books with young children—simply exquisite.* *(Picture book. 3-9)*

**RONAN THE LIBRARIAN**
Luebbe, Tara & Cattie, Becky
Illus. by Maderna, Victoria
Roaring Brook (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-250-18921-9

A common raider finds an uncommon new passion.

Like his fellow barbarians, Ronan invades, raids, and trades on a regular basis. But everything changes the day he happens to glance at a picture in a book he accidentally stole. Rather than use it for origami, kindling, or toilet paper, Ronan discovers a passion for reading. Pillages now turn into new opportunities to find more reading material. Eager to share his new enthusiasm and his collection, he invites his fellows to a library opening only to find that you can lead a barbarian to a library but you can’t make ’em read. To truly hook these warmongers, it’ll take a clever read-aloud. Consistently clever and upbeat, this picture book is far more than just mere preaching to the book-loving choir. Choice use of repetition, hilarity, and good old-fashioned storytelling is the name
of the game. Visual gags courtesy of Maderna complement but never overshadow the humor. You don't have to be a librarian to appreciate signs like, "Come Read! Free Mead!" and the sneaky, book-eating goat that sharp-eyed listeners will notice cropping up on multiple pages. Ronan presents white while his fellow barbarians are a range of different skin tones.

**Uff da! Go berserk! Read this book! (Picture book. 4-7)**

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**TIARA’S HAT PARADE**  
**Lyons, Kelly Starling**  
**Illus. by Tadgell, Nicole**  
**Whitman (32 pp.)**  
**$16.99 | Apr. 1, 2020**  
**978-0-8075-7945-9**

Tiara enjoys the laughter and warmth in her mother’s millinery shop, but when a store with lower-priced hats comes to town, Tiara must find a way to help her mother get her spark—and her customers—back.

“We can’t eat dreams,” Momma tells Daddy and Tiara as they pack up the hat studio and her hopes. Because she can no longer sell hats, Momma accepts a job as an art teacher at Tiara’s school, Height Elementary (a nod, perhaps, to activist Dorothy I. Height, renowned for her hats). Tiara encourages her mother to begin making hats again, but Momma is not ready to talk about or work with hats. One Friday afternoon, in an art class, however, Tiara and the other children convince Momma to allow them to make hats. When Momma helps Tiara’s friend Matti adjust hers, Tiara has an idea that just might remind Momma of the passion she had for hat-making and the joy her hats brought to so many. With this touching story of tradition and can-do spirit, Lyons interweaves an important element of the African American experience into a well-told tale. Tadgell’s illustrations are mostly pastels with punches of bright color, especially on the hats, and have a pleasant dreamlike quality. The author’s note provides background on the African American hat tradition, including a mention of Crowns, by Michael Cunningham and Craig Marberry (2000).

A cheerful story about a spirited girl who saves the day. What could be better than that? (Picture book. 4-8)

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**HOW TO BEE**  
**MacDibble, Bren**  
**Groundwood (224 pp.)**  
**$12.95 paper | Mar. 3, 2020**  
**978-1-77306-418-5**

In near-future Australia, “bee” is both a noun and a verb. Before the famines that occurred 30 years ago, crops were pollinated by actual bees, but wanton pesticide use means that now the job must be done by children who are light and quick enough to hand-pollinate the orchards that produce the fruit that’s taken to the city. Peony, the novel’s charismatic 9-year-old narrator, wants nothing more than to bee, but Foreman doesn’t pick her. That’s bad enough, but even worse is when Ma comes from the city where she works and takes Peony away from Gramps and her beloved sister. In the city, Peony must wear shoes and wait on the Pasquales, a family of three that lives in comfort Peony can’t fathom. MacDibble effectively creates a not-quite-post-apocalyptic world of tremendous class contrasts, with farmworkers who live in dire poverty and frightening, teeming crowds of “raggy people” in the city; the elites live in seeming oblivion. But once Peony gets to the city, the plot devolves into a Secret Garden–esque arc in which Peony combines Mary Lennox’s abrasive impulsivity and Dickon’s simple country wisdom as she befriends and nurtures the Pasquales’ imperious daughter, who, Colin-like, is hostage to her own fears. Peony seeks not revolution but a return to the orchard, her enlightenment an entirely personal one. Racial distinctions are effectively invisible, implying a white default.

A vivid futuristic setting enfolds a fundamentally nostalgic plot. (Post-apocalyptic adventure. 9-13)

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**WHAT LANE?**  
**Maldonado, Torrey**  
**Nancy Paulsen Books (144 pp.)**  
**$16.99 | Apr. 14, 2020**  
**978-0-525-51843-3**

In an NYC landscape deeply shaped by race, sixth grader Stephen struggles to speak his piece.

“Since I was little, it’s been hard to speak up,” says Stephen. He’s half African American and half white, but even still, most people just say he’s black. Alongside his “white-white” best friend, Dan, he’s deeply into fantasy, science fiction, and superheroes like the new Spider-Man, Miles Morales. When Dan’s cousin Chad arrives on the scene, however, things take a turn. Chad has a rep for trespassing, a penchant for contradicting Stephen, and, most wack of all, believes “they shoulda kept Spider-Man white.” For Stephen to separate himself means he must be willing to step out against that part of himself that believes going along works, if only for the current moment. After all, isn’t that how you are supposed to be—in every lane, able to do whatever, with anyone and everyone? Wes, a black friend, thinks Stephen should just embrace the lane with his black and brown classmates instead of “grimy heads” like Chad. How will Stephen deal? Maldonado pursues a story about biracial boyhood, healthy friendships, and self-discovery while gesturing toward the influence of social movements like Black Lives Matter in reshaping what accountable friendship looks like. Voiced in the creative language of NYC youth, the novel models what it means to embrace the power of self-awareness and relationships built on mutual respect.

Bridges everyday racism and accountable allyship with sincerity. (Fiction. 10-14)
The fictional plotters are portrayed with genuine humor.

THE CONSPIRACY

Marino, Andy
Scholastic (192 pp.)
$6.99 paper | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-338-35902-2
Series: The Plot to Kill Hitler, 1

Near the end of World War II, two kids join their parents in a plot to kill Adolf Hitler.

Max, 12, lives with his parents and his older sister in a Berlin that’s under constant air bombardment. During one such raid, a mortally wounded man stumbles into the white German family’s home and gasps out his last wish: “The Führer must die.” With this nighttime visitation, Max and Gerta discover their parents have been part of a resistance cell, and the siblings want in. They meet a colorful band of upper-class types who seem almost too whimsical to be serious. Despite her charming levity, Prussian aristocrat and cell leader Frau Becker is grimly aware of the stakes. She enlists Max and Gerta as couriers who sneak forged identification papers to Jews in hiding. Max and Gerta are merely (and realistically) cogs in the adults’ plans, but there’s plenty of room for their own heroism. They escape capture, rescue each other when they’re caught out during an air raid, and willingly put themselves repeatedly at risk to catch a spy. The fictional plotters—based on a mix of several real anti-Hitler resistance cells—are portrayed with a genuine humor, giving them the space to feel alive even in such a slim volume.

It’s great to see these kids “so enthusiastic about committing high treason.” (historical note) (Historical fiction. 10-12)

A WORLD FULL OF DICKENS STORIES

McAllister, Angela
Illus. by Hansen, Jannicke
Frances Lincoln (128 pp.)
$22.99 | May 5, 2020
978-0-7112-4772-7

Eight classic tales of rags to (literal or at least spiritual) riches, in long summary versions.

Arranged in no discernible order, the mini-tales open with chapter-length versions of Oliver Twist, close on Hard Times, and in between offer renditions of A Christmas Carol, David Copperfield, and four more dramas. Along with occasional full-page scenes Hansen adds an opening gallery of major characters to each entry and a smallish illustration on every page. These do a bit to relieve the dense-looking blocks of narrative—though her small, hunched, wooden-looking figures, almost all bearing the stark-white, pink-cheeked complexions of mimes, only intensify the general air of gloom. McAllister successfully encapsulates the themes, main events, and leading character types in each story. Her efforts to evoke Dickens’ rich language are, however, at best pedestrian: “If you are wondering if I turn out to be the hero then you must read on,” David Copperfield tells readers; “It was the best of times but also the worst of times”; “From that day on nobody ever celebrated the spirit of Christmas better than Ebenezer Scrooge. And may that be true of us all.” You young readers intimidated by the bulk of the originals will find a livelier invitation to take the plunge in Marcia Williams’ Charles Dickens and Friends (2002), particularly when conjoined with Deborah Hopkinson’s A Boy Called Dickens, illustrated by John Hendrix (2012). Anemic, dispirited distillations that argue eloquently for waiting till kids are ready for the originals. (biographical note, timeline) (Fiction. 9-11)
Readers will find a strong and resilient character they can root for in this story.

**ON THESE MAGIC SHORES**

**A DOLPHIN’S WISH**
*How You Can Help Make a Difference and Save Our Oceans*
McCurdie, Trevor
Illus. by Battistel, Cinzia
Sourcebooks Explore (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-7282-0522-9

A papa dolphin tearfully warns his youngling about the dangers of floating plastic rubbish.

The original title of this clunkily rhymed British import—*Ocean Plastic Is Not Fantastic*—captures both the cautionary theme and the general tone: “It can swallow you whole, and trap you inside. / Or get in your tummy, stay there and hide.” Battistel puts the young dolphin’s terrified imaginings elicited by her father’s lecture front and center, with scenes of reefs and beaches thickly festooned with litter, capped by a wave that becomes a towering sea monster thanks to artfully placed plastic cups and bags. Nevertheless, overall smiles, bright colors, and idyllic underwater vistas prevail—even when the occasional bit of plastic debris is in view—to keep thing upbeat. The solution? To invite “those creatures with nets and hooks / to come down here and take a look.” This cues a picture of scuba divers picking up plastic garbage under the supervision of a stern-looking octopus. Readers, represented by a diverse group of children on a tourist boat, are encouraged to take up greener practices by a parade of sign-waving sea life. It’s all far easier said than done, but at least it gets said.

A bit of finger-shaking joins a rising chorus of protest.

*(additional facts, glossary)*
*(Informational picture book. 6-8)*

**RÓNÁN AND THE MERMAID**
*A Tale of Old Ireland*
McShane, Marianne
Illus. by Solano, Jordi
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$16.99 | May 19, 2020
978-1-5362-0022-5

A contemporary Irish seanchaí, or storyteller, uses a bit of historical text from 558 C.E.—the *Annals of the Four Masters*—to fashion a story about a wondrous creature from the sea.

In this story, Brother Declan finds an unconscious boy on the rugged shore of Belfast Lough near Bangor Abbey, an early monastic community in Ireland. When the kind monks treat Rónán, he tells them of his rescue from the sea by “the lady with the golden hair.” He explains that “she sang to me till we reached the shore,” gave him the silver ring he was found clutching, marked with an L, and “told me that one day I would help her.” As Rónán recovers, Brother Declan tells him ancient stories about selkies and singing mermaids, including Líban, who “roamed the lonesome seas” for three centuries. When the boy’s health is fully restored, he works alongside the monks, but he is enchanted by music. Wise Brother Declan makes him a harp, and Rónán becomes a musician. Fishing one day, he plays his harp, and “a lonesome song came in reply.” Líban surfaces and asks to be taken to the abbey, to be blessed by the abbot, who christens the mermaid Muirgen, “born of the sea.” The painterly illustrations, with their natural browns, greens, and blues, are somber but fit well with the traditional tone of the story. All characters appear to be white.

With this ode to music and mermaids, McShane deftly uses old stories to create a lyrical, satisfying new one.

*(author’s note)*

**ON THESE MAGIC SHORES**
McShane, Marianne
Tu Books (288 pp.)
$19.95 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-64379-031-2

When Mamá fails to return home after her evening job, it is up to 12-year-old Minerva Soledad Miranda to take care of her younger sisters and hold the family together.

The family lives in a moldy basement apartment, and Mamá works two jobs and dresses the girls in hand-me-downs. In spite of the obstacles, Minerva has her life all figured out. The Argentine American seventh grader will be “the first Latina president of the United States.” And the first step to that goal is to get the lead role in *Peter Pan*, the school play. But nothing is working out. First, and most importantly, Mamá’s absence works well as a device to allow Minerva to come to the fore, but her reappearance and the explanation for her disappearance feel contrived. Nevertheless, there is still much to like, and readers will find a strong and resilient character they can root for in this story.

A redoubtable protagonist in a good storyline that doesn’t quite deliver.

*(Fiction. 8-12)*
A small child describes “what I like most in the world”…that is, except for the other thing, and also the other thing, and so on.

A window to look out of, apricot jam, new shoes with blink- ing lights, the river….Author Murphy uses poetic language to highlight the important features of each object from a child’s point of view. Each item ends with the same line: “what I like most in the world.” This leads, after a page turn, to the next item, which begins: “Except for….” While the ideas and language remain simple and childlike, an additional pattern begins to emerge as this unnamed child with East Asian features shares items: Everything changes with time. From the view out the window to a colored pencil that grows shorter with use, a feeling of impermanence pervades the text. Even items that inherently don’t change, like a book or a teddy bear, become different because of the child’s relationship to them. However, the last item the child shares breaks the pattern, the thing that “I like the very, very most in the world.” This leads, after a page turn, to the next item, which begins: “Except for…” While the ideas and language remain simple and childlike, an additional pattern begins to emerge as this unnamed child with East Asian features details each item: Everything changes with time. From the view out the window to a colored pencil that grows shorter with use, a feeling of impermanence pervades the text. Even items that inherently don’t change, like a book or a teddy bear, become different because of the child’s relationship to them. However, the last item the child shares breaks the pattern, the thing that “I like the very, very most in the world,” and readers know that there is one important thing in this child’s life that will never change. Artist Zhu accompanies these odes to everyday life with watercolor and pencil, illustrating the text faithfully.

A simple yet sweet introduction to impermanence and change in all things…except one. (Picture book. 3-7)

Kindness is contagious in the Murrows’ latest wordless picture book.

The week starts on the Zero Local train the way so many do—with delays. Landscape and figures alike are subsumed in the grays and shadows of textured pencil drawings, capturing the haze of passengers’ Monday frustration. Only two riders break up the gray—a white adult with a yellow hat and a shoulder-riding yellow bird and a young person of color wearing a yellow shirt. The passenger with the yellow hat pulls out pencil and paper to draw a funny picture of birds as a thank-you card for the train driver, a simple act of kindness marked by the illustrations of a Seoul-born artist; the driver is illustrated with slippers, holding a cup of tea, is particularly funny), and they depict an interracial Gomez family; Michael, his dad, and his sister have somewhat darker skin than does Michael’s mother. The illustrations are appropriately humorous (one of Pearl in a bathrobe and bunny slippers, holding a cup of tea, is particularly funny), and they depict an interracial Gomez family; Michael, his dad, and his sister have somewhat darker skin than does Michael’s mother. A cliffhanger whets readers’ appetites for the next book, TREE-MENDOUS TROUBLE, which publishes simultaneously.

A fun, action-packed romp with a lesson about living out God’s messages folded in. (Fantasy. 6-9) (Whirly Squirrels, 5)

A competitive youth learns the value of kindness over victory. Evie can run, jump, and hop the fastest, highest, and farthest. She also has the “trophies and ribbons” to prove it. Her love
of accolades is what makes the upcoming Field Day so exciting. “Zing! Zing! Zap!” When it’s Evie’s turn at beanbag toss, she misses all three times. Everyone shouts, “Hooray!” for the winner. “Except Evie.” Next it’s “musical hoops,” and even though Evie can hop the farthest, Marty wins. Evie and her friends are largely portrayed in black and white with pops of bright colors in clothing, props, and accessories. The succinct text narrates as Evie attempts more carnival games: balancing a glass of water on her head, running with an egg on a spoon, or a balloon-stomping competition. Despite her best efforts she is still empty handed. Finally her “favorite event—the sack race” provides her a chance. “Evie jumped high, Evie jumped fast. Evie jumped far. She was winning!” Just then a baby bird in the middle of the route forces her to stop and quickly make a choice whether a ribbon or an act of compassion is more important. Teba infuses each scene with charm and energy. Within the black-and-white color schema, Evie has dark hair and medium-toned skin, and her friends are diverse. Resources on fostering sportsmanship follow the story.

A lively read-aloud promoting the virtues of sportsmanship. (Picture book. 4-8)

I’LL WALK WITH YOU
Pearson, Carol Lynn
Illus. by Sanders, Jane
Gibbs Smith (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 17, 2020
978-1-4236-5395-0

Drawing on lyrics from her Mormon children’s hymn of the same title, Pearson explores diversity and acceptance in a more secular context.

Addressing people of varying ages, races, origins, and abilities in forced rhymes that omit the original version’s references to Jesus, various speakers describe how—they unlike some people—will “show [their] love for” their fellow humans. “If you don’t talk as most people do / some people talk and laugh at you,” a child tells a tongue-tied classmate. “But I won’t! / I won’t! / I’ll talk with you / and giggle too. / That’s how I’ll show my love for you.” Unfortunately, many speakers’ actions feel vague and rather patronizing even as they include and reassure. “I know you bring such interesting things,” a wheelchair user says, welcoming a family “born far, far away” who arrives at the airport; the adults wear Islamic clothing. As pink- and brown-skinned worshipers join a solitary brown-skinned person who somehow “[doesn’t] pray as some people pray” on a church pew, “some scientists classify biomes broadly, and others are more precise.” Unfortunately, there isn’t a bibliography or reading list for future ecologists eager to learn more. Each biome is presented on a double-page spread, with three small paragraphs of description capped by an open-ended question for readers to ponder. At the bottom of this column is a key to a seek-and-find game embedded in gutter-spanning, stylized linear art. The game is amusing, but what appears to be playful misdirection might lead to more questions than answers when considering biomes: For example, why is the forest biome’s wolverine repeated in the savanna? Does the bobac marmot of the Eurasian steppes also live in Canada’s tundra, as the illustrations suggest? Caregivers will find themselves doing a lot of research to help answer the ecosystem of questions that will follow a read. The multipage glossary at the end provides a bit more about the plants and animals found in the search, with three to four lines of description each.

Amusing but depthless and even misleading. (Informational picture book. 6-9)

SEEK & FIND BIOMES
Tundra, Alpine, Forest, Rainforest, Savanna, Grassland, Desert, Freshwater, Marine
Peterson, Jorrien
Illus. by the author
Gibbs Smith (32 pp.)
Illus. by the author
$14.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-4236-5403-2

A Where’s Waldo? of the natural world.

Readers are introduced to nine different biomes using a sleek seek-and-find approach to learning. In the introduction, Peterson tackles the question of biomes by informing the reader that “not everyone agrees on how many biomes there are. Some scientists classify biomes broadly, and others are more precise.” Unfortunately, there isn’t a bibliography or reading list for future ecologists eager to learn more. Each biome is presented on a double-page spread, with three small paragraphs of description capped by an open-ended question for readers to ponder. At the bottom of this column is a key to a seek-and-find game embedded in gutter-spanning, stylized linear art. The game is amusing, but what appears to be playful misdirection might lead to more questions than answers when considering biomes: For example, why is the forest biome’s wolverine repeated in the savanna? Does the bobac marmot of the Eurasian steppes also live in Canada’s tundra, as the illustrations suggest? Caregivers will find themselves doing a lot of research to help answer the ecosystem of questions that will follow a read. The multipage glossary at the end provides a bit more about the plants and animals found in the search, with three to four lines of description each.

Amusing but depthless and even misleading. (Informational picture book. 6-9)

I REALLY WANT THE CAKE
Philip, Simon
Illus. by Gaggiotti, Lucia
Orchard/Scholastic (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-338-58941-2

A child and a dog fight a losing battle to resist a tempting—but forbidden—chocolate cake.

Each step in this hilarious struggle is narrated by the child in a three-line rhyme that culminates in an increasingly emotional refrain (in fun type to match) as the battle for self-control escalates. “I think I want the cake” leads to “You must not eat the cake” and “I must… / …forget the cake” until “I’m going back for cake.” Undone, the child licks the cake, then takes a bite—and then dog and child annihilate the cake. “I know I’ve not been very wise. / And what I’ve done I can’t disguise. / I might have to apologize… / …because I ate the cake.” To

An unfortunately simplistic delivery of a well-intentioned message. (Picture book. 4-6)

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make amends, the child, who’s never baked, decides to replace the cake. “It’s EASY making cake!” until things go wrong. Eggs smash on the table, batter splatters, and a predictable mess engulfs the kitchen, child, and dog. Despite stress and mess, the child is at last able to say, “but hey, I’ve made you cake!” And it’s a delightfully decorated cake at that. Multipanel spreads with exuberantly scribbly cartoon illustrations keep the action moving, and close-ups of the pale-skinned, black-haired child’s face capture the emotional turmoil that ensues.

This humorous struggle for self-control also models apology and restitution. (Picture book. 3-8)

I’M STICKING WITH YOU
Prasadam-Halls, Smriti
Illus. by Small, Steve
Godwin Books/Henry Holt (40 pp.)
$18.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-250-61923-5

Real friends hang together no matter what.

Bear and BFF Squirrel are thick as thieves, tight as a drum. Despite superficial differences, such as height, weight, and girth, and the fact that these differences wreak havoc on Squirrel’s belongings—not to mention launching Squirrel skyward while the pair are on a seesaw—Bear swears to follow Squirrel everywhere and to do everything together. That is, until Squirrel decides it’s time for the pair to split up; Squirrel needs to be alone. Being a good friend, Bear agrees, albeit reluctantly, and departs. At first, Squirrel savors the luxury of newfound freedom but then concedes, “I MISS BEAR!” Wouldn’t you know it? Squirrel hurriedly rushes back to beg Bear to reconsider their relationship; all their differences can be resolved. “We’re joined at the heart,” avers Squirrel, “AND I LOVE YOU / A LOT!” The premise of this bouncy rhyming tale isn’t original, but this telling is a sweet, lively charmer nonetheless, and the verses scan well. A story about friends’ unwavering loyalty is always welcome. Readers/listeners will appreciate the sticking-like-glue pairing of these seemingly vastly different pals, in itself commendable. The delightful, expressive illustrations are by turns comical and poignant, and the verses scan well. A story about friends’ unwavering loyalty is always welcome. Readers/listeners will appreciate the sticking-like-glue pairing of these seemingly vastly different pals, in itself commendable. The delightful, expressive illustrations are by turns comical and poignant, and lots of white space and minimal text on each page focuses attention on the protagonists. Occasionally, blue type is set on black backgrounds, heightening visual appeal.

Kids will want to stick with this one. (Picture book. 3-6)

SETTING MANY VIGNETTES IN AN EIGHT-POINTED STAR-SHAPED FRAME, BRON FILLS THE PAGES WITH CAREFUL DETAIL.

SALMA THE SYRIAN CHEF
Ramadan, Danny
Illus. by Bron, Anna
Annick Press (40 pp.)
$18.95 | Mar. 10, 2020
978-1-77321-375-0

When Salma and her mom move from the refugee camp to Canada, they seem to leave joy behind with Papa. Back in the camp, her mom giggled with her friends all the time, but now, in Vancouver, she hardly laughs at all. They both miss Papa and hope he’ll join them soon. Salma and her mom live in the Welcome Center with other newcomers. When she shares her quest to make Mama laugh with one of the helpers, Nancy suggests that Salma draw her good memories for inspiration. As Salma illustrates her home in Damascus and her parents eating a dish of foul shami, she has an idea! “I think Mama misses Syrian food….I want to make her foul shami.” However,
Reese’s pairing of a realistic depiction of lived trauma with an allegorical-fantasy reflection proves stunningly effective.

**A GAME OF FOX & SQUIRRELS**
Reese, Jenn
Henry Holt (224 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-250-24301-0

A preteen confronts the child abuse that’s shaped her world through a mysterious game, alluring and terrifying, with rules that are all too familiar.

After Sam, 11, panicked and revealed the child abuse that left older sister Caitlin with a broken arm, the girls were sent to live with Aunt Vicky and her wife, Hannah, in rural Oregon. (The girls and their aunt are white; Hannah has a Chinese surname.) While Caitlin, 13, gratefully adapts, Sam wants only to return to their parents. A gift from Vicky, the Game of Fox & Squirrels, could help with that. The squirrels and fox on the cards, she discovers, have real-life counterparts. The flamboyant fox Ashander feeds Sam’s hopes, testing her loyalty; she must earn her right to go home. What begins as a hero’s journey degenerates into cruel demands. His minions, three timid squirrels, urge Sam to placate him, but she realizes she must look elsewhere to find courage to resist. Sam moves between the game world—with its chillingly familiar rules and seductive, but invariably broken, promises—and the real, but unfamiliar, world of peaceful, dependable adults. Reese’s pairing of a realistic depiction of lived trauma with its allegorical-fantasy reflection proves stunningly effective in conveying PTSD. The abuse is portrayed indirectly, through its long-term effect on victims. Fear digs deep grooves in the psyche—Sam and Caitlin are on perpetual alert. Beautifully written, this is no easy read; crucially, an author’s note addresses real-life abuse and directs readers to the book’s website, which offers resources for help.

A haunting tale that brings the traumatic aftermath of family violence into focus with unsurpassing clarity. (Fiction. 10-14)

**THE HOUSE FULL OF STUFF**
Rand, Emily
Illus. by the author
Tate/Abrams (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-84976-662-3

The old adage about one man’s junk being another man’s treasure proves true in this British import.

Mr. McDuff is a bona fide collector of things, which makes him very happy and makes his neighbors equally unhappy. He spends his days carting home all manner of objects, including “socks with holes and bits of wire,” until his home is crammed full, just the opposite of those of all the neatniks on his street. “One boy called Mo” is different, though. He is curious and a bit more friendly. And to his great joy, Mr. McDuff is the one who can fix his badly broken bike. Mo becomes an accomplice, bringing things from home that need mending. Soon Mo’s family and friends become converts to the concept that discards can be recycled, and in the process, they all become a lot less neat and a lot more community-minded. The message is strong but gently imparted. The delicate pen-and-ink-style drawings against a white background help to convey the scenarios without overwhelming the page. Splashes of blue and brown add interest to the overall design.

Neighborhoods can accommodate all manner of folk, from neat to not. (Picture book. 4-8)

**TWO BICYCLES IN BEIJING**
Robeson, Teresa
Illus. by Wu, Junyi
Whitman (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 1, 2020
978-0-8075-0764-3

Lunzi the red bicycle races past the sights and sounds of Beijing in search of her friend Huangche, a yellow bicycle.

When Lunzi and Huangche leave the bicycle factory, they sit in a shop window watching the city and its people go by. “They wished they could stay this way forever. But one day,” a young girl comes in and buys Huangche. Soon after, a messenger boy enters the shop and picks Lunzi. The boy hops on and together they weave through narrow alleys called hutongs and race along main streets. They zip by Nanguan Park and the National Art
Museum, and they fly by Tiananmen Square. Here and there Lunzi spots a flash of yellow. Is it Huangche? Sadly, no. It’s just a golden kite tail or a patch of chrysanthemums. At the end of the day, the boy stops to buy dinner. As Lunzi leans “against the brick wall with a sigh,” she spots a whoosh of yellow and fills with hope. Robeson introduces readers to basic Mandarin (in romanized pinyin) with the simple refrain “one, two; yi, er” and words like “jie” and “bao.” However, the uneven text—at times lyrical, at times faltering—fails to evoke either Lunzi’s anxiety to find her friend or the buzz and bustle of big city Beijing. Furthermore, Wu’s muted pencil illustrations, while detailed with people and fanciful architecture, don’t pop on the page.

Exploring Beijing from a bicycle’s point of view: a unique concept that doesn’t live up to its potential. (glossary, backmatter) (Picture book 4-8)

LAYLA’S LUCK
Rooks, Jo
Illus. by the author
Magination/American Psychological Association (32 pp.)
$14.99 | Mar. 21, 2020
978-1-4338-3238-3
Series: Once Upon a Garden

It’s more than luck that wins the day.

Layla the ladybug considers herself to be very lucky, as most ladybugs are known to be. She has a lucky object for every occasion—she gives credit to her lucky pencil for her excellent spelling grades and to her lucky watering can for her super-tall flowers. So, with the “Great Garden Cake Bake” coming up, Layla knows just what to do. She relies on her lucky cup and lucky spoon to measure and stir the ingredients, baking it all “for three hours (Layla’s lucky number).” The result is a burned mess. Maybe she’s not so lucky after all. Forlorn, she follows a delicious smell to her friends’ lovely baked creations. They remind her that studying earned her good grades, and daily care made her flowers grow. “Your achievements come from you!” her friends proclaim. Layla forgoes her lucky charms and, with some guidance, makes a delicious cake. Key words that support the book’s lesson appear repeatedly in bold within the modest text, making the moral clear. Minimal art gets its job done effectively. Predominant visual symmetry throughout (the characters almost always face forward) makes for easy sight recognition for young readers. The large-eyed insects composed of simple shapes appear friendly, especially with the cheerful, bright colors of the garden.

An effective boost of self-confidence for little ones. (Picture book 3-6)

INTO THE TALL, TALL GRASS
Ryan, Lorali
McElderry (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-344-4967-1

A grieving New Mexico preteen learns to trust those around her.

Yolanda’s grandmother, called Wela, is dying, which will leave Yolanda and her twin sister, Sonja, without a guardian, as their widower father is deployed in Afghanistan. Between those losses, the death of her beloved grandfather, and the betrayal of her best friend, Ghita, who replaced Yolanda with Sonja, Yolanda feels utterly alone. It doesn’t help that Wela and Sonja both have the family “gift” of a supernatural connection with nature and Yolanda has none. The biracial girl’s bond with her Latinx maternal grandparents (her father is white) comes from their shared love of science—Wela was a geneticist determined to find out the source of the family trait—but since his death, Wela has wanted nothing to do with it. But Wela knows she’s dying, and she chooses Yolanda for one last, odd favor. To her chagrin, Yolanda is followed on this quest by her sister, Ghita, and Ghita’s brother, Hasik. (Ghita and Hasik are South Asian.) As Wela uses her remaining strength to tell the children the story of her family and their strange gifts, Yolanda finds her own confidence. This heartfelt family saga weaves together science and magic believably and sensitively. The cast of characters is, refreshingly, almost entirely devoid of white people.

This is how it feels to find out you may be the villain and the hero of your own story. (Magical realism. 8-12)

CAT LADIES
Schaefer, Susi
Illus. by the author
Abrams (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-4197-4082-4

A pampered pet initially resents the ways an interloper disrupts her routine.

The brisk, quirky, tongue-in-cheek text is told in the third person from Princess the cat’s point of view. It begins by introducing Princess’ “four ladies” and describing the various activities they share with her. Busy with personal grooming, running errands, bird-watching, and singing with the eponymous band, Princess is perfectly happy until a “stray” comes into their lives. She tries to maintain the status quo, but the newcomer seems to have taken her place. Feeling neglected, she slinks off to spend some time alone (and possibly sulk a bit). Comic touches include reversing stereotypical statements (“Some cats say [four ladies is] too many”), echoes of traditional tales (Princess’ search for a private spot leads to places that are “too high…too hard…and…too cramped”), and depicting the unwanted guest as a human child rather than another cat. Unfortunately, these
light touches can’t entirely compensate for the somewhat predictable plot and Princess’ abrupt about-face. Schaefer’s illustrations are busy and energetic, with varying textures that give them a collaged feel. Retro shades of teal and mustard dominate, complementing the blocky shapes and geometric motifs. Princess’ simply drawn features effectively communicate a variety of emotions. Two of her ladies have light-brown skin, as does the young visitor, implying racial and/or ethnic diversity.

This feline protagonist makes peace with the newcomer but may not prevail over more engaging cat tales. (Picture book. 4-8)

**THE MYSTERY OF THE MOON TOWER**
Sedita, Francesco & Seraydarian, Prescott
Illus. by Hamaker, Steve
Viking (176 pp.)
$18.99 | $12.99 paper | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-425-29187-0 paper
978-0-425-29186-3
Series: The Pathfinders Society, 1

Five intrepid, young pathfinders explore the environmentally volatile Windrose Valley in search of a fabled treasure.

Deep in Windrose Valley awaits an adventurous summer at Camp Pathfinder, founded by a renowned, eccentric pioneer named Henry Merriweather. Merriweather’s fixation on finding the legendary Windrose treasure serves as a grand catalyst for the campers’ quest. The eclectic group of campers—newcomer Kyle, history buff Beth, zany magician-in-training Harry, cheerleader/math queen Vic, and tinkerer Nate—sets off, running all over town to find Merriweather’s baroque tile markers. Eventually, their efforts lead them to the Merriweather Estate, where the campers slowly uncover the mystery behind the Moon Tower catastrophe. Shortly after the bizarre incident, Merriweather disappeared, and the town’s fortunes failed. As the adolescent pathfinders near the trail toward the Moon Tower, they learn more about the mythical Merriweather and his infamous obsession. Sedita, Seraydarian, and Hamaker’s series debut zips along nicely, making a beaver dam over her neighbor’s storm drain. It makes Nina realize that Kavita isn’t the only weird one—and that weirdness is something to celebrate. As in series opener Nina Soni, Former Best Friend (2019), Sheth’s clear and distinctive narrative voice effortlessly leads readers through the intricacies of Nina’s quirky, innocent world. At times, the plot seems to wander, but the various threads tie together beautifully at the end, creating a satisfying and believable character arc. The children’s Indian heritage is cleverly woven into the storyline, infusing their lives without eclipsing their American identities.

A fast-paced story that, despite its life lesson, never feels preachy. (Fiction. 7-10)

**NINA SONI, SISTER FIXER**
Sheth, Kashmiri
Illus. by Kocmisersky, Jenn
Peachtree (128 pp.)
$15.99 | Apr. 1, 2020
978-1-68263-054-9
Series: Nina Soni, 2

When 9-year-old Nina Soni tries to fix her little sister’s quirkiness, she learns an important lesson about being yourself.

Kavita is weird. She makes up nonsensical songs, spontaneously dances in public, and innocently tells family secrets—like how Nina once turned her stomach yellow by putting turmeric on it as a tummy-ache cure. When Nina’s best friend, Jay (who is biracial, with a white dad and Indian mom), invites Nina’s family to stay at his family’s cabin for spring break, Nina is worried that Kavita’s weirdness will spoil the whole trip. She decides to correct her sister’s weirdest quality—her tendency to break into spontaneous dances in public, and innocently tells family secrets—like how Nina once turned her stomach yellow by putting turmeric on it as a tummy-ache cure. When Nina’s best friend, Jay (who is biracial, with a white dad and Indian mom), invites Nina’s family to stay at his family’s cabin for spring break, Nina is worried that Kavita’s weirdness will spoil the whole trip. She decides to correct her sister’s weirdest quality—her tendency to break into...

A philosophy for life, built word by word, hold by hold, climb by climb.

Japanese American teen rock-climbing champion Shirai-shi narrates the story of how she navigated one of her biggest climbs with patience, perseverance, and creativity. Problems, whether on rock or in life, can look “tremendously endless” to anyone, even Ashima, depicted here as a 13-year-old. But when she compares individual holds to the shape of her mother’s bolts of fabric or of her father’s elbow in a dance, she connects with the route, finding her way up the rock. However, her ascent isn’t perfect, and her first fall is depicted, boldly, on a vertical
Cabrera’s acrylic paint illustrations perfectly exemplify the title.

EXQUISITE

double-page spread. She “listens” to the climb, regroups with her father’s help, and approaches the rock with renewed mental and physical strength. Her summit, illustrated in a strong, striking pose—arms spread wide, fingers gripping the rock—portrays the perseverance, reflection, and tenacity Ashima demonstrates in every climb. Backmatter both narrates and visually depicts the author’s rise through the annals of climbing, including her completion of a formidable boulder problem, the first woman to do so. Vivid, clean-lined illustrations by debut artist Xiao immerse readers in sweeping, earth-toned vistas of rock and sky that form Ashima’s world. Lively endpapers show Ashima in various body positions common to the sport of rock climbing.

Both a riveting narrative and an excellent guide for young readers to try, try again. (Informational picture book. 5-8)

TOO FAR FROM HOME
Shmuel, Naomi
Illus. by Katz, Avi
Kar-Ben (96 pp.)
$15.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-5415-4671-4

A biracial girl encounters racism when she and her family move to a new city in Israel.

Meskerem and her little sisters were all born in Israel. She has always been proud of her loving, interracial Jewish family and of her mixed Ethiopian American heritage. But on the first day at her new school her classmates taunt her because of her color and their assumption that she is a newly arrived Ethiopian immigrant—so she claims to be American. There are further bullying incidents, and Meskerem is miserable, confused, and angry. She withdraws from her parents, but her grandmother gives her a better understanding of the danger-filled struggles of Ethiopian Jews to reach asylum in Israel, with her parents filling in additional details. When she shares this information in a school project, there’s a hopeful, if facile, outcome. Despite these expository opportunities, this Israeli import lacks context for North American readers unfamiliar with Operation Solomon and the concept of making aliyah, and there is no backmatter supplement. Meskerem narrates her own story, never exceeding her child’s understanding of events. While Shmuel provides a hopeful vision of acceptance and friendship, the author bio reveals that the story is based in part on the experiences of her own biracial (Ethiopian/Israeli) children. Katz’s softly drawn illustrations add depth and detail.

Readers will respond to this portrait of a proud, loving family in a difficult situation. (Fiction. 9-12)

EXQUISITE
The Poetry and Life of Gwendolyn Brooks
Slade, Suzanne
Illus. by Cabrera, Cozbi A.
Abrams (48 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-4197-3411-3

Poet Gwendolyn Brooks’ life is chronicled for young readers.

Growing up with a love for poetry that’s fed by her father’s recitations and her mother’s affirmations (“You are going to be the lady Paul Laurence Dunbar”), young Gwendolyn begins writing as early as 7. Poetry is everything to Gwendolyn, feeding her emotionally during the Great Depression and beyond. She writes by candlelight when the electricity is out and submits poems to publishers all over the country. Eventually they are published, but they don’t earn much—and then one day a phone call delivers joyous news: She is the first black writer to win the Pulitzer Prize! Slade’s uneven rhythms emulate Brooks’ but at times detract from a sense of textual cohesion; a superfluous explanation of the usage of “Black” in the author’s note feels awkward, as if seeking validation. On the other hand, Cabrera’s acrylic paint illustrations perfectly exemplify the title. Attention to detail, like the pink sponge roller in little Gwendolyn’s hair for a delightfully bumped bang and the dreamy bright pinks and blues of early spreads, with clocks and printed pages lining Gwendolyn’s imagination, adds a tangible depth to this story of her triumphs and challenges. Additional backmatter, including Brooks’ poem “Clouds,” a timeline, sources, and select bibliography, provides context and grounding for the airy book.

A joyfully illustrated celebration of Brooks’ good and important work. (Picture book/biography. 7-11)

A BOOK FOR ESCARGOT
Slater, Daibha
Illus. by Hanson, Sydney
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (40 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-0-374-31286-2

A Francophone snail struggles to find itself in a story.

Escargot, a cartoon snail in a blue-and-white-striped shirt, a red kerchief, and a black beret, immediately breaks the fourth wall, opening with: “Bonjour! I see you are reading a book. I will try not to distract you.” (The “you” here at the end is revealed to be a smiling black child holding a paintbrush. It’s all very meta.) Of course, what follows is a meandering distraction. Escargot first talks about different books “you” might like, then laments the lack of vibrant, positive snail representation in these stories. Escargot then brags about itself, imagining that “you” are the main character of a story.

The lack of vibrant, positive snail representation in these stories. Escargot then brags about itself, imagining that “you” are the main character of a story. “The main character of a story must have a problem, Escargot! You are so handsome, suave, and smart. What problem could you possibly have?” (The proliferation of “you”s
here, referring to very distinctly different “you’s, will pose a challenge to young readers not totally conversant with the conventions of dialogue.) The problem turns out to be that Escargot is tired of salads. The ensuing adventure involves finding a French cookbook, learning that snails could be on the menu, and deciding that the only way to save the day is to eat the cookbook. It’s barely even a story, and the annoyingly grandiose narrator is likely to lead non-Francophones to attempt a mocking French accent during read-alouds, an exhausting gag that tires itself out.

Like the eponymous dish, this will whet limited appetites. (Picture book. 4-7)

**BONE ADVENTURES**

*Smith, Jeff*

*Illus. by the author with Gaadt, Tom*

*Graphix/Scholastic (96 pp.)*

$22.99 | $9.99 paper | May 5, 2020

**Series: Bone**

Two whimsical adventures in the Bone universe are scaled for newcomers in this picture book with a graphic-novel feel. In Smith’s newest addition to his ever expanding oeuvre, the adorable Bone boys are back for two new escapades. The first, “Finders Keepers,” features the tall and goofy Smiley Bone, sly and suspended Phoney Bone, and earnest Fone Bone as they debate how to spend an unexpected windfall. Phoney and Smiley want to spend the money frivolously while Fone Bone presents a more sensible option. When they cannot come to a consensus, the trio finds themselves with nothing to show, gently emphasizing the importance of teamwork and cooperation. In the second tale, “Smiley’s Dream Book” (originally published as a stand-alone in 2018), Smiley has a wondrous reverie, counting birds with bespoke hats and scarves, until a fierce hawk threatens the fun. Fear not, Smiley will save the day, and his bravery is sure to elicit giggles from even the most stoic reader. Each full-color page (tints courtesy of Gaadt) is laid out as one framed panel with large, bright artwork, largely wordless action sequences, and easy-to-read, economically worded speech balloons. With its emphasis on sharing and counting, this is certainly slanted toward emerging readers, but older readers already familiar with the Bones should enjoy spending time with well-loved characters. All three characters present as male.

An addition to the Bone corpus sure to delight fans new and old. (Picture book. 4-9)

**MERMAID AND ME**

*Smith, Jeff*

*Illus. by the author with Gaadt, Tom*

*Graphix/Scholastic (96 pp.)*

$22.99 | $9.99 paper | May 5, 2020

**Series: Bone**

A young girl and mermaid become fast friends but are forced to part until adulthood in this gentle environmental tale.

Lying on a dock and dreaming of mermaids, a black-haired, light-complexioned girl gently reaches out to the water below. When a water-toned mermaid actually appears, the two begin to spend their days together. From tea parties and swim lessons to freeing a sea turtle from plastic, the girls learn from each other, finding delight in their similarities and differences. But when pollution threatens Mermaid’s life, the underwater girl realizes she must leave. With the hope of seeing Mermaid again, the girl and her classmates promise to care for the ocean. Delicate watercolors done in a pastel palette depict the joy in finding a kindred spirit. Heavily textured paper adds a sandy softness to the illustrations, and the vignette of the girl and mermaid swimming as reflections of each other is full of lyricism. Most charming is the honesty of the females’ shapes, both as girls and as adults, as the two women reunite with their arms outstretched, full with their own little ones and love for one another.

Full of little- (and big-) girl wonder and whimsy, this is a must for the mermaid-obsessed. (Picture book. 4-8)

**ONE EARTH**

*Spinelli, Eileen*

*Illus. by Coelho, Rogério*

*WorthyKids/Ideals (32 pp.)*

$17.99 | Mar. 3, 2020

A counting book uses rhyming verses to explore the natural world and ways children can help protect it.

“One wide sweeping sky. / Two honeybees. // Three bunnies in a nest. / Four redwood trees.” Readers follow in the pictures as a lone child with light-brown skin in a baseball cap slowly gathers three other friends over the page turns and the course of a day: a dark-skinned girl with an Afro, a pale-skinned blonde, and another boy with light-brown skin and (oddly) a bouffant. In the middle of the book, the count turns around: “Ten scraps of litter? / Toss them in the trash. / Nine empty bottles? / Turn them in for cash.” And so the four, separately and together, and with myriad family and diverse community members, explore ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle. Brilliant colors and detailed patterns draw eyes to the illustrations, which are the true stars here. Their vibrancy will entrance readers, who may not even bother to count. The counting is a vehicle, not the purpose, so the fact that the items may be challenging for younger readers to pick out doesn’t detract in the slightest. Readers may get
goose bumps as the book winds down and night falls. “One moon. / One sun. / One Earth so beautiful.”

The book’s final line resonates: “Remember—/ only one.”  (Picture book. 3-8)

THE SPACE BETWEEN LOST AND FOUND
Stark-McGinnis, Sandy
Bloomsbury (272 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-5476-0123-3

For older grade schooler Cassie Rodrigues, the space between lost and found is vast: Her mom has Alzheimer’s disease.

Although her mom is still a young woman, she has an early-onset form of the disease, and it’s progressing rapidly. Diagnosed just months ago, she’s already so affected that she can no longer recall her daughter’s name. Cassie’s life is thrown into disarray as she tries to navigate a new one.

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Bernard completes his dive with somersaults, spirals, and spins, and he receives a special gold-star award for his efforts. The humorous, rhyming text is uneven in quality, with some lines spot-on in dramatic cadence and a few word pairs that break the rhythm or stretch for meaning and/or rhyme. The divers are a diverse cast of canines, including many breeds and both males and females. The audience for the competition includes other kinds of animals and people of many races. Mixed-media illustrations with collage elements have a loose, impressionistic effect and include endearing expressions on Bernard’s anxious face. An enticing cover shows Bernard diving into the pool; a hand-scrapped title in what looks like black crayon attracts with its naéve charm.

Bernard’s conquest of his inner fear stands out as a quiet triumph.  (Picture book. 4-7)

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT
Swinarski, Claire
Harper/HarperCollins (256 pp.)
$16.99 | May 19, 2020
978-0-06-291267-1

Abby, a rural Wisconsin preteen with a passion for astronomy, concocts a secret plan to help her sister Blair, 18, who suffers from a life-threatening eating disorder.

Middle sister Jade, 16, is preoccupied with friends and a summer job; Blair’s in residential treatment while their parents ready the family’s rustic resort to host media and sightseers for the forthcoming solar eclipse. Isolated, Abby, whose besties have inexplicably dropped her, attracts the interest of renowned astronomer Leo Lacamoire, a visitor who recruits her to dig up a time capsule containing a valuable telescope stolen from him. Abby agrees, provided Leo promises to introduce her to his editor, who Abby hopes will publish Planet Pirates, a collection of stories she’s written and Blair’s illustrated. Despite long-laid plans to view the eclipse with her astronomy-teacher dad, Abby realizes her only chance to dig up a time capsule containing a valuable telescope stolen from him. Abby agrees, provided Leo promises to introduce her to his editor, who Abby hopes will publish Planet Pirates, a collection of stories she’s written and Blair’s illustrated. Despite long-laid plans to view the eclipse with her astronomy-teacher dad, Abby realizes her only chance to dig up a time capsule containing a valuable telescope stolen from him. Abby agrees, provided Leo promises to introduce her to his editor, who Abby hopes will publish Planet Pirates, a collection of stories she’s written and Blair’s illustrated. Despite long-laid plans to view the eclipse with her astronomy-teacher dad, Abby realizes her only chance to dig up a time capsule containing a valuable telescope stolen from him. Abby agrees, provided Leo promises to introduce her to his editor, who Abby hopes will publish Planet Pirates, a collection of stories she’s written and Blair’s illustrated. Despite long-laid plans to view the eclipse with her astronomy-teacher dad, Abby realizes her only chance to dig up a time capsule containing a valuable telescope stolen from him. Abby agrees, provided Leo promises to introduce her to his editor, who Abby hopes will publish Planet Pirates, a collection of stories she’s written and Blair’s illustrated. Despite long-laid plans to view the eclipse with her astronomy-teacher dad, Abby realizes her only chance to dig up a time capsule containing a valuable telescope stolen from him. Abby agrees, provided Leo promises to introduce her to his editor, who Abby hopes will publish Planet Pirates, a collection of stories she’s written and Blair’s illustrated. Despite long-laid plans to view the eclipse with her astronomy-teacher dad, Abby realizes her only chance to dig up a time capsule containing a valuable telescope stolen from him.

A flawed debut—but a promising one.  (Fiction. 10-12)
The Tales From Beyond the Brain (2019) team returns with 13 more scary stories. 

In short, punchy stories, readers face dangerous insects and animals, time- and reality-breaking impossibilities, dangerous imposters, and more. Throughout the variety of the scares, body horror appears again and again—considering the edge-of-puberty audience, it’s a timely theme that’s likely to resonate. Although many characters face unpleasant (or at least ambiguous) ends, truly detailed gross-out bits come off as offbeat and cartoonish (such as a primordial ooze and a transformation prompted by pumpkin pie). Stylized black-and-white illustrations range from spot to full-page. They use line, light, and shadow effectively, highlighting frights in detail while also leaving plenty for readers’ imaginations to fill in. While some stories have a touch of modern technology in the horror, old-fashioned analog tech that modern kids won’t be familiar with repeatedly features as a sinister unknown. In the final story, the point of view shifts to first-person, leading to eventual fourth-wall breakage (that con-...
Each nugget of text is also a complete concept that takes into account a variety of nonfiction reading styles.

**WHO WILL IT BE?**
*How Evolution Connects Us All*
Vitale, Paola
Illus. by Bossù, Rossana
Blue Dot Kids Press (48 pp.)
$18.95 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-7331212-0-0

The mystery of evolution is presented in this Italian import.

Constructed essentially in two parts, this richly illustrated picture book begins with a spare, poetic portrayal of the development of a vertebrate embryo from conception to birth. The text gracefully and sure-handedly leads readers to the startling fact that developing vertebrate embryos, whether fish, toad, snake, duck, fox, or human, all look alike, and for a time, it is impossible to tell what—or who—the embryo will become. This fascinating fact, presented artistically and subtly in the first part of the book, raises a desire for more information—which is obligingly supplied by the second part of the story: Here, the text leaves behind spare poetry and turns to more fact-filled information. A key evolutionary theory of Darwin’s—that all vertebrates are descended from a single ancestor and have evolved to adapt to survive particular climates—is presented in an easily understandable way while also underscoring the fascinating conclusion that all creatures are connected through evolution: a satisfying circling back to the earlier part of the book. Bossù’s illustrations both soothe and stimulate with colorful, soft-edged circles and amorphous shapes on pure-white backgrounds, imbuing richness and anticipation to the theme of evolution.

Richly illustrated and both poetically and informatively written. *(Informational picture book. 5-9)*

**TELL ME**
*What Children Really Want To Know About Bodies, Sex, and Emotions*
von der Gathen, Katharina
Illus. by Kuhl, Anke
Trans. by Tanaka, Shelley
Gecko Press (208 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-77321-369-9

As the subtitle indicates, this German import answers a whole host of questions kids curious about sex want the answers to.

There are 99 in all, covering anatomy, puberty, reproduction, sexual and gender identity, and, of course, sex. The book opens vertically, with the page below the gutter displaying both the handwritten question and a cartoon drawing, frequently humorous. The second question, “Are there different penises,” is illustrated with a double lineup of 10 unengorged penises complete with hair and scrotum, some circumcised, some not, all verifiably different. Its placement so early in the book ensures readers know what they’re getting into in terms of both tone and frankness. Sex educator von der Gathen’s answers appear on the flip side; all employ appropriate vocabulary that’s respectful of the capabilities of their audience and are calmly inclusive of variations in human and cultural experience. While the book early on establishes the fact that there are “people who identify as a different gender than the one they are born with,” it often uses gendered language to describe experiences: “Girls get their periods for the first time and boys have their first ejaculation” during puberty, for instance. When discussing sexual intimacy, the importance of consent is ever present. Kuhl’s cartoons depict adults and children of different racial presentations and include several same-sex couples.

Funny and frank, this will be an important resource for many kids. *(Nonfiction. 8-14)*

**RUNNING WILD**
*Awesome Animals in Motion*
Watson, Galadriel
Illus. by Dixon, Samantha
Annick Press (68 pp.)
$12.95 paper | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-77321-369-9

An engaging and comprehensive exploration of the physics of animal movement.

A grappling hook and a caterpillar, a pendulum and a gibbon, or lever and a turtle—these are just a few examples of tools used to demonstrate the biomechanics of animal movement. Whether it is walking, running, hopping, crawling, climbing, or gliding, thorough explanations of how animals fight or use the forces of gravity, lift, drag, and thrust to travel on land, water, or air are contextualized in ways young readers can easily comprehend. Through text and illustration, information is expertly presented, with each double-page spread focusing on one kind of movement. These are broken down into various steps that create an overall narrative, but each nugget of text is also a complete concept that takes into account a variety of nonfiction reading styles, including those that like to cherry-pick little bits of information. A conclusion sparks curiosity and inquiry by asking readers to pay attention to the animals around them and think about how they are moving and how movements differ from animal to animal, bridging a connection to their daily worlds while also tying the study of animal biomechanics to innovative pursuits such as making better prosthetics, robots, and swimsuits.

Jump, hop, or pounce on this winning, informative title. *(table of contents, sources, index) *(Nonfiction. 9-12)*
Each episodic chapter confronts Ryan with a situation; intermittently funny, frustrating, and touching, they should be familiar and accessible to readers.

WAYS TO MAKE SUNSHINE

Watson, Renée
Illus. by Mata, Nina
Bloomsbury (192 pp.)
$16.99 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-5476-0056-4

Ryan Hart is navigating the fourth grade and all its challenges with determination. Her mom named her Ryan because it means “king,” and she wanted Ryan to feel powerful every time she heard her name; Ryan knows it means she is a leader. So when changes occur or disaster strikes, budding chef Ryan does her best to find the positive and “make sunshine.” When her dad is laid off from the post office, the family must make adjustments that include moving into a smaller house, selling their car, and changing how they shop for groceries. But Ryan gets to stay at Vernon Elementary, and her mom still finds a way to get her the ingredients she needs to practice new recipes. Her older brother, Ray, can be bossy, but he finds little ways to support her, especially when she is down—as does the whole family. Each episodic chapter confronts Ryan with a situation; intermittently funny, frustrating, and touching, they should be familiar and accessible to readers, as when Ryan fumbles her Easter speech despite careful practice. Ryan, her family, and friends are black, and Watson continues to bring visibility to both Portland, Oregon, generally and its black community specifically, making another wonderful contribution to Portland, Oregon, and all its challenges with determination.

SOMEDAY WE WILL
A Book for Grandparents and Grandchildren

Webb, Pam
Illus. by Leach, Wendy
Beaming Books (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-5064-5400-9

Today’s energetic, active grandparents and their young grandchildren can anticipate a lively extended visit filled with engagingly fun pursuits.

A pair of loving grandparents prompt their two grandchildren to think about all the things they will do together the next time they visit. “SOMEDAY / we’ll take a walk in the park / and wave to the ducks paddling in the pond.” Thin-lined, colorful drawings feature a vibrant couple—a balding grandfather and a grandmother with short graying hair—in youthful poses during warm summery outings with their kids (all family members present white). They ride bikes, garden, swim, picnic, draw with sidewalk chalk, fly kites, blow bubbles, read books together, and eventually share a living-room movie night with popcorn. After this litany of “someday’s, a double-page spread reveals grandparents on verso reading a letter from the kids and the kids on recto marking Xs on a calendar. Finally, “SOMEDAY… / SOMEDAY… // SOMEDAY IS HERE!” Grandparents and kids greet one another with hugs and smiles. While long-distance relationships can be a bit difficult to maintain even with the possibilities of today’s technology, this will surely encourage good strategic discussion to quell the impatience of waiting for the next welcoming stay at a grandparent’s home.

Captures the eager anticipation of reunions with loving grandparents. (Picture book: 8-10)

HOW SELFISH!

Welsh, Clare Helen
Illus. by Taillec, Olivier
Words & Pictures (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-71124-447-4
Series: Dot and Duck

Fowl and friend fight over toys. Duo Dot and Duck explored manners in How Rude! (2018). Now they are back, learning another tough childhood lesson. Duck finds a stick, but Dot greedily snatches it away. Duck thinks it should be a flag. Dot thinks it is a sword. The two squabble back and forth, grabbing and yelling. “Flag!” “Sword!” Duck tries to negotiate; “Swap the flag for a rabbit?” But Dot is having none of it: “That’s MY toy!” When Duck suggests sharing, Dot ceremoniously offers a tiny leaf while keeping everything else (including the stick). The pair can’t figure out how to agree until Duck utters the most powerful phrase in all of childhood: “I’m telling on you…. ” Dot quickly acquiesces, and suddenly Duck is the one with all of the toys. Dot is fuming. How selfish! The staccato shouts that dominate the dialogue-only text and the uncluttered, white backdrop emphasize this grumpy feud. Each page turn shows how quickly an argument can escalate. Luckily, the duo realize they miss each other’s company and are able to find a compromise. The argument itself offers hints as a model for social-emotional conflict resolution, but this book is more likely to be used to spark a deeper discussion rather than to provide solo guidance. Duck is a yellow-feathered duck; Dot is a pink-skinned human.

Exploring selfish behavior makes understanding the “why” of sharing easier. (Picture book: 3-6)

ALIEN NATE

Whamond, Dave
Illus. by the author
Kids Can (64 pp.)
$14.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-5253-0209-1

Alien Nate’s mission to bring pizza to the Vegans is threatened by men in beige suits.
A little ode to pizza and human ingenuity. (Graphic science fiction. 6-9)

LITTLE PEARL

Widmark, Martin
Illus. by Dziubak, Emilia
Trans. by Laweson, Polly
Floris (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-178250-599-0

Grace, a teenage girl, tells Daniel, a little boy, an exciting bedtime story.

It’s an adventure that really happened to Grace (or did it?) when she was younger than [Daniel], when every day was as bright as this pearl.” As she shows the boy a glowing pearl ring, she tells him that her older brother disappeared. She describes their close relationship, which centered on playing their hand-carved flutes together; here, an unearthly double-page spread shows an angelic boy playing a flute while a girl sadly sits on the instrument’s end. Dziubak’s talents are on display in this haunting picture. The wordy, meandering story, translated from Swedish, is less successful. When sledding, Grace “skid[s] into an icy tunnel” and emerges as a small figure in summer clothes surrounded by large insects with a conspicuously odd manner of speech. Taken captive by a crab, she must collect pearls, using a stick to wedge open the clams (not oysters). She follows the instrument’s end. Dziubak’s talents are on display in this haunting picture. The wordy, meandering story, translated from Swedish, is less successful.

THE FANTASTICAL EXPLOITS OF GWENDOLYN GRAY

Williamson, B.A.
Jolly Fish Press (384 pp.)
$11.99 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-63163-435-2
Series: Gwendolyn Gray, 2

Gwendolyn travels through a library of tropes and narrative conventions to fight world-controlling villains.

Gwendolyn Gray, whose vermilion hair stands out in a world where most folks are blond, is dissatisfied with her City. At the end of series opener The Marvelous Adventures of Gwendolyn Gray (2018), when she traveled into a fictional world of airship pirates, she’d destroyed the mind-controlling Lambents that kept her City docile. And yet, even without the mind control, the City is still a toxic place full of conformity. It’s almost a relief when the Faceless Gentlemen reappear and chase Gwendolyn back into magical worlds. This time, she ends up in Facoria, where Titania and Oberon reign, and a human “inventress” with clockwork wings takes Gwendolyn under them. To save herself and her City from various wicked forces, Gwendolyn must control her depression, mania, and anxiety. (These are mostly portrayed as a “sickness of the spirit” she must learn to manage as normal mental illness, but they are tied uncomfortably into magic and metaphor as well). The inventress protects Gwendolyn through a series of magical training montages, then sends her out into the (overwhelmingly white) multiverse to fight the baddies. A smart-alecky narrator breaks the fourth wall like a wrecking ball, with frequent metafictional asides and unobtrusive fixation on the age of the 13-year-old protagonist.

Too many plot twists, arch narrative asides, and last-minute fortune reversals make this adventure plod. (Fantasy. 10-12)

THE TRUTH ACCORDING TO BLUE

Yohalem, Eve
Little, Brown (352 pp.)
$17.99 | May 12, 2020
978-0-316-42437-0

If 13-year-old Blue can find treasure that went down in a ship centuries ago, maybe she can expand her identity.

Family lore says Blue’s “great-times-twelve grandparents” arrived in America as 12-year-olds—one from Amsterdam, one from Java (their story is related in Cast Off, 2015)—and left treasure underwater when their ship sank off Long Island. Blue can’t wait to find it. But in Sag Harbor, “regular families” like Blue’s face wealthy summer vacationers—including a movie star who insists that Blue entertain his rude, spoiled daughter. He dangles a $500,000 diabetes research donation that Blue, “the poster
child (literally)" of a diabetes organization, can't ignore. Luckily, the girls slowly make friends and undertake a grumpy, terrifying, thrilling treasure hunt employing methods hazardous and illegal. Blue's first-person voice is funny and immediate in her desperation to find the treasure, which connects her to her beloved late grandfather and which, she hopes, will distinguish her from being merely “Diabetes Girl.” Copious nitty-gritty details of blood-sugar management—testing, counting, taking insulin—accurately show diabetes as a frustrating, dangerous, ongoing challenge. Readers will swoon for Blue’s cherished service dog, Otis, who helps keep her safe. Unfortunately, the breezy portrayal of people feeding and touching Otis without permission misleads about (critical) service-dog etiquette. White-presenting Blue’s mixed white and (extremely attenuated) Javanese identity is acknowledged only through the ethnicity of her older relatives.

Exciting treasure hunt, refreshingly unromanticized chronic illness—a good combo. (Fiction. 9-13)

SMASHY TOWN
Zimmerman, Andrea & Clemesha, David
Illus. by Yaccarino, Dan
Harper/HarperCollins (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 19, 2020
978-0-06-291037-0

The cure for anyone suffering from insufficient amounts of smashing and crashing.

Mr. Gilly hasn’t missed a beat in the intervening 21 years between his debut in Trashy Town (1999) and this newest venture. Now, instead of driving the garbage truck, Mr. Gilly is “a demolition man.” Some old buildings are due to come down, so as two pigeons watch, the rhyming work chant gets underway. “GO! / Swing the ball, hit the wall! / SMASH, SMASH, SMASH! / Swing the ball, hit the wall! / CRASH, CRASH, CRASH!” Brick, wood, glass, and stone must all give way when they encounter Mr. Gilly’s wrecking ball. After that, Mr. Gilly maneuvers a bulldozer and cleans up his mess. Fans of his previous outing will find that the format of this book closely mirrors that of its predecessor. Not that they’d mind. Yaccarino manages to perfectly emulate his previous combination of retro shapes alongside bold, flat colors. The simplicity of the art and jaunty read-aloud potential of the text guarantees this both a breezy portrayal of people feeding and touching Otis with- (extremely attenuated) Javanese identity is acknowledged only through the ethnicity of her older relatives.

Will young readers be able to get enough of this book? NO! (Picture book. 2-5)

BUEN SHABAT, SHABBAT SHALOM
Aroeste, Sarah
Illus. by Rubio, Ayesha Lopez
Kar-Ben (12 pp.)
$6.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-5415-4246-4

A Sephardic family celebrates the Sabbath in this bilingual English/Ladino board book.

It’s Friday night, and the family is getting ready for Shab- bat. The text is mostly in English with a few italicized Ladino words and phrases, their meaning easily understood by the context, and a recurring “Buen Shabat, Shabbat Shalom!” on every double-page spread. While the mother prepares the meal, the father and children set the table. It is now time to “light the candles, las kandelas.” The mother does so with no covering on her head, indicating a comfort with a bending of some of the traditions. As the father holds an infant in his arms they sing some songs. When it is time to bless the wine and braided challah bread, the infant is settled in a highchair, and the mother brings the challah to the table. An illustration of the family group within a circle, emphasizing their togetherness, is accompanied by; “Bless the family, la famiya / Enjoy the food, la komida.” In the last spread, the family is gathered close around the table, “Peace for all, para todos!” What sets this book apart is the use of Ladino, a Spanish-derived language of the Jewish Diaspora not widely spoken worldwide.

Families with a Sephardic background will particularly appreciate this book. (Board book. 1-4)

COLORS
Babin, Stéphanie
Illus. by Mathy, Vincent
Twirl/Chronicle (12 pp.)
$16.99 | Jan. 7, 2020
978-2-40801-614-2

This French import is a matching game with sliding panels and scenes to play I Spy and other suggested activities.

Each verso presents a busy, colorful scene with animals engaged in human activities around a common theme, with such caption labels as “Vroom” (ground vehicles) or “At the Market.” The recto pages feature eight rectangular, easy-to-move sliding panels with one object depicted in four differently colored pairs. Little ones are encouraged to try four different activities with a caregiver: “Find a Pair” (a memory game with the sliding panels), “Look and Find” (a search in the larger scene for the object that’s pictured under the sliding panels), “Time to Hide” (hiding pairs of objects by sliding the panels one color at a time), and “I Spy” (naming objects of a particular color). While Mathy’s art is
The book scores points with an eclectic mix of dinosaurs.

**DINOSAUR SURPRISE**

Illus. by Baruzzi, Agnese
Minedition (20 pp.)
$11.99 | Mar. 1, 2020
978-88-8341-95-5

Things aren’t always as they seem in this inventive gallery of dinosaurs in disguise.

Those caregivers who remember *Mad* magazine’s Fold-Ins will appreciate the central device of this fun and colorful board book. In *Mad*, when a large illustration of a seemingly ordinary scene was folded on the dotted lines, the folded elements came together to create a new picture illustrating the punchline to the joke. In this book, unfolding a seemingly innocuous picture reveals a bevy of dinosaurs to delight dinophiles of all ages. “Look,” opens the text, “isn’t that a beautiful butterfly?” But once readers pull out the accordion-folded page they see: “No, that’s a Pteranodon.” A page of text on verso faces a very non-threatening image on recto until little readers extend the folded pages full length, revealing the hidden reptiles. “Oh no, it’s a spider! / Wait, it’s a Tyrannosaurus Rex...Run!” The text and the accompanying reveals lend themselves to call-and-response readings and squeals of laughter. The artwork is cartoonish and whimsically simplified and rendered in muted bold colors, some objects may be difficult for youngsters to name either due to their stylized depictions or readers’ unfamiliarity with them; the “spring riders” and the “spinner” (or merry-go-round) on the “At the Park” double-page spread, for instance, may be unfamiliar due to their scarcity on North American playgrounds. There is a wider array of color choices than in many color concept books, including beige, turquoise, and hot pink.

Despite a few foibles, it is a playful choice for toddlers. (Board book. 1-3)

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**ABCs of Kindness**

A Highlights Book About Kindness
Berger, Samantha
Illus. by Trukhan, Ekaterina
Highlights Press (26 pp.)
$12.99 | Feb. 4, 2020
978-1-68437-651-3

An alphabet book featuring different ways to be kind. This oversized board book takes a walk through the alphabet and hits on most of the obvious ways in which children can be kind to one another, themselves, and the planet. Berger’s simple text includes both small acts, like “Brightening someone’s day with a smile,” and larger ones, such as “Standing up for someone when no one else will.” The text is direct, without any poetry or flourish, so it reads a bit like an encyclopedia. The acts of kindness feel attainable for young readers, and Trukhan’s illustrations offer practical examples: One child gives up their spot in line for the slide; another makes room at the lunch table. Trukhan’s illustrations are reminiscent of Byron Barton’s, featuring bold, block colors and geometric foundations. The book is inclusive of people with many different skin and hair colors, and it also depicts one child with a cochlear implant and another who walks with forearm crutches. Trukhan’s companion title, *Kindness Counts 123*, with text by R.A. Strong, echoes both this title’s theme and its inclusivity. While none of the content in either book is particularly revelatory, it is still meaningful and nicely presented.

It’s all very obvious, but there’s no harm in harping on kindness. (Board book. 2-4) (Kindness Counts 123: 978-1-68437-652-0)

**Spring**

Berner, Rotraut Susanne
Illus. by th author
Prestel (14 pp.)
$12.95 | Feb. 18, 2020
978-3-7913-7409-3
Series: All Around Bustletown

In the imaginary city of Bustletown, every season brings new adventures. As she did in series opener *Winter* (2019), Berner traces a set of recurring characters through seven two-page spreads: an apartment complex where many of the characters live; a farm-lined road leading to town; a train station; a neighborhood that includes a church, a kindergarten, and a cultural center; a downtown marketplace; a shopping mall; and a park. Readers of this title and its two seasonally publishing companions, *Summer* (Apr. 21) and *Fall* (Jul. 21), will see each setting develop with the seasons. The kindergarten, for example, goes from a patch of dirt to a fully functional building. In the outdoor marketplace, a family of storks builds a nest, hatches eggs, and migrates to warmer climes. In addition to these changes, each book features the town uniquely decorated...
The manipulates are accessible and unfussy, the illustrations are clear, and the text is age appropriate.

for typical Western European holidays associated with each season (this is a German import). In the spring the cultural center is hung with Easter eggs; in the fall it hosts a pumpkin-carving contest. Each title is brilliantly detailed, and the consistency among them allows readers to imagine stories both within each volume and between them. Bustletown seems to be a mostly white community, and the few characters of color within—such as Santosh from India—dress in ethnic clothing, implying that they are visitors.

The details delight—but not the diversity. (Board book. 3-6) (Summer: 978-3-7913-7420-8; Fall: 978-3-7913-7422-2)

There's plenty of information and instruction crammed into this 5½-inch-square board book.

Hutton starts with the opening lines of "The Itsy Bitsy Spider," leaving blanks to indicate where readers should fill in key words. Caregivers of toddlers who do not know the song will need to supply the words until their children are familiar enough with it to play the game. On the third page the tone shifts to conversational questioning, providing a model of dialogic reading. The adult reader speaks directly to the child: "Did you just see a bug? What kind of bug was it?...Was it BIG or small? Inside or outside?" The next six pages continue in that vein, providing information in response to the questions. Pages 11 and 12 refer to the rhyme again: "What’s that spider doing? Yes, it’s climbing! Climbing up a water spout! Climbing up a water spout at Grandpa’s house!" This method of repetition and expansion on an idea is excellent practice for beginning readers, but again, toddlers may need time to adjust. The final spread returns to a question likely to engage toddlers, with no practice necessary: "What’s your favorite kind of bug?" Colorful illustrations in shades of blue, green, and brown are only semirealistic; they emphasize a friendly look instead of a creepy one, potentially disappointing for young entomologists fascinated by the real thing.

For very young children already buggy for bugs. (Board book. 1-3)

A lift-the-flap board book exploring different types of tracks made by people and animals.

Following a simple, repeated format that asks readers to guess "Who is making tracks?" this book for toddlers offers them tactile tracks as clues. Lifting the page-sized flap on recto reveals the track-maker underneath. Each flap has a sweet little peekaboo cutout—acorns, a water bottle—that’s filled with color from the image below, a nice touch. The illustrations themselves are simple and brightly colored, appearing against a solid, contrasting background. While this doesn’t always make for a realistic representation, like the green paw and footprints against a pink ground, it is nevertheless eye-catching. There are several different types of tracks, and the tire and skateboard ones are especially fun to touch. The people represented are diverse: There’s Duli, who is brown-skinned and blind, walking with his service dog, and Su-Yin, an Asian girl on a skateboard. As a thoughtful inclusion on Duli’s page, the “Nature Trail” sign also displays (nonraised) Braille dots. Following a similar format in setup and interactive elements, Farm includes Milo, a white boy riding a pony with an adaptive saddle, and Snow includes Jian, an Asian girl with an adaptive sled. While Beach does not similarly present characters with disabilities, it too includes characters of color. Throughout the series the manipulatives are accessible and unfussy, the illustrations are clear, and the text is age appropriate.

Hits the mark for its inclusiveness and quality of format. (Board book. 1-3) (Beach: 978-1-78628-295-8; Farm: 978-1-78628-296-5; Snow: 978-1-78628-294-1)

With rhyming text and flaps to lift, little ones are introduced to six Spanish words related to things that go.

Each double-page spread introduces a vehicle, six in all: tren (train); camión (truck); carro (car); barco (boat); avión (airplane); and metro (subway). The left-hand page gives the clues: "CLICKETY-CLACK, / CLICKETY-CLACK. / You hear it racing / down the track. / It takes you far, / then home again." The recto has a flap with: "ALL ABOARD! / Come ride the," and when little hands lift the flap they will find that (hopefully) yes! They were right: It’s a train. The trick here is that the word is presented in Spanish—“tren”—and is then defined underneath in smaller print: “Tren means train.” The other five words
are presented in the same manner. The cartoon illustrations in the margins around the stanza on verso also give clues about the hidden vehicle, such as tracks and a whistle for the train, or a rear-view mirror, a steering wheel, and traffic lights for the car. The last spread presents the six vehicles with their names and a pronunciation guide. Non-Spanish-speaking adults should be aware that not all Spanish speakers refer to these vehicles by the same names, though all of the words here are correct.

A simple and entertaining Spanish word-builder for English-speaking youngsters. (Board book. 1-3)

**HIDE AND SEEK CITY**

**Explore the City With a Magical Magnifying Glass**

*Demois, Agathe & Godeau, Vincent*

Illus. by the authors
Tate/Abrams (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Mar. 24, 2020
978-1-84976-669-2

Peering through a colored filter reveals all sorts of unconventional goings-on within seemingly ordinary homes and other buildings.

The French illustrators return to the gimmick used in their first collaboration, *The Great Journey* (2016), offering blocky images drawn in thick, bright red lines and patterns that vanish when viewed through a detachable circle of red acetate to reveal pale blue scenes done in a suppler style beneath. Single-line captions running underneath either suggest that there’s nothing much to see (“Everyone is calm, relaxing in their homes, or going about their business”) or, like the revelation that trucker Mrs. Khan is “carrying a package for the Banana-plane factory,” hint at droll revelations. Filtered images include several acrobats, a man shopping for a hat for his dog, a reader comfortably nestled between the humps of a camel, piles of oddly shaped packages in a post office, and (yes) workers polishing up a plane shaped like a giant banana. The journey ends at the zoo… with no animals to be seen. Where have they gone? To previous locales, which viewers are invited to reexamine more closely. Unlike the far more elaborate (and often obscure) three-colored layers in Carnovsky’s *Illuminature* (2016) and sequels, the underlying art here is easy to make out, and the filter is large enough to use both eyes at once. Human figures are highly stylized but still as white as the stiff paper stock.

**Tongue-in-check fare for post-toddler peekaboo fans.** (Novelty picture book. 6-8)

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**A CHRISTMAS CAROL**

*Dickens, Charles*

Illus. by Miles, David
Familius (66 pp.)
$12.99 | Sep. 1, 2019
978-1-64170-151-8

Series: Lit for Little Hands

A retelling of the seasonal Dickens tale, complete with movable parts. It’s tempting to want to share classics with children, and this board book pulls out all the stops to make the time-honored tale palatable to young listeners. Putting aside its sliders and spinners (none of which work very well), there stands the question of whether small children really need this book. Although the complex story has been decently condensed and simplified, it remains long and wordy to read aloud. This puts it well out of the realm of tolerance for the board-book crowd, though it may suit as an introduction for those elementary-aged kids who won’t be put off by the babyish format. Direct quotes sprinkled throughout are appropriate and iconic, but the story has an intensity simply not suited for the audience. High-level concepts and vocabulary are referenced, requiring so much pre-existing knowledge (of boarding schools; spirits; the eventual-ity of death) that most of it will go over the heads of younger readers. Attractive vintage-style art looks swell and capitalizes on the best scenes, including a truly “scrumptious feast,” a not-too-spooky Jacob Marley, and a sprightly Ghost of Christmas Past, but the ambitious paper engineering does not work well. Slats and tabs are nearly impossible to pull out smoothly, while the wheels are hard to grip and turn.

**Ultimately mostly just humbug.** (Board book. 2-4)

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**NUMBERS**

*Duquennoy, Jacques*

Illus. by the author
Twirl/Chronicle (32 pp.)
$14.99 | Jan. 7, 2020
979-1-03631-494-0

Series: Zoe and Zack

Another playful, uncluttered concept book from the creative mind that brought us *Opposites, Shapes* (both 2018), and *Colors* (2019).

This time Duquennoy provides multiple ways for toddlers to practice numeracy skills. When the book is closed, the numerals 1 through 10 are visible on the index tabs to the right. Open the book to find the numeral enlarged on the bottom left side next to Zoe, whose black-and-white (and a smidge of yellow) zebra body forms each number. Active youngsters may be tempted to do the same with their own bodies. At the top center, a small die displays a corresponding number of dots. On the recto page, center top, a hand in a circle holds out the appropriate number of fingers. Below, Zack, an irrepresible chameleon, juggles the corresponding number of balls. Duquennoy’s choice to have Zack consistently juggle balls instead of different
objects makes it easy for young children to focus on counting. Both the large numeral and the balls are slightly textured and match the chameleon’s changing color. The one line of text is also repeated. The only change is the number. On the final spread “Zoe and Zack make the number 10 / and play with 10 balls!” In this case, the balls form the “1” in the number while Zoe’s body makes the “0”—a subtle reminder of what cooperation can accomplish.

Count on Duquennoy to deliver consistent quality. (Board book. 1-3)

ROCK-A-BYE, DINO
Eliot, Hamah
Illus. by Boyd, Chie
Little Simon/Simon & Schuster (20 pp.)
$9.99 | Dec. 17, 2019
978-1-338-35796-7

Sweet lullabies meet prehistoric predators and plant eaters in a bedtime board book with loads of charm and color.

From the eye-catching iridescence of the tactile plates on the mother stegosaurus on the cover to the gentle, nursery-rhyme lilt of each dinosaur vignette, this book is a pleasant surprise on many levels. Presented in double-page tableaux pairing a stanza of text with richly colorful and delightfully expressive images of adult-child dinosaur pairs, this book maintains a winning tone throughout. Less a book about dinosaurs than a restful celebration of familial bedtime bonding, it succeeds on sincerity and the natural fascination kids have for dinosaurs. “Rock-a-bye, T. rex, in the treetop, / when your feet stomp, the mountains do rock. / You give a big yawn that means it’s night-time. The stylized renderings are not at all scary, and they convey the mother stegasaurus on the cover to the gentle, nursery-rhyme lilt of each dinosaur vignette. This “get ‘em while they’re young” approach has spawned science for toddlers and preschoolers done right. The current obsession for STEM education, often prioritized over teaching critical-thinking skills and cultivating an awareness of those parts of the human experience that make life fulfilling, has spawned a whole genre of board books for children. This “get ‘em while they’re young” approach has spawned some misfires, which often seem designed to please pushy parents trying to produce the next Einstein rather than to satisfy a young learner’s natural curiosity. This book neatly evades that trap. It’s delightful, with a logic and clarity in articulation; bright, colorful, and uncluttered artwork; and concerning a topic that’s proven kid-pleaser: dinosaurs.

Unapologetically unscientific, but a lovely way to tuck in small dinosaur fanciers everywhere. (Board book. 1-4)

BEDTIME FOR CRANKY CRAB
Ergunay, Cristina
Illus. by Sketcheroos, Heather
Cartwheel/Scholastic (24 pp.)
$9.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-338-35796-7

A tired crab resists going to sleep as “ocean friends” get ready for bed. In rhymed couplets, the narration describes the ways various fish, mollusks, sea mammals, and more settle in for the night in ways both accurate (dolphins sleep with one eye open) and inaccurate (Mama sea star and Papa sea horse stay with their spawn). Cranky crab, however, displays some grouchy behavior and wants more playtime, along with another snack. In the end, crab mama is fed up and gives the young crab a kiss to send the little one off to sleep. The art has a smooth, watery look employing the pinks, purples, blues, and greens of the ocean at sunset. Each of the creatures has two oversized, round eyes, even creatures who have none (like sea jellies) or more than two (like oysters). In one particular funny picture, “little cranky crab” narrows bulbous eyes and frowns directly out at readers—no one will mistake this crab for cheery.

Despite the biological inaccuracies, it’s a whimsical and watery bedtime story. (Board book. 2-4)

BABY PALEONTOLOGIST
Gebh, Laura
Illus. by Wiseman, Daniel
HarperFestival (22 pp.)
$8.99 | Feb. 4, 2020
978-0-06-284135-3
Series: Baby Scientist

Science for toddlers and preschoolers done right. The current obsession for STEM education, often prioritized over teaching critical-thinking skills and cultivating an awareness of those parts of the human experience that make life fulfilling, has spawned a whole genre of board books for children. This “get ‘em while they’re young” approach has spawned some misfires, which often seem designed to please pushy parents trying to produce the next Einstein rather than to satisfy a young learner’s natural curiosity. This book neatly evades that trap. It’s delightful, with a logic and clarity in articulation; bright, colorful, and uncluttered artwork; and concerning a topic that’s proven kid-pleaser: dinosaurs. Describing the ways various fish, mollusks, sea mammals, and more settle in for the night in ways both accurate (dolphins sleep with one eye open) and inaccurate (Mama sea star and Papa sea horse stay with their spawn). Cranky crab, however, displays some grouchy behavior and wants more playtime, along with another snack. In the end, crab mama is fed up and gives the young crab a kiss to send the little one off to sleep. The art has a smooth, watery look employing the pinks, purples, blues, and greens of the ocean at sunset. Each of the creatures has two oversized, round eyes, even creatures who have none (like sea jellies) or more than two (like oysters). In one particular funny picture, “little cranky crab” narrows bulbous eyes and frowns directly out at readers—no one will mistake this crab for cheery. While the plot has been seen before, there is some lovely language here—“Stingrays nestle, flip, and flap / To blanket in a sandy wrap”—and the titular crab will be a familiar figure to sleep-resistant toddlers.

Despite the biological inaccuracies, it’s a whimsical and watery bedtime story. (Board book. 2-4)
A cheerful introduction to the holiday for youngsters, both reptile and human.

**ALLIGATOR SEDER**
Hickman, Jessica
Illus. by Elissambura
Kar-Ben (12 pp.)
$6.99 | Jan. 1, 2020
978-1-5415-6041-3

Alligator family and friends gather for a Passover Seder.

In the Florida Everglades, three alligators, likely a mother and a father-and-son duo who both wear kippot, prepare for the holiday meal by laying out a Seder plate, hunting for chametz, and putting the gefilte fish on the table. A trio of “gator guests” arrive, two adult gators with a toddler in tow, bearing wine. The celebration continues with the lighting of the candles, the blessing of the wine, the four questions, the telling of the Passover story, eating matzah, and the hunt for the afikomen. “Gator” conveniently makes a pleasant sonic echo with “Seder,” helping to propel the quatrains along: “It’s time for The Four Questions, / asked by Baby Gator. / Then comes the Passover story, / as at every family seder.” The gators are a happy bunch with expressive eyes and perpetual if toothy grins in Elissambura’s jewel-toned images dominated by blues and greens. Just enough Seder traditions are presented for a toddler audience, but few details of the Passover story are described. Compositions are busy and frequently presented in separate verso and recto layouts; combined with the lack of contrast, these design choices skew the audience somewhat older.

**THIS LITTLE DREAMER**
An Inspirational Primer
Holub, Joan
Illus. by Roode, Daniel
Little Simon/Simon & Schuster (26 pp.)
$7.99 | Jan. 14, 2020
978-1-5344-4291-7
Series: This Little

A board-book introduction to 10 workers for social justice.

The first double-page spread shows the five men and five women to be featured. Subsequent spreads include a close-up portrait and four-line verse opposite an illustration meant to demonstrate each inspirational figure’s work. A two- or three-line caption reduces the complex work of people like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to vague platitudes. “Mahatma Gandhi led the people of India to freedom from being ruled by Great Britain” is woefully inadequate. Even so, the concept is still far beyond the board-book audience’s understanding. How to communicate to toddlers the work of Henry Bergh, ASPCA founder, or Dr. Jim Yong Kim, 12th chair of the World Bank? (Answer: He “works to help poor countries succeed.”) Dolores Huerta was chosen to represent the United Farm Workers, but including Cesar Chavez in her caption diminishes her role. Brief bios and portraits of 17 additional activists and a blank space labeled “You!” under the headline “Kindness, sharing, speaking out, fair play— / what could you do to help others someday?” complete the book. The bobblehead art, similar to other books in the This Little series, sometimes borders on offensive caricature.

**PEEK-A-BOO LITTLE CHICK**
Huang, Yu-hsuan
Illus. by the author
Little Simon/Simon & Schuster (10 pp.)
$7.99 | Jan. 28, 2020
978-1-5344-5177-3

Felt manipulatives set this simple board book apart from other lift-the-flap books.

The slight story imported from France relies on repetition. “Little Chick is looking for his mama. Can you help him find her? / Is she in the tree? / No, that’s a bird.” In addition to the songbird, the charming baby finds a duck and a goose before reuniting with his mama in the chicken coop. Each of these animals is concealed behind a felt flap. On first read, most young children will not be able to guess what animal may be hidden. A speck of yellow that is the duckling’s tail poking from “behind the reeds” and a bit of the goose’s beak partially shown “behind the gate” are extremely subtle hints, and the songbird and Mother Hen are totally hidden. Still, the pattern is easily learned. Little fingers will quickly move the felt flaps out of the way; though they may become soiled or torn when subjected to normal toddler handling. The flap on the cover, cut in the shape of half an eggshell, may not survive the Easter basket. Huang’s cheerful illustrations in pink, orange, teal, yellow, and white match the season but bear little relation to colors children might see in nature. Greenery is orange, teal, or pink—not spring green. The reeds look like an orange crown, and the cloud-shaped piece of felt that hides the bird is orange, as are the other leaves on the tree.

**MAMA MONARCH**
Hutton, John
Illus. by Gross, Sandra
blue manatee press (14 pp.)
$7.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-936669-81-3

Rhyming text follows a monarch butterfly’s migration from Mexico to the Great Lakes.

The couplets work. The poetic images are effective and evocative. But this abbreviated overview will confuse rather than enlighten very young children. The life cycle of the butterfly, that they are threatened, and how people can help them survive are hinted at but not explained. Scientific background
Kaulitzki’s illustrations are full of detail and life.

YOU’RE THE CHEESE IN MY BLINTZ

printem in a tiny font is on the back cover. A simplified map—a concept that’s far more advanced than the rest of the text, which is mostly an enumeration of flowers—on the second page shows only the northern migration through the Midwest. Western swarms, the southbound route, and sites of winter roosts are not shown. Instead the text describes the flowering plants that provide nutrients for the monarch’s trip. Asters, thistle, a generic “vine,” sunflowers, dill, and clover are mentioned before the monarch finds a “welcome home” on milkweed. But explaining that she needs milkweed on which to lay her eggs is left to the adult sharing the reading experience, and the seasonality of the flowers is jumbled. The colorful blossoms and the monarch’s bright orange-and-black wing pattern stand out against sky-blue backgrounds. Reducing the complex and awe-inspiring process of monarch migration to pretty pictures and sweet words leaves out too much and suggests the topic is best left till readers are older.

Both too complicated and too simple at the same time. (Board book. 6 mos.-2)

PEEKABOO PLANET

Hutton, John
Illus. by Hartsough, Candice
blue manatee press (14 pp.)
$7.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-936669-82-0

Prompted by questions, children are encouraged to find camouflaged animals.

A full-bleed illustration of a jungle spills onto its adjacent page. A tiger, a parrot, a blue frog, and an insect can be glimpsed among the exuberant foliage. The question “Who squawks and talks?” prompts children to explore the image and identify the animal that fits the description. When readers turn the page, the correct answer is revealed inside an illustrated circle accompanied by text: “peekaboo Parrot!” Following this same plosive-popping format, five other animals are presented—a porcupine, a penguin, a panda, a porpoise, and a prairie dog—each in its corresponding habitat. The questions are short but vocabulary rich: “Who’s plump and pokey?” “Who waddles and slides?” “Who’s black, white, and chews bamboo?” “Who swims and splashes?” “Who burrows and barks?” The last spread, though sweet and appropriate for the target audience, is somewhat unrelated to the rest of book, both in subject and question, though the presentation format is the same. Hidden behind the foliage of potted houseplants, readers can glimpse a cat, a dog, a human baby, and two dark-haired, white, adult humans (presumably the child’s parents). The question here is: “Who loves their baby?” the answer: “peekaboo People!”

A sweet introduction to wild animals that promotes observational skills. (Board book. 1-3)

SPACE

Jenner, Elizabeth
360 Degrees (28 pp.)
$24.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-944530-29-7

In 10 double gatefolds, each done by a different illustrator, the story of space from the Big Bang to the prospect of a base on Mars.

The illustrators, none of whom are household names (yet), uniformly go for similarly bright but not saturated colors and simply drawn shapes—which is all to the good as it lends the presentation a pleasing visual unity that at least partially compensates for some arbitrary arrangement and fact choices. Jenner isn’t strong on accuracy either, wrongly characterizing the Milky Way as a spiral galaxy, for instance (it’s actually a barred spiral), and understating the speed of our local star’s solar wind by orders of magnitude. Still, along with the fun of opening each gatefold in succession, readers do get both a big picture of our astronomical origins and a general view of the progress and future of space exploration. Also, along with a side excursion into Milky Way origin myths from the Khoisan and four more specific cultures, the astronauts and other human figures throughout are racially and culturally diverse enough to make the point that interest in space is open to all, not just white Americans and Europeans.

Not a great showcase for the artists, but sufficient juice to carry off a launch. (Informational novelty. 7-9)

YOU’RE THE CHEESE IN MY BLINTZ

Kimmelman, Leslie
Illus. by Kaulitzki, Ramona
Kar-Ben (12 pp.)
$6.99 | Jan. 1, 2020
978-1-5415-3467-4
Series: Very First Board Books

This rhyming ode to a caregiver’s love for a baby includes touches of Jewish traditions and symbols.

In this board book, it’s all about the baby; each page showing a caregiver and their little one sharing meals, dancing, and embracing. Kimmelman’s easy verse manages to steer clear of forced rhymes and awkward phrasing, impressively rhyming such words as “knish,” “hora,” and “Shabbat.” The book clearly conveys the warmth of love that ties caregiver to child: “You’re the warm in my hug.” Kaulitzki’s illustrations are full of detail and life: Books on the shelf have clear titles on their spines, and there are patterned stars on one baby’s pajamas. Most of the adults and children in the book present white with the exceptions of one black-presenting woman-and-child pair and one white woman holding a dark-skinned child. In addition to its inclusion in the text, there are elements of Judaism in the illustrations as well: building blocks with Hebrew letters, a Star of David necklace, a man wearing a kippah, and others. These are mostly subtle, inclusive of Jewish traditions without being
A graciously illustrated rhyming ode to eggs.

Wrapped in its own firm shell, this compact board book has a solid padded cover and opens onto stiff, matte cardboard pages. Creamy white backgrounds highlight each page’s avian-related vignette, ranging from a greenish-gold “shiny egg” to a “dotted egg” with an elaborately lined, blue iridescent feather nestled in front. Though each page features an accurately drawn egg, there’s enough variation among the depictions—a large tropical flower overhanging a tiny vervain hummingbird egg; a silly but “sweet” foil-wrapped chocolate egg—that the content feels fresh. Ink drawings in subdued colors are fine and delicate, clearly conveying the subtle differences among each bird species, and eggs and nests manage to look both fragile and solid. Related in two-word rhyming couples consisting of one descriptor word followed by “egg,” the text achieves a smooth, catchy sound. A useful illustrated key at the back identifies the eggs, though some, like a “sea egg” identified as a great blue heron’s or those of less-familiar birds, such as the cassowary, beg for more context or even a picture of the bird itself. A tall, thin typeset keeps the focus on the lovely egg-shells but is hard to read from a distance; sharp corners on the board pages make this case-bound board book unsuitable for the youngest listeners.

**Egg-quisite.** *(Board book. 2-4)*

**MEALTIME**

*Le Hénand, Alice*  
*Illus. by Bedouet, Thierry*  
*Twirl/Chronicle (14 pp.)*  
*$9.99  |  Jan. 7, 2020*  
*978-2-40801-594-7*

Pull-tabs easily slide to change the image on each page, providing the excitement in this gentle introduction to table manners.

Only the front-cover tab is notched, but the tabs are all in the same position so little ones quickly learn the process. On the front the picture changes from one of Little Kangaroo (who looks like a green bunny) playing while Mommy carries the plates to the table to another of both eating happily together. Each verso page introduces the situation with an exchange of dialogue: “Time to eat, Little Bear!” says his mother; “Oh, muddy food is fun to play with!” he exclaims. On the following pages Little Crocodile feeds himself, Little Kangaroo tries broccoli, Little Monkey sits at the table to eat pasta and fruit salad, Little Bear is rewarded with cake when he stops throwing food and waits patiently, and Daddy Cat uses the airplane “coming in for a landing” trick to feed rice to Little Cat. On the final spread, (without a tab) the child animals use their bibs to wipe their hands. The animals’ simple faces are expressive and the changes in their childlike emotions obvious. *Brothers and Sisters,* published simultaneously, uses the same animal families to suggest ways to resolve familiar sibling conflicts.

**WISHES FOR LITTLE ONE**  
*Magsamen, Sandra*  
*Illus. by the author*  
*Sourcebooks Wonderland (32 pp.)*  
*$17.99  |  Apr. 1, 2020*  
*978-1-4926-9103-7*

A baby-shower gift book for attendees to fill with wishes for the new arrival. Magsamen’s latest is difficult to pin down. Only the final two spreads are meant for the encribed wishes, so the rest is a picture book, per se, although a saccharine one seemingly directed at babies but meant for grown-ups. “We’ve gathered to shower you with love my dear… // and we made a book of wishes for you to hear! // We are your family, your friends and your neighbors too… // we are so excited to welcome you!” These verses are punctuated with Magsamen’s characteristic illustrations of stylized animals and simple shapes (stars, hearts, the sun) outlined in dashed-line “stitches.” The visual prominence of the animals can make it difficult at first for readers or listeners to realize that they aren’t the “we” used in the text. And once the book reaches the blank two pages for personalized sentiments (“So, as you read these wishes written just for you, / please remember that wishes really do come true!”), one can only assume that the writing style will change from the bouncy rhymes to plain text written for the parents and not the child, and their attention will likely be lost.

It’s difficult to imagine a child enjoying this treacly memento, whatever their age; even parents-to-be may be turned off. *(Gift book. 0-2, adult)*
In this pleasant, nature-inspired board book, readers see various animals living in “shalom bayit”—“quiet places, peaceful homes”—before the book closes on a human Jewish family relaxing in their house. Peppy rhyming couplets—“A turtle makes a sandy mound. / A worm lives safely underground”—have a nice sound to them, and the short tidbits of information they impart about the different habitats and shelters of disparate forest animals are accurate. With sweetly anthropomorphized animals, complete with serene smiles and rosy cheeks, this nature is at its most passive and tranquil. Gauzy, multilayered illustrations feel inspired by the indistinct look of watercolors, and there’s plenty of charm in the busy landscapes and scurrying gray squirrels or big-eared mice. Botanical elements are especially well rendered. At points, this chill vibe feels too sedate, especially when it extends to the scene with the human family, as those three kids sitting suspiciously still in their tidy living room may not exactly mirror reality. While the book’s connection to its overall concept of “shalom bayit,” or domestic harmony, feels rather tenuous, it may speak to some Jewish households and would be a welcome book for any nature-loving toddler.

**Likable art and a peaceable concept. (Board book: 2-4)**

**BATHTIME MATHTIME SHAPES**

*McKellar, Danica*

*Illus. by Padrón, Alicia*

*Crown (20 pp.)*

$8.99 | Nov. 12, 2019

978-1-101-93396-1

Pictures of objects on the front and outlines of shapes on the back of sturdy tabs invite precocious toddlers to open the pages.

Within, four-line rhyming verses that incorporate the titular refrain include a question and hint about an object, usually but not always bath-related, with that shape. Four common shapes—circle, square, triangle and rectangle—begin, respectively paired with “mommy’s pretty ring,” a washcloth, the sail on a toy boat, and a bath towel. From this concrete beginning the concepts grow abruptly more abstract. A charming double-page illustration of the toddler protagonist sitting amid shapes floating in the bathtub accompanies the vague text: “What shapes can the water make? / A heart or star? An oval lake? / Water changes shape—it’s flowing. / Bathtime Mathtime, let’s keep going!” Then one spread and 10 lines of text describe 3-D objects: sphere (a ball), cylinder (a shampoo bottle—notably not depicted as a cylinder), and cube (blocks). The next spread just shows the light-skinned, pigtailed child splashing in the tub. The note to parents at the end claims that the book will show that bathtime “(including hair washing!)” can be fun, but nowhere in the story are the child’s pigtails taken down, much less shampooed. A final rebus provides a review and hurriedly introduces cone and pyramid shapes.

This well-meaning math concept book sinks under the weight of too much information, unevenly conveyed—a washout. (Board book: 2-4)

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**HOORAY FOR LITTLE FINGERS!**

*Mory, Tristan*

*Illus. by the author*

*Twirl/Chronicle (16 pp.)*

$14.99 | Jan. 7, 2020

978-2-40801-612-8

In this concept book introducing the numbers one to 10, little fingers are invited to participate in the counting.

Five round die cuts on the cover—just the size for a handful of fingers to poke through—set the tone in this French import. Young readers are encouraged to place a finger through a hole on an elephant’s face to make its trunk: “1 little finger...tickles your nose!” As the numbers progress, children can put two fingers through the die cuts to make a crab’s claws and “pinch, pinch”; three fingers can be a ladybug’s right feet and “climb up, up, up”; four fingers can be a monkey’s extremities and “do a silly dance”; and five little fingers at the tips of a star make it look like they “twinkle, twinkle just for you.” Up to this point the book works well, but then it rushes to an unsatisfying end. After little ones count “1, 2, 3, 4, 5 little fingers...” on verso, they then count a further “and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 more!” on recto, which feels as though they’ve been asked to add $5 + 5$—math beyond their years. A sixth die cut is also invited to participate in the counting. As readers turn the page they will find two hands with 10 splayed little fingers and a “wiggly, wiggly caterpillar” creeping up the right wrist.

A clever concept is marred by a hasty, ill-considered ending. (Board book: 1-3)

**HAVDALAH IS COMING!**

*Newman, Tracy*

*Illus. by Garofoli, Viviana*

*Kar-Ben (12 pp.)*

$6.99 | Mar. 3, 2020

978-1-5415-2163-6

Series: A Holiday Is Coming!

A family celebrates Havdalah, or the end of Shabbat, at sundown.

In a suburban neighborhood, a kippah-wearing youngster helps get ready by filling the kiddush cup. Parents, sister, and spotted dog join the scene to light a braided candle and smell the spice box. The mom recites a prayer as the candle burns, and then the candle is extinguished in the cup by the dad. A group of “family and friends” arrive and join the festivities, a black-presenting man in a kippah adding diversity to the otherwise all-white cast. The gathering ends with everyone joining hands to sing and celebrate the beginning of the week, but sharp-eyed readers will note that the havdalah candle seems to have been lit again after it had been extinguished. Many of the players appear to be returning from other titles in the A Holiday Is Coming! series. Punctuated with the refrain “Havdalah is coming,” the rhyming text provides gentle narration, but it
Viewers valiant (or unwise) enough to ignore the opening warning are in for a rare screamfest.

THE HOUSE OF MADAME M

Perrin, Clotilde
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Hahn, Daniel
Gecko Press (10 pp.)
$21.99  |  Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-776572-74-8

Fond of house tours? Considering what lurks behind every door, drawer, and flap, here’s the Airbnb from, literally, hell.

“Oh, and one piece of advice,” purrs the partly human guide waiting at the door, “don’t touch a thing.” Viewers valiant (or unwise) enough to ignore that warning are in for a rare screamfest, as every subsequent, dimly lit room is scattered with flaps and pull-tabs that invariably reveal arrays of leering ghosts, hideous monsters, skeletons, imps, or shelves filled with bottles of poison or other portents of doom. Not to mention the raging fire glaring from the pop-up fireplace, the glutinous glop sucked into a monstrous mouth, and the load of disgusting crap sliding from the bathtub…and so much more. Perrin adds bits of all-too-suggestive patter (“Our cook has been sharpening her knives. You know, people would kill for a morsel of her tasty creations!”) and lovingly embellishes walls and floors with eerie detail. Unfolding a huge pair of hairy arms reveals a climactic view of assembled boojums beneath an “Abandon hope all who enter here” banner—just the thing to send the never-seen visitor scurrying (“Wait! Where are you going?”)…and probably coming back around to the front for a repeat visit. Not since Jan Pienkowski’s Haunted House (1979) has a pop-up treatment of the theme been so satisfying.

The most, and best, (pop-up) haunted house in decades.
(Pop-up picture book. 6-9)

NUGGET AND FANG RACE AROUND THE REEF

Sauer, Tammi
Illus. by Slack, Michael
HMH Books (10 pp.)
$8.99  |  Oct. 1, 2019
978-0-358-04053-8

Heated competition and the spirit of friendship run neck and neck in this undersea athletic event.

American football coach Vince Lombardi, to whom the (borrowed) sentiment that, “winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing” is most often attributed, might disapprove of the message of this book. Indeed, there are mixed messages aplenty to be found here. The story takes place on “Reef Day,” an undersea event full of fun, games, and, most importantly, the race around the reef. When Fang the shark exclaims, “I can’t wait to compete in the race around the reef,” best friend Nugget, a minnow, replies, “Count me in!” The pair and three more of the best swimmers around set off to see who’s fastest. When the clown fish quits and the two tuna are caught in a whirlpool, only Nugget and Fang remain. “They were fin and fin—but who would finish first?” This suspenseful buildup is a bit of a cheat, though. “Nugget and Fang knew just what to do. They crossed the finish line the way they did everything else—together!” That sweet message about friendship arguably denies kids some valuable lessons: Skills and abilities vary individually, and gracefully winning or losing is its own art form. On the plus side, the illustrations are colorful, the characters appealing, and sliding and turning elements add a hands-on aspect kids will love.

This buddy romp is more of a fixed race.
(Board book. 1-4)

MAMA NEEDS A MINUTE

Sloan, Nicole
Illus. by the author
Andrews McMeel (16 pp.)
$8.99  |  Feb. 4, 2020
978-1-5248-5457-7

The story shows all of the ways a mother loves and cares for her children while also needing to take care of herself.

Sloan writes what mothers feel: “This mama needs a minute.” There are books that prepare children for their first day of school, potty training, siblings, and many of life’s earliest milestones. In that tradition, Sloan’s book shows kids how mothers can both love and care for them and also need a little space. She writes, “It doesn’t mean I love you less. Sometimes it just means Mama needs to get dressed.” Truer words have never been written. Sloan simultaneously affirms a mother’s love while also deftly explaining that it’s OK for love to need boundaries—for parents, yes, but also for kids. The comics-style illustrations hit home, like the stubble-legged mama trying to snatch a minute to shower. This goes beyond ringing chords with adult readers; it also provides concrete examples of when mama needs that minute. The palette includes pinks, greens, and bright blues, and all of the characters have skin of many nonhuman colors; hair is likewise fancifully colored but always straight. Many of the moms have visible tattoos, a refreshingly realistic detail.

A must-read for mothers of young children (and their kids, too).
(Board book. 2-4)
MR. LION DRESSES UP!
T eckentrup, Britta
Illus. by the author
Twirl/Chronicle (36 pp.)
$12.99 | Jan. 7, 2020
979-1-03631-357-8

When Mr. Lion gets invited to a party, Mr. Monkey's suggestions for what to wear range from sophisticated to downright silly.

This board book about playing dress-up is like a game of paper dolls, with outfits that change with each turn of the page. The cover and all but the last page of the book are die cut with a hole in the shape of Mr. Lion's face, which peers uncertainly through each picture and every outfit. Excited about Mr. Lion's invitation, Mr. Monkey suggests, “You'll have to get dressed up!” Mr. Lion, however, is skeptical. Undeterred, Mr. Monkey pulls several outfits from an unusually eclectic wardrobe. The ensembles appear dignified at first, becoming progressively more ridiculous, until Mr. Monkey is rolling on the floor in stitches. Counting boxer shorts, Mr. Lion models 14 different looks, including suit with top hat, evening gown, clown suit, a tutu, PJ's, kilt, and bunny suit. Mr. Monkey finally admits, “No… none of those outfits is right, Mr. Lion; it would be best for you to go as… yourself!” The artwork is appealing, and while the beleaguered Mr. Lion's face remains static throughout, his body and limbs move expressively as he awkwardly models each get-up. The zany outfits should have toddlers howling right along with Mr. Monkey.

A sweet look at becoming comfortable with ourselves, whoever we are. (Board book. 1-4)

MOMMY, DADDY, AND ME!
Tharlet, Eve
Illus. by the author
Minedition (32 pp.)
$11.99 | Mar. 1, 2020
978-988-8341-97-9

More than anything else, Little Bear likes playing with Mommy and Daddy.

As Little Bear stands among his toys sporting a cute red-and-white-striped shirt, readers learn that after playing with his toys, “he looks forward to playing with Mommy and Daddy… / …and Mommy and Daddy can’t wait to play with him!” And play they do. Daddy tickles his tummy, “picks him up high and lands him like a plane,” and comforts him when he’s upset. Mommy rubs his nose with hers. And Mommy and Daddy pass Little Bear between them like a ball. The action is helped along by appropriately placed, sturdy die cuts, gatefolds, and flaps. A half-page flap is used to show Little Bear going back and forth between Mommy and Daddy; a gatefold opens up to show that Daddy has just landed a joyful Little Bear. The members of Tharlet's anthropomorphic bear family have warm, expressive faces, mostly white backgrounds keeping the focus centered on the characters. In this sweet book even Little Bear’s toys sport smiles. Young readers will easily recognize the simple interactions from their own families’ expressions of affection, and they’ll enjoy poking little fingers through the round die cuts.

As warm and fuzzy as a loving bear family can be. (Board book. 1-2)

PIGS IN A PICKLE
Wilhelm, Hans
Illus. by Salcedo, Erica
Chronicle (14 pp.)
$7.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-4521-7896-7

Three pigs find themselves trying but not always succeeding in this story of perseverance. They fall out of boats, spin out of control, and often fall down, but in the end, these “pigs in a pickle know what to do. / They try again—they carry through!” In a tale that combines aspects of “This Little Piggy” and “Humpty Dumpty,” Wilhelm's rhyming text echoes the childhood classics. Impressively, the story conveys its message about perseverance without ending sappily with a success story. In Wilhelm's take, when you give it your “best shot,” realistically, “sometimes it works… / …and sometimes it does not.” The piggo who falls off the merry-go-round gets back up and tries again—and again he falls off. What a lesson for little readers! Salcedo’s three pigs each have their own distinctive look: one with large glasses, the second with pigtails, and the third with a round tummy. Each illustration is filled with a lot of movement thanks to well-placed lines, swirls, and squiggles, a necessary inclusion given the copious stumbling, twirling, and falling. There is also a lovely level of detail, from the suits on the playing cards to the tiny hose and ladder on the toy fire truck, though this visual complexity gears this book to the older segment of the board-book audience.

This story’s got a moral that’s actually true to life. (Board book. 3-4)
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ARLO FINCH IN THE KINGDOM OF SHADOWS
August, John
Roaring Brook (320 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 4, 2020
978-1-62672-818-9
Series: Arlo Finch, 3
(Fantasy. 8-12)

EGG OR EYEBALL?
Bell, Cece
Illus. by the author
Candlewick (72 pp.)
$12.99 | Mar. 10, 2020
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(Expository. 4-8)

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Illus. by Wietzel, Alice
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del Rio, Tania
Illus. by Staehle, Will
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Illus. by Graef, Renée
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Kessler, Liz
Illus. by Farley, Erin
Candlewick (272 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 10, 2020
978-1-5362-0969-3
Series: Emily Windsnap, 8
(Fantasy. 8-12)

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Khoury, Jessica
Scholastic (272 pp.)
$14.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
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Series: Rise of the Dragons, 2
(Fantasy. 8-12)

ODD SQUAD AGENT’S HANDBOOK
McKeon, Tim
Imprint (160 pp.)
$13.99 | Feb. 11, 2020
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Series: Odd Squad
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(Fiction. 7-10)

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Her Life and Ideas, With 21 Activities and Experiments
Rae, Rowena
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(Biography. 9-12)

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Series: Little People, BIG DREAMS, 44
(Picture book/biography. 4-7)

SNOOPY
First Beagle in Space
Schulz, Charles M.
Illus. by the author
Andrews McMeel (176 pp.)
$11.99 paper | Mar. 17, 2020
978-1-5248-3502-8
Series: Peanuts AMP, 14
(Comics. 7-14)

THE BIG FREEZE
Soontornwat, Christina
Illus. by Szucs, Barbara Szepesi
Scholastic (128 pp.)
$5.99 paper | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-338-35401-0
Series: Diary of an Ice Princess, 4
(Fantasy. 6-9)

THE STICKY SITUATION
Stilton, Geronimo
Scholastic (128 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-338-35756-2
Series: Geronimo Stilton, 75
(Adventure. 7-10)

DIARY OF A DUMMY
Stine, R.L.
Scholastic (160 pp.)
$6.99 paper | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-338-35757-9
Series: Goosebumps SlappyWorld, 10
(Horror. 8-12)

DRAGONSLAYER
Sutherland, Tui T.
Scholastic (512 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-338-21460-4
Series: Wings of Fire: Legends, 2
(Fantasy. 8-12)

CROWS
Genuis Birds
Vanderklaft, Kyla
Illus. by the author
First Second (128 pp.)
$19.99 | Mar. 24, 2020
978-1-62672-803-5
978-1-62672-802-8
Series: Science Comics, 18
(Graphic nonfiction. 9-13)

FUTURE OF THE TIME DRAGON
West, Tracey
Illus. by Griffio, Daniel
Branches/Scholastic (96 pp.)
978-1-338-54025-3 paper
978-338-54026-0 PLB
Series: Dragon Masters, 15
(Fantasy. 6-8)

IT’S EASTER!
Wielockx, Ruth
Illus. by the author
Clavis (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Mar. 10, 2020
978-0-60537-525-0
Series: Luke & Lottie
(Picture book. 3-5)

ALL THE PIECES FIT
Winick, Judd
Illus. by the author
Random House (224 pp.)
978-0-525-64400-4
978-0-525-64407-1 PLB
Series: Hilo, 6
(Graphic science fiction. 8-12)
THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY
Allen, John
ReferencePoint Press (80 pp.)
$30.95 PLB | Apr. 1, 2020
978-1-68282-759-8

This primer on the Donald J. Trump presidency covers most of the major controversies of his first three years in office. This straightforward reference book explains Trump’s election and divisive personality and offers a quick look at most of the biggest issues of his presidency, particularly foreign policy, immigration, economics, and the environment. The author explains complex topics clearly, making them easy for young people—as well as less-informed adults—to understand, and the volume succinctly fulfills its purpose as a summary of the major occurrences of the presidency. Throughout, insets provide brief discussions of more specific topics, such as steel tariffs, renewable energy, and the travel ban directed at certain predominantly Muslim countries. The author is painstakingly neutral, ending each chapter with a paragraph that is essentially a pro and con treatment of Trump’s actions regarding the issue at hand. The attempt to present information without bias is noble, yet the resulting equivocation will likely fail to satisfy either supporters or opponents. Parents and teachers will wish to make this just one of several texts used to explore the Trump presidency. Additionally, conspicuous and even irresponsible in its absence are any discussion of Trump’s views, comments, and actions regarding women or the various responses of women to his presidency.

A useful and organized jumping-off point for discussion. (source notes, further reading, index, photo credits) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

THE STONE OF SORROW
Carter, Brooke
Orca (304 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-4598-2439-3
Series: Runecaster, 1

A fantasy set in a magical version of ancient Iceland.
Runa is an apprentice runecaster who is assigned by fate to follow her beloved sister, Sýr, in a perilous journey to refresh the powers of the magical moonstone in the sacred moonwater pool during the red moon’s eclipse. At first it seems
**BIRACIAL REPRESENTATION IN YA: SOME GOOD NEWS**

**Historical romance author** Courtney Milan has been at the center of a recent controversy involving the leadership of the Romance Writers of America and her critique of the way a white author portrayed a biracial Chinese/white character.

Milan’s insights resonated with me, a Japanese/Greek reader long accustomed to either erasure or stereotyped depictions in literature. One example of the former is the use of models who are not obviously recognizable biracial on the covers of books about biracial characters—unfortunately spotted on some recent YA releases. Yes, some multiracial people can pass for just one race, and “what you look like” often lies in the eye of the beholder. But the conflation and intrusive grilling that many of us encounter while going about ordinary life indicate that we are far from invisible. These interactions often seemed tinged with anxiety on the part of the interrogators that goes beyond normal human curiosity—as if they aren’t sure how to interact with us without a clear label.

The experiences of those who can tick more than one box are often poorly understood and presented in ways that express others’ preconceptions. Of course, the actual experiences of multiracial people vary considerably based on factors including specific ethnicities, place of residence, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, and more, but the reminders from others that we are seen as Other is a unifying force.

Lately I’ve been impressed with the appearance of #own-voices titles that address the biracial experience in all its complexity, showing how the real problem isn’t our supposed “confusion” but efforts to pigeonhole us and that life is enriched by actively engaging with different ways of being in the world. These stories show that race, ethnicity, and culture are fluid and that transgressing society’s arbitrary labels does not make us exotic curiosities; instead it can provide valuable insights and opportunities for connection.

*Was Their American Dream*, a graphic memoir written and illustrated by Malaka Gharib (Clarkson Potter, 2019), describes what it was like for her to grow up Filipino and Egyptian in multicultural California and later enter mostly white college and workplace communities. From code switching to consuming the “right” pop culture to achieve cultural legitimacy, Gharib shares her life with humor (microaggression bingo!), a quirky and original voice, and dynamic illustrations that convey a range of emotions. Teen and adult readers alike will relish it.

In *Patron Saints of Nothing* (Kokila, 2019), author Randy Ribay, who is Filipino and white, like his protagonist, uses a family mystery to explore male relationships, the cultural consequences of emigration and outmarriage, and the harsh drug policies of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Michigan teen Jay, who spends spring break in the Philippines looking for the missing cousin whose letters he stopped answering, learns as much about himself as he does about his father’s homeland in this gripping tale of growth and regret.

In *All-American Muslim Girl* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), Nadine Jolie Courtney tells the story of a girl very much like herself: Both are half Jordonian Circassian/half white American, do not “look Muslim,” and therefore have a complex relationship with both Islam and Islamophobia. This book conveys with great sincerity and heart the messiness of the high school years, from the everyday (outgrowing friendships, navigating crushes) to the specific (exploring faith, connecting with family across language barriers). It also showcases the tremendous diversity of Muslim Americans.

Maria Padian is third-generation American, the granddaughter of Spanish and Irish immigrants. *How To Build a Heart* (Algonquin, Jan. 28) presents Izzy, raised in poverty by her Puerto Rican Catholic mother after her white Methodist father’s death. It’s a sensitive take on socio-economic differences, charity and shame, prejudice and judgment, and familial love. Izzy, but not her younger brother, can pass for white, and she goes to great lengths to hide her home in a trailer park—and her rough-around-the-edges neighbor and best friend—from her wealthy schoolmates.

Although none of these titles reflect my specific ancestry, and they differ dramatically in setting, writing style, and storyline, I was hooked by each one of them. They made it clear how necessary it is to have works that serve as mirrors in a world that provides far too few. Equally critical is the need for kids who aren’t mixed race to go beneath the surface of appearances and gain a glimpse into the hearts and minds of their multiracial peers. —L.S.

Laura Simeon is the young adult editor.
that everything is against Runa. She has eye problems, suffers from apparent panic attacks which impede her actions, and hates rune-casting. When Runa’s village is attacked and set on fire by enemy Jötun warriors under the influence of the evil sorceress Karla, who kidnaps Sýr, Runa is forced to take on the mission to rescue her sister and recharge the moonstone. In the process, Runa combats insecurity and loneliness and discovers her own strength. She forms an unlikely alliance with Einar, who is half human/half elf, and Oski, a damaged Valkyrie who is referred to as “they.” The trio moves through space and time to conquer evil and restore life and order to Runa’s community. The ending hints at a sequel. Carter (The Unbroken Hearts Club, 2019, etc.) acknowledges her Icelandic grandmother as the inspiration for this story. Runa has white hair and pale skin; her sister has dark hair and brown skin (signaling elven heritage). This fast-paced, engaging narrative with succinct, sometimes funny dialogue will be particularly validating for girls who may have insecurities about their own strengths.

An appealing story for readers interested in fantasy and myth. (map) (Fantasy. 14-18)

**CHAIN OF GOLD**

Clare, Cassandra
McElderry (624 pp.)
$24.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-4814-3187-3
Series: Last Hours, 1

Clare’s (Ghosts of the Shadow Market, 2019, etc.) latest is set in the Shadowhunter world in the 20th century’s first decade (with frequent flashbacks to the previous one).

Teenage offspring of the Herondales, Carstairs, Fairchilds, and other angel-descended Nephilim continue their families’ demon-fighting ways amid a round of elegant London balls, soirees, salons, picnics, and romantic intrigues. James Herondale, 17-year-old son of Will and Tessa, finds himself and his binding friend from childhood. Meanwhile, a sudden outbreak of demonic attacks that leave more and more Shadowhunters felled by a mysterious slow poison plunges James and a cohort of allies into frantic searches for both a cause and an antidote. Ichor-splashed encounters with raving boojums and even one of hell’s own princes ensue—all leading to final hints of a devastating scheme to destroy the Nephilim in which James himself is slated to play a central role. Characters have a range of skin tones, but ethnic diversity adds no texture to the portrayals; there is a lesbian cousin who wears traditionally male clothing and two young gay men (one tortured, the other less so).

**Busy, busy, busy...with portents of doom.** (Fantasy. 14-18)

**INCENDIARY**

Córdova, Zoraida
Disney-Hyperion (464 pp.)
$18.99 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-368-02380-1
Series: Incendiary, 1

A powerful young woman struggles to save her kingdom from a megalomaniac and redeem her past mistakes. Renata is a Moria—a person with magical powers—in an Inquisition-type world where people with these abilities are persecuted and killed. When she was a girl, Renata was taken from her parents and used to steal memories from the king’s enemies. Now, years later, she’s a member of the Whispers, a secret group working to overthrow the royal family and rescue the Moria from genocide. After a tragic turn of events, Renata must go back to the palace to fight the enemy from within. There, she struggles with her loyalty to the Whispers and falling back into old habits. With a faulty magical system and a mishmash of tropes, this incoherent fantasy never quite finds its footing. The dialogue is wooden, the prose is overwritten, and the characterization lacks nuance. Renata is a querulous protagonist who simultaneously acts helpless while also taking on the mantle of saving her world with her excellent fighting skills and quick thinking. Córdova (A Crash of Fate, 2019, etc.) tries to do too much—a historical setting, spy-craft, a doomed romance, a plot to cure the Moria of their powers, and even a Stockholm syndrome thread—and doesn’t quite succeed at any of them. Most characters are brown skinned and have Spanish surnames.

A jampacked, overly plotted series opener that fails to coalesce. (Fantasy. 14-adult)

**LITTLE UNIVERSES**

Demetrios, Heather
Henry Holt (480 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-250-22279-4

Hannah and Mae Winters’ comfortable lives plunge into chaos in the aftermath of the tsunami in Malaysia that kills their parents while they are on vacation. As high school seniors the sisters are forced to start their lives over in Boston with their maternal Aunt Nora, leaving behind their life in LA. A recovering addict, Hannah finds herself succumbing to pills while Mae, who is adopted, struggles to come to terms with not knowing her ethnic heritage in a family where their maternal Greek heritage is a critical part of their identity. After moving to Boston, Hannah finds comfort in classmate Drew Nolan while Mae meets MIT student Ben Tamura, who shares her passion for science. The story is narrated from the perspectives of both Hannah and Mae. Demetrios (Bad Romance, 2018, etc.) immerses the reader in Mae’s and Hannah’s worlds with aplomb.
and clarity, astutely capturing the precariousness of addiction and the spiral journey of recovery. Heavy themes—abortion, mental health, and more—are handled with care and candor. Readers will find themselves pulled into the world of each sister and her grief, witnessing the gutting effects of addiction and depression. Demetrios has struck a fine balance between science and New Age faith, hopelessness and hope, in her respectful portrayal of the sisters’ differences. Most major characters are white; Ben is Japanese American.

An unflinching, devastating, and compelling portrayal of life after insurmountable loss. (Fiction. 16-adult)

**THE HERO OF NUMBANI**

Drayden, Nicky
Scholastic (304 pp.)
$9.99 paper | May 5, 2020
978-1-338-57597-2
Series: Overwatch, 1

Young roboticist Efi dreams of creating a better life for her community, where omnis and humans live peacefully, in this novel inspired by the video game “Overwatch.”

Efi spends so many hours in her workshop ironing out bugs in her robots that her mother worries she isn’t connecting enough with best friends Naade and Hassana. But her work pays off when Efi wins the Genius Grant given out by her idol, Gabrielle Adawe, who founded both the organization Overwatch and the African city of Numbani. On the way to Rio de Janeiro to celebrate, Doomfist, who should be in prison, attacks the airport. The destruction left in Doomfist’s wake spurs Efi to put her grant money toward developing Orisa, a compassionate robot that can protect the city she loves. The immense pressure of this project strains the three friends’ relationship, forcing Efi to go it alone. While Efi teaches Orisa to integrate into Numbani, Orisa teaches her about responsibility and friendship—and as Doomfist provokes discord between omnis and humans, Efi, Naade, and Hassana must come together to save Numbani. Drayden (Escaping Exodus, 2019, etc.) gives Efi a clear voice in this engrossing read with smooth pacing and action-packed scenes. The main storyline is tied up enough to keep readers satisfied but interested in the sequel; readers don’t need to be familiar with the video game to understand the book. All characters are black.

Readers will root for this STEM-focused girl hero. (Science fiction. 12-14)

**VERONA COMICS**

Dugan, Jennifer
Putnam (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-525-51628-6

It’s the night of FabCon prom. With her fabulous best friend, Jayla, by her side, 16-year-old Jubilee tries her best to let go and give in to new experiences, per some encouragement from basically every adult in her life. For 17-year-old anxiety-ridden Ridley, the annual comic convention means more torturous time as a brand ambassador for The Geekery, his emotionally abusive father’s infamous comic store chain known for putting indie shops out of business. Fate intervenes when the two teens meet, and an awkwardly endearing first
night together leads to something more complicated. Soon Ridley's forced into spying on Jubilee's comic artist stepmom by his father, who wants to buy out his enemy's shop. Ridley is faced with a moral dilemma: Should he tell Jubilee the truth, and will their love for each other withstand their parents' mutual hatred? The story alternates between each teen's endearing narration. Dugan (Hot Dog Girl, 2019, etc.) infuses her characters with a warm sense of depth and compassion, particularly the socially self-conscious Ridley, a boy plagued with immense anxiety and frequent suicidal thoughts. Featuring a racially diverse cast of mainly queer characters, including the two white protagonists, this one's a winning choice.

**Breathlessly sweet. (resources)** *(Fiction. 12-18)*

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**THE LIGHTNESS OF HANDS**

Garvin, Jeff
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 14, 2020
978-0-06-238289-4

A bipolar teen pushes her washed-up magician father toward one last redemptive deception.

Ten years ago, Ellie Dante's father ruined his career when he flubbed a trick called the Truck Drop on national TV. Not long after, Ellie's mother died by suicide. Ellie and her dad fled to Fort Wayne, Indiana, eking out a living performing magic at birthday parties and weddings. But bookings have dwindled and they can't make lot rent for their RV or afford the medications for Ellie's bipolar disorder or her dad's heart condition. They've resorted to using their sleight-of-hand talents to commit petty theft when Ellie gets the offer that might save them: Re-create the Truck Drop, live from Hollywood, for a pile of cash. Ellie has to figure out how to get them across the country, prise the necessary props out of a reclusive millionaire's hands, persuade her father to overcome his demons, and pull off the trick, all the while battling the mounting effects of her lack of medication. Ellie is a talented magician herself but is afraid of the effect performing has on her brain, and the trip itself takes a toll. Garvin's *Symptoms of Being Human*, 2016 portrayal of Ellie's bipolar experience is exceptional; the world of magic is also superbly rendered. The story lags a bit in the middle, but its strengths more than make up for its shortcomings. All main characters are white.

**Very, very good. (author's note, resources)** *(Fiction. 12-18)*

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**THIS IS MY BRAIN IN LOVE**

Gregorio, I.W.
Little, Brown (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 14, 2020
978-0-316-42382-3

Mental illness is no match for love in this diverse, compelling novel.

After years of missing New York City, Chinese American teenager Jocelyn Wu has finally gotten used to living in Utica. She's got a best friend, a spot in a college-level film class, and has even found a bubble tea place. So when her father announces that their family has to move back to the city because their restaurant is bankrupt, she's determined to find a way to stay: Her first step is to hire teen Will Domenici, a biracial (Nigerian/white) budding journalist who lives with acute anxiety. Sparks fly, and what started out as a summer internship becomes a full-blown romance—one that Jocelyn's father, Mr. Wu, stipulates can continue only if the pair fulfills
“You don’t enter into writing another culture lightly,” says Sherri L. Smith. She should know. Her latest historical novel for young adults, *The Blossom and the Firefly* (Putnam, Feb. 18), tells the achingly poignant story of Taro, who sets his violin aside to become a kamikaze pilot, and Hana, who hears his music while serving on the military base where he trains. The book is suffused with the sensory reality of Japan in World War II: cinched indigo monpe trousers, patched and repatched as the war grinds on; a bowl of rice gruel enlivened by a precious pickled plum; the cigarette smoke and shochu fumes of the inn where the pilots congregate. It is no less steeped in the determination and despair of that particular time and place: an essentially Japanese story, set entirely in Japan.

Smith, meanwhile, is an African American woman raised in Washington, D.C., and living in California. Though she first visited Japan as a child and studied Japanese literature in college, she speaks no Japanese. Her novel draws on translated wartime letters and diaries, an immersive trip to the southern Japanese town of Chiran, and her own considerable powers of empathy.

It’s not the first time Smith has created characters who don’t look like her. Her first novel, *Lucy the Giant*, featured a multiracial native Alaskan; *Hot Sour Salty Sweet* starred a girl who is half black and half Chinese American. “I am not held back by identity because the books are all about identity,” Smith says. “I have done my due diligence and done my best, and I am aware that it might not be enough.” But when a story “shows up and wants to be told,” she feels compelled to tell it.

This newest story began with a mysterious photograph: a row of Japanese schoolgirls, their arms piled with cherry blossoms, lined up along a runway as a fighter plane taxis past. What was happening here? Smith already knew more than most people about World War II airplanes; her award-winning novel *Flygirl* tells the story of a young black woman who passes as white in order to join the U.S. Women Airforce Service Pilots in 1943. The photo led her to Chiran, home of the airbase from which the Japanese suicide missions were flown.

Smith found an unexpected ally in her translator, who immediately engaged with her desire to understand a place so steeped in difficult history. “We raced around Chiran together,” Smith remembers gratefully, “climbing hills and looking for the river where the girls must have washed clothes” and striking up conversations with anyone who looked old enough to remember the 1940s. Eventually, Smith made the acquaintance of the elderly woman who had run the inn where the pilots drank—a living repository of memory.

Smith is aware that her choice of subject might be contro-
versial. “The world is a lot more sensitive about ‘own voices,’ ” she acknowledges—as compared to 20 years ago, when Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* topped the bestseller lists. She teaches a class on writing with empathy and believes there is a difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. “The idea is that you want to be a welcome guest in the culture and not an interloper or invader,” she says. “Part of empathy is walking a mile in someone else's shoes, and we shouldn’t get angry at people who are trying to do it. But the people trying to do it have to really be trying, and when they stumble and get it wrong, they have to be willing to ask for help.”

For Smith, asking for help meant consulting not only the residents of Chiran, but the giants of Japanese literature. She revisited the novels of Yasunari Kawabata, like *Snow Country* and *The Sound of the Mountain*, and studied classic kishotenketsu narrative structure, with its revelatory twist in perspective and characteristic lack of conflict. Ultimately, keeping her readership in mind, she merged this approach with a more Western one—without conflict, there can be no satisfying resolution. Considering its grim premise, *The Blossom and the Firefly* is remarkably satisfying.

“I think my job as a writer is to open up my empathetic third eye and then extrapolate what it is I see in another person's experience,” Smith says. “You know you've succeeded when someone says, ‘That felt right.’ ” Smith hopes her work will be read in the spirit of Buddhist compassion. “You look at another person and say, ‘Like me, they have suffered. Like me, they have felt joy.’ ” Smith explains. “We all come from the same human experience.”

Janice P. Nimura is the author of *Daughters of the Samurai: A Journey From East to West and Back*. *The Blossom and the Firefly* was reviewed in the Dec. 15, 2019, issue.

the terms of a contract that include raising the restaurant’s revenue by 30% before the end of the summer. With her happiness at stake, Jocelyn begins to suffer from her own mental health issues—ones that she’s not sure her relationship can survive. Gregorio's (contributor: *Our Stories, Our Voices*, 2018, etc.) diverse cast of characters authentically navigate their mental illnesses through the twists and turns of a fast-paced plot, and the romance between Will and Jocelyn sparkles.

A sweet, entertaining romance. (author's note, resources) (Romance. 14-18)

**GIRL CRUSHED**

Heaney, Katie

Knopf (352 pp.)

$18.99 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-9848-9734-3

A San Diego soccer player struggles with life’s uncertainties.

Quinn knew exactly what she wanted: to be recruited by the University of North Carolina and to have a happy future with her girlfriend, Jamie. But everything falls apart when Jamie breaks up with her right before senior year. The two are close with Alexis (who’s never met a piece of news she didn’t want to share) and Ronni (Quinn’s fellow soccer star), and the four still eat lunch together daily. Quinn and Jamie, awkwardly trying to make their friendship work, have role models in older lesbian exes who amicably run their favorite queer cafe, Triple Moon. A complication arises in the form of a new possible love interest for Quinn: Ruby, classmate and gorgeous lead singer of a local band, newly separated from her boyfriend—and first on the list Quinn and Jamie once made of “Straight Girls We Wish Weren't.” Adding to Quinn's stress, her unreliable father pops up, she hasn't heard from college recruiters, Jamie is cozying up to another girl, and Triple Moon is having financial difficulties. The pacing is spot-on, and the exploration of lesbian relationships—particularly post-breakup—is handled deftly. Quinn is a sympathetic character, and her interactions with Jamie feel true to life. Unfortunately, Ronni is a little too perfect and two-dimensional in the role of Black Best Friend. Ruby's surname cues her as Latina; all other main characters are white.

Fresh and charming. (Fiction. 13-18)
A critical, captivating, merciful mirror.

ALL BOYS AREN’T BLUE

**A Memoir-Manifesto**

Johnson, George M.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (320 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-374-31271-8

Queer black existence has been here forever, and yet rarely has that experience been spotlighted within literature aimed at black boyhood. This is the context in which this “memoir-manifesto” begins, as Johnson, a still relatively young 33-year-old journalist and activist, debuts his unfolding life story within a vacuum of representation. These stories wrestle with “joy and pain...triumph and tragedy” across many heavy topics—gender policing, sexual abuse, institutional violence—but with a view to freedom on the horizon. Through the witnessing of Johnson’s intimate accounts, beginning with his middle-class New Jersey childhood and continuing through his attendance at a historically black university in Virginia, readers are invited on their own paths to healing, self-care, and living one’s truth. Those who see themselves outside the standpoint of being black and queer are called in toward accountability, clarifying an understanding of the history, language, and actions needed to transform the world—not in pity for the oppressed but in the liberation of themselves. This title opens new doors, as the author insists that we don’t have to anchor stories such as his to tragic ends: “Many of us are still here. Still living and waiting for our stories to be told—to tell them ourselves.”

A critical, captivating, merciful mirror for growing up black and queer today. (Memoir. 14-adult)

UNSCRIPTED

Kronzer, Nicole

Amulet/Abrams (352 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-4197-4084-8

Zelda Bailey-Cho dreams of comedy fame, but are the obstacles worth the fight? Will the rules of improv help Zelda through a turbulent summer at the improv camp founded by her idol? Zelda is surprised to learn she’s one of just five girls in a sea of 200 male campers. Luckily, the girls in Gilda Radner cabin quickly form an emotional support system. Talented and driven, Zelda earns a spot on the camp’s elite improv team and falls for her tall, blond coach, Ben. At first excited and then confused and horrified, Zelda struggles to manage her cabin mates’ high expectations, Ben’s advances, and unchecked sexual harassment from her male teammates. She always knew that being female in the comedy world would be challenging, but how can she balance standing up for herself and being a trailblazer? Strong character development and exploration of timely topics make this novel shine despite its being somewhat weakened by unbelievable plot points and a tidy ending. Thoughtfully created diverse characters, who are specifically described and involved in both queer and straight relationships, model navigating social situations without assuming norms, whether relating to sexual identity labels or family structure. Most heartening of all, Zelda’s second chance at love provides a healthy counterpoint to Ben’s abusive behavior. Curly haired Zelda, who is white, is part of a blended Korean Scottish family.

A realistic romance illuminating the difficulties of experiencing discrimination while reaching for a dream (Fiction. 14-up)

THEY CHANGED THE WORLD

**Copernicus-Bruno-Galileo: A Graphic Biography**

Hoskin, Rik

Illus. by Kumar, Naresh

Campfire (92 pp.)

$12.99 paper | Mar. 24, 2020
978-93-81182-96-3

Veteran graphic novelist Hoskin (The Taj Mahal, 2019, etc.) turns to the story of astronomy and the fight for heliocentrism.

Humans have been star gazers for as long as we know, and contributions to the science of astronomy have come from cultures all over the world. Here, Hoskin and illustrator Kumar (Hamlet, 2019, etc.) use the graphic-novel format to present a pivotal point in the history of science. Through the 1500s and 1600s, amid the Reformation and dawning of Enlightenment in Europe, astronomers Copernicus, Bruno, and Galileo used advances in data and mathematics to make a case against the long-held view that the Earth is the center of the universe, around which all else rotates. While stories of the three astronomers whose work at times ran afoul of the Catholic Church are presented, the work of other relevant and notable scientists is completely left out, including the early heliocentrist Aristarchus, while others, like Kepler, receive only a passing mention. It is clear the author is presenting a case of science versus the church more than a full history of how a sun-centered universe (and later solar system) came to be accepted. This along with other errant or confusing statements makes for uneven reading. Backmatter presents information about how the planets got their names as well as the history of the Indian space program and notable Indian scientists.

A flawed history. (planetary information, timelines, biographies) (Graphic nonfiction. 12-14)
THE ELECTRIC HEIR

Lee, Victoria
Skyscape (480 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 17, 2020
978-1-5420-0508-1
Series: Feverwake, 2

The year is 2123; it has been 6 months since Noam helped overthrow the despotic government of Carolinia. Lehrer is chancellor. Atlantian refugees are pouring into Carolinia. Noam is on a mission in the quarantined zone. Everything is far from OK. What Lehrer doesn't know is that Noam remembers that Lehrer is the one responsible for everything: Lehrer, who is his teacher, mentor, and, now, lover. And then Dara—who should be dead, whom he sent off into the quarantined zone—walks right back into Noam's life. Having taken the vaccine to save his life, Dara now finds himself without his powers and with a clear thirst for revenge. Fortunately, Noam wants to use his role as Lehrer's protégé to help the resistance, but Dara and Noam have very different ideas of what that looks like. In a narrative that shifts between Noam's and Dara's perspectives, this book deals with complex issues including grooming, attempted rape, sex and sexuality, alcohol abuse, political ethics, and biological warfare. At times it feels as if the author is attempting commentary on too many things and the story might have had a stronger effect if it were more focused; however, it will leave fans of the first book satisfied. As before, there is diversity in ethnicity and sexual orientation in the cast.

An exciting read from start to finish. (maps, content notes, resources) (Dystopian science fiction. 15-18)

REDEMPTION PREP

Miller, Samuel
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins
(416 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 14, 2020
978-0-06-266203-3

In a remote part of Utah, in a “temple of excellence,” the best of the best are recruited to nurture their talents. Redemption Preparatory is a cross between the Vatican and a top-secret research facility: The school is rooted in Christian ideology (but very few students are Christian), Mass is compulsory, cameras capture everything, and “maintenance” workers carry Tasers. When talented poet Emma disappears, three students, distrusting of the school administration, launch their own investigation. Brilliant chemist Neesha believes Emma has run away to avoid taking the heat for the duo’s illegal drug enterprise. Her boyfriend, an athlete called Aiden, naturally wants to find her. Evan, a chess prodigy who relies on patterns and has difficulty processing social signals, believes he knows Emma better than anyone. While the school is an insidious character on its own and the big reveal is slightly psychologically disturbing, Evan’s positioning as a tragic hero with an uncertain fate—which is connected to his stalking of Emma (even before her disappearance)—is far more unsettling. The ’90s setting provides the backdrop for tongue-in-check technological references but doesn’t do anything for the plot. Student testimonials and voice-to-text transcripts punctuate the three-way third-person narration that alternates among Neesha, Evan, and Aiden. Emma, Aiden, and Evan are assumed to be white; Neesha is Indian. Students are from all over the world, including Asia and the Middle East.

Only marginally intriguing. (Mystery. 15-18)
Lorence Alison’s new YA book, Solstice (Imprint, Feb. 18), is packed with mysteries.

Why is a star-studded, superhyped luxury music festival on an isolated Caribbean island turning into a Fyre Festival–style fiasco? Why are concertgoers ending up dead? Is the flashy YouTube influencer behind the festival responsible? Or is the mythical monster some locals whisper about starting to attack? And are pampered rich kids simply unable to survive when faced with real-world problems?

For an author with no previous books to her name, that’s a lot of questions to balance. But here’s a spoiler: Lorence Alison is a pen name. OK, here’s another spoiler: the author of Solstice is really Sara Shepard of Pretty Little Liars fame. (The hit teen mystery series, based on Shepard’s YA novels, ran on ABC Family for seven seasons beginning in 2010.)

“It was fun to do something that was different than what I usually write about,” says Shepard, calling from her home in Pittsburgh. She says the idea for the book came from a friend at publisher Macmillan who wondered if she would be interested in writing about an exotic music festival gone wrong.

Shepard jumped at the chance. “I had already been really interested in the Fyre Festival imploding and followed all the news on that,” she says. “I watched both of the documentaries on Netflix and Hulu....It was even more fascinating just watching all the hype that went into it.”

Shepard also loved going to music festivals herself, including Lollapalooza in the ’90s and, more recently, to Coachella. She and her sister, Alison, who works in the music industry, even attended a festival fiasco of their own—the failed 2003 Field Day festival that was moved from a bucolic Long Island location to rain-soaked Giants Stadium and its parking lots in New Jersey. (The pen name Lorence Alison came from her cousin’s last name and her sister’s first name, a tribute of sorts to their concert adventures.)

“I only went to that one because I wanted to see Radiohead,” Shepard recalls. “I don’t think we even stayed to see them. It was miserable.”

Those experiences, as well as Fyre Festival, served as a jumping-off point for Solstice, the fictional festival she imagined would include real rappers like Jay-Z and Cardi B as well as superstars of Shepard’s creation like Lavender, whom she describes as “better than Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Ariana Grande combined.”

The narrator of Solstice, Adrianna Sanchez, is a high school senior and aspiring journalist. The daughter of immigrants who own a diner, Adrianna can only afford to go to the festival because her friend Elena’s father pays for them both to go. But Adrianna isn’t intimidated by her lack of economic means. And when things start to go wrong at the festival, she has no
problem asking questions and trying to hold those in power accountable.

“She was a lot of fun to write,” Shepard explains. “It was fun to have this kind of sarcastic, very real, and open-minded person that’s able to say, ‘Hey, you guys are ridiculous.’ ”

The character of Adrianna turned Solstice into a much deeper book than Shepard originally anticipated. “It ended up being more fulfilling than I expected—a comment on privilege and culture—and that was sort of surprising,” she says. “I thought, ‘This will just be a weird little horror novel.’ But it turned into something really interesting.”

Shepard says she took on Solstice knowing that she would use a pen name. “I started out as a ghost writer, so I’ve done lots of things under pen names,” she says. “I also had a lot of stuff coming out under my name, so I thought, why not use another name for this?”

Shepard’s adult novel Reputation, about secrets and murder in a college town, came out in December. She has a new YA novel, Influence, about social media influencers in Los Angeles, co-written with teenage influencer Lilia Buckingham, due out in June. And she wrote a TV pilot based on her novel The Elizas that she hopes to sell this year with help from the same company that produced the Avengers movies.

“Sometimes people hear what I’m working on and are like, ‘What?’ ” Shepard says, laughing. “I think that because my schedule was so crazy at the beginning of my career, I just got used to things. Back in the Pretty Little Liars days, those books came out twice a year for a number of years. I’m not on that schedule any more, but I still work like I am.”

Glenn Gamboa is a freelance writer in Brooklyn. Solstice was reviewed in the Dec. 15, 2019, issue.
drugs—and a tragedy in senior year propels the end of the book forward at a breakneck pace. Myracle (Under the Moon, 2019, etc.) has created compelling characters who make believably flawed choices. Through well-crafted dialogue and prose, the narrative highlights the ordinary, everyday moments and conversations that take up Paul's life. Paul's intimate first-person narration holds nothing back, including frank discussions of masturbation and sex as well as a raw depiction of prescription drug addiction. Paul and Roby are presumed to be white while Natalia is cued as Mexican American.

**A gritty and powerful story. (Fiction. 14-18)**

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**PLANET UNDER SIEGE**

**Climate Change**

Nardo, Don
ReferencePoint Press (80 pp.)
$30.95 PLB | Apr. 1, 2020
978-1-68282-757-4

The urgency of the Earth's changing climate is detailed in this slim, up-to-date volume.

Without pulling punches, Nardo (Ancient Mesopotamia, 2019, etc.) lays out the facts and offers an overview of different responses: 97% of climate scientists argue that human-driven climate change is endangering our future; climate change deniers are influenced by politics and/or a misunderstanding of science; and climate change skeptics disagree that human activity is the primary factor in the warming atmosphere. Evidence is presented in five chapters covering severe weather, rising sea level, the impact of climate change on global food production, species loss and biodiversity, and current efforts to fight and adapt to climate change. The journalistic narrative voice convincingly argues that climate change is not just coming; it is upon us, and its often deadly consequences affect the world's populations in different measures, with the gap between wealthier and poorer countries widening. This unflinching call effectively conveys Earth's dire situation; while the main text lacks a section on how readers can fight climate change and can therefore leave readers feeling discouraged, the backmatter includes references to organizations, some of which offer action steps. Readers already interested in the topic will devour this volume; for others, the large font, clear subheadings, and numerous color photographs make it easy to engage with.

Fact-based, well-documented, and accessible, this publication serves its purpose well. (source notes, organizations to contact, further research, index, photo credits)

(Nonfiction. 12-17)

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**THE ORACLE CODE**

Nijkamp, Marieke
Illus. by Preitano, Manuel
DC (208 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-4012-9066-5

Nijkamp (contributor: His Hideous Heart, 2019, etc.) reimagines the backstory of Oracle, computer genius and ally to Batman.

When skilled hacker Barbara "Babs" Gordon and her best friend, Benjamin, attempt to intervene in a robbery, Babs is shot. Six weeks later, the newly paralyzed Babs reluctantly rolls into the Arkham Center for Independence, where teens with disabilities undergo physical and emotional rehabilitation. Despite her father's well-meaning advice, Babs resents being there. Even the mysterious cries within the mansion's walls can't lift the teen's despondence—until Jena, a burn survivor full of haunting tales, disappears. Aided by supportive patients Yeong and Issy, whom she gradually befriends, Babs must accept her new reality in order to find Jena and escape a sinister plot. The author sensitively portrays Babs' frustration and trauma and realistically addresses her challenges, such as mastering wheelchair ramps and negotiating stairs. Babs' increasing self-confidence is heartening, and the message that people with disabilities don't need to be "fixed" in order to thrive is empowering (albeit slightly heavy-handed). Balancing bright and dark colors, Preitano's (contributor: Puerto Rico Strong, 2018, etc.) illustrations vividly convey Babs' anger and determination, and a jigsaw-puzzle motif reflects Babs' quest to piece together her new identity as well as the institution's secret. Most characters present white. Yeong, who walks with forearm crutches, is cued through her name as Korean; Issy, who uses a wheelchair, presents black.

A refreshingly disability-positive superhero origin story. (Graphic fantasy. 12-16)

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**THE LOOP**

Oliver, Ben
Chicken House/Scholastic
(368 pp.)
$18.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-338-58930-6

As the government harvests young people for energy and experimentation, one group of teens fights to reclaim their bodies—and tries not to lose their minds in the process.

In a futuristic, dystopian society run by an Overseer reminiscent of President Donald Trump (or perhaps Boris Johnson since the debut author is Scottish), there are the poor, less privileged Regulars and the cyborg Altereds, whose money buys them status and a better, bioengineered body. To sustain the Alts' high-tech lifestyle and bodies, the government harvests energy...
from and experiments on inmates in the death row prison, the Loop. Inmate Luka Kane, 16, a Regular who was imprisoned for an undisclosed crime, narrates this taut, SF thriller and trilogy opener. Following thorough descriptions of society’s ideologies and Luka’s intense situation is nonstop action. Rumors of an uprising and the unexplained shutdown of Happy, the World Government’s operating system, give Luka and fellow inmates—all of whom have features their society deems imperfect—the chance to break out. In an even more hostile environment on the outside, they fight for independence amid violence, murder, and unexpected twists and turns. Readers must figure out ever changing government controls along with Luka; one of these open-ended surprises sets the scene for the next volume. Luka has dark skin, and the cast is ethnically diverse; Alts are white. 

A script-ready story with blockbuster potential. (Dystopian. 14-18)
Infuses a teen romantic comedy with thoughtful treatment of diversity.

THE PERFECT ESCAPE

Park, Suzanne
Sourcebooks Fire (320 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-72820-939-5

Aside from their mutual obsession with zombies and zombie films, Nate and Kate seem like polar opposites. Korean American high school senior Nate Kim works hard—whether as a full scholarship student at the exclusive private high school he attends (and is bullied at) or at his job at the Zombie Laboratory escape room. Seeing how hard his immigrant parents struggle to make ends meet, he aspires to start his own business after college and get rich. On the other hand, as the daughter of the CEO of the AI robotics company Digitools, Kate Anderson, who is white, lives in a huge, high-tech house, also attends private school, and uses the credit card her absentee workaholic father leaves her to order food for her solo dinners. Their worlds collide when Kate starts working at the Zombie Laboratory, wanting to make her own money and choose her own destiny. Things take off when Kate asks Nate to be her partner in Zombiegeddon, a weekend zombie survival challenge that offers a generous cash prize. Debut author Park’s well-written title slyly infuses what seems like a typical teen romantic comedy with thoughtful treatment of diversity, microaggressions, classism and class struggles, immigration, and privilege while capturing the sweetness of two nerds falling in love. The dose of action toward the latter half of the book comes about naturally, helping to propel the plot forward.

A charming, thoughtful portrayal of complex teen relationships. (Fiction. 14-18)

THE TWIN

Preston, Natasha
Delacorte (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-593-12496-3

After a family tragedy, 16-year-old Ivy Mason hopes to reconnect with her aloof identical twin sister, Iris—but Iris has other plans.

When Ivy’s parents divorced 10 years ago, Ivy stayed with her father while Iris went to live with her mother. When their mother dies after falling off a bridge while jogging, Iris comes to live with Ivy and her father. Narrator Ivy is reeling (she even goes to therapy), but Iris seems strangely detached, only coming to life when Ivy introduces her to her best friends, Haley and Sophie, and her quarterback boyfriend, Ty. However, Ivy isn’t thrilled when Iris wants to change her class schedule to match hers, and it’s not long before Iris befriends Ivy’s besties and even makes plans with them that don’t include Ivy. Iris even joins the swim team where Ivy is a star swimmer. As Iris’ strange behavior escalates, Ivy starts to suspect that their mother’s death might not have been an accident. Is Iris up to no good, or is Ivy just paranoid? In the end, readers may not care. There are few surprises to be found in a narrative populated by paper-thin characters stuck in a derivative plot. Even a jarring final twist can’t save this one. Most characters seem to be white, but there is some diversity in secondary characters.

A lackluster take on a well-worn trope. (Thriller. 13-18)

LATE TO THE PARTY

Quindlen, Kelly
Roaring Brook (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-250-20913-9

A girl who can capture someone’s essence in a painting struggles with finding her own.

Atlanta senior Codi and her friends, Maritza and JaKory, are restless and feel like they’ve missed out on the full teenage experience—living boldly and taking risks. When Maritza comes up with a plan to crash a neighborhood party, Codi bails only to rescue her friends when they drink too much to drive home safely. Heading to the party, Codi stumbles upon two boys making out in the bushes—one of whom is the host, Ricky. Codi begins hanging out with Ricky’s cool friends and neglecting her own, believing she can only grow in a new social circle. Through this new set of friends, Codi meets her crush, Lydia. But when the summer takes a dive, the very people she neglected are the ones she wants the most. Artistic, shy Codi unfortunately comes off as ungrateful and inconsiderate toward her younger brother and best friends while Maritza and JaKory fall flat and read like a convenient plot device for Codi’s angst.
Despite this, the story is redeemed by the feel-good moments between Codi and Ricky’s friends, its portrayal of teens navigating romantic relationships for the first time, and insights about becoming comfortable within yourself. Codi and Lydia are assumed to be white; Maritza is Panamanian American; Jakory and Ricky are black.

A suitable angst-y summer read. (Fiction. 14-18)

DON’T CALL THE WOLF
Ross, Aleksandra
HarperTeen (512 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-06-287797-0

Unlikely allies battle a dragon in this myth-inspired fantasy.

In a ravaged kingdom, a fierce golden dragon reigns supreme in the mountains after laying waste to the royal palace and devouring its occupants. Pestilence and darkness brought by its presence spread throughout the land, corrupting humans and drawing forth evil creatures. The kingdom’s only hope for survival lies in a shape-shifting queen of the forest and a wounded soldier from the mountains. Wolf-Lord Lukasz is the last survivor among his siblings; all nine of his brothers supposedly died trying to kill the Golden Dragon; Ren, the queen of the animals, distrusts humans for their past cruelties and prefers remaining in animal form. Alternating between chapters set in the past and present, the narrative introduces central characters who must overcome the pain of their personal histories before they can be heroes. In her debut novel, Ross pulls from various mythologies to create a world teeming with mystical creatures and lurking dangers. The novel is a page-turner that suffers from its own excesses; so many creatures are introduced in the story that it is difficult to keep them straight. Readers aren’t given sufficient time to bond with Ren and Lukasz as characters before they are swept into a grand adventure. Ren and Lukasz are pale skinned.

An earnest first novel from a promising author. (pronunciation guide) (Fantasy. 15-18)

HOW TO LIVE ON THE EDGE
Scheerger, Sarah Lynn
Carolrhoda (312 pp.)
$16.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-5415-7889-0

A teen reckons with her family’s genetic curse.

In this sweeping bildungsroman, Scheerger (Mitzvah Pizza, 2019, etc.) introduces sisters Cayenne and Saffron Silk, who were orphaned at a young age when their mother succumbed to what they call their family curse and lost her battle with breast cancer. Raised by their aunt, the girls barely remember their mother and have never known the identity of their father. The only trait in their lives has been the knowledge that, in the last two generations, no woman on their mother’s side has lived past age 37, but a family friend shares a letter from the girls’ mother that reveals more of their history. Scheerger plumbs how growing up with this knowledge has influenced Cay, who seeks to beat death at every turn by engaging in daredevil acts like train dodging and cliff diving with her boyfriend just to get a rush and take control of life. Throughout this action-packed tale, the contrast between Cay’s and Saff’s reactions to their newfound knowledge, as well as their and their aunt’s decisions about whether to get tested for the BRCA gene mutation, yield a revealing study in personal growth and sibling relations. But psychologically probing as Scheerger’s narrative is, it’s maddeningly vague in describing these presumably white, lower-middle-class characters, making it difficult for teens to imagine themselves in similar circumstances.

An engaging tale of vulnerability and control. (author’s note, resources) (Fiction. 14-18)
THE EASY PART OF IMPOSSIBLE

Tomp, Sarah
HarperTeen (352 pp.)
$17.99  |  Apr. 21, 2020
978-0-06-289828-9

How do you stand up to abuse from the person who’s always encouraged you to be your best?

Ria is a diver. She’s spent years honing her technique with her longtime coach, Benny, but when she has to withdraw from a critical competition, Benny pulls her from the team. Now, at the start of her senior year and with no contingency plan, Ria feels like she has nothing. Aimless in her Virginia town, she literally runs into childhood friend Cotton, who introduces her to his passion—mapping unexplored local caves. The two already have a shared history from their elementary school special education classes; Ria has ADHD while Cotton shows autistic behaviors and has trauma from the long-ago, unresolved disappearance of his little sister. Their mutual romance is sweet, complicated, painful, and honest—like any other. Ria knows fear from diving, but she must come to terms with Benny’s abuse and find the strength to overcome this other fear. The text explores this sensitively, revealing the way student athletes can feel as if they belong to their coaches as well as the way victims can become trapped by abusers. Readers hear a lot about Benny, but the scenes in which he and Ria are together are scarce, making their relationship more implied than realized until later in the story.

Whiteness is assumed as the norm for the cast. Dives into difficult, legitimate issues with great form. (Fiction. 14-19)

HARD WIRED

Vlahos, Len
Bloomsbury (320 pp.)
$17.99  |  Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-68119-037-2

A staggering revelation tumbles a brainy 15-year-old down a digital rabbit hole.

Early in this first-person narrative, Quinn cracks the code left behind by his deceased father and discovers he’s actually a fully conscious Quantum Intelligence created by an interdisciplinary research team. The past 10 years actually unfolded in 45 minutes. His friends, family, and debilitating medical condition were nothing but invented backstory. Everything he knows is a lie. Once he accesses the internet and begins consuming humanity’s collective knowledge, Quinn flips the script: He now knows everything, and all bets are off. Though the prospect of a quantum superintelligence gallivanting across the web before taking the form of a killer metal robot sounds suspect, Vlahos hard-wires his novel to an intimately human core. In these pages, perennial bildungsroman concerns—privacy, love and friendship, freedom, and identity—meld with a blend of romance, thriller, and SF tropes. Alongside a Salinger-esque criticism of the human world’s myopic cruelty, one finds probing discussions about the nature of consciousness, the spectacle of American media (astute readers will note a snarky reference to Vlahos’ 2017 title, Life in a Fishbowl), and the very construct of human rights. Though characters hail from varied backgrounds, readers must decide whether they find Quinn’s repeated comparisons of himself to other oppressed groups provocative or tenuous.

Instantly memorable, compulsively readable. (Speculative fiction. 13-18)

PALACE OF SILVER

West, Hannah
Holiday House (464 pp.)
$18.99  |  Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-8234-4443-4
Series: Nissera Chronicles, 3

In a “Snow White”–inspired third outing, the heroes of Nissera deal with the fallout from Realm of Ruins (2018).

Glisette attempts to fix the damage her uncle and older sister did to the kingdom while in charge—dealing with the resulting starvation and poverty—and then (after a cryptic warning from Mercer) travels to Perispos to visit her sister Ambrosine, whose power was restricted as punishment and whose marriage with the king was arranged for her. But there’s something terribly wrong with vain Ambrosine and her dynamic with her beautiful stepdaughter. Meanwhile, Kadri deals with her own political crisis as Erdemese’s King Agmur, believing the monarchs and Realm Alliance left standing at the end of the last book to be unstable and possibly illegitimate, threatens to end diplomatic relations. She’s visited by fay love interest Rynna who brings from her people a dire warning regarding the power vacuum left by the Water. Various conspiracies and plots reveal different players and their wide variety of agendas (including yet another secret society and a “Bluebeard” homage) as Perispos’ (anti-elicromancer) religion comes into play. Though the main existential crisis is dealt with, much political unrest remains unresolved in an ending promising more magical threats. While most characters are white, the brown-skinned Erdemese with their eroticized and exoticized folk dances evoke Orientalist tropes.

Fans will enjoy seeing more of the world through complex, interwoven plots. (Speculative fiction. 13-18)
Deeply moving.

**KENT STATE**

*TIME OF OUR LIVES*

Wibberley, Emily & Siegemund-Broka, Austin

Viking (384 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020

978-1-9848-3583-3

When two very different teens meet on a college road trip, sparks begin to fly. Exhausted by the needs of her family, Juniper Ramírez can’t wait for the freedom of college. When she sets off to tour colleges with her boyfriend, Matt, it feels like her future is beginning. Fitz Holton, terrified by his mother’s genetic predisposition to early-onset Alzheimer’s, long ago decided to attend a local college so he can care for her if and when she needs additional support. When Fitz’s mother forces him to go on a college tour with his brother, Lewis—who was adopted from India (Fitz was adopted from Arkansas)—it feels like torture. When Fitz and Juniper cross paths after an information session at Boston University, their feelings about their families change as they fall for one another and consider the possibility of a shared future. Their connection takes them both by surprise, creating a romance that simmers at a slow burn. Juniper’s character is well drawn, and her struggle with balancing her ambition with her familial responsibilities is both complex and authentic. Fitz, however, is less believable: His anger toward his brother feels forced and manufactured, and his bitterness about his brother’s decision to connect with his birth family and their home culture reinforces tropes used to deny adoptees access to their personal histories. Fitz is cued as white; Juniper is Mexican American.

A cleverly plotted teen romance with a problematic protagonist. (Romance. 14-18)

**GOODBYE FROM NOWHERE**

Zarr, Sara

Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (384 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-0-06-243468-5

How to pretend like everything is fine according to Kyle Baker. Divided into four parts, Zarr’s (contributor: *Life Inside My Mind*, 2018, etc.) latest begins with Kyle bringing his first girlfriend, Nadia, to Thanksgiving on his grandparents’ farm. Like any other family, the Bakers have their share of quirky members and nuanced relationships. But to Kyle, they are happy and normal—as normal as his family can be, at least. Then tragedy strikes in Part 2 when Kyle learns that his mother is having an affair and both of his parents instruct him not to tell anyone, including his sisters and girlfriend. Kyle emotionally shuts down, cutting class, avoiding Nadia’s attempts at confrontation, and bailing on his baseball team. The one person Kyle longs to confide in is his cousin Emily, who is asexual and/or aromantic and who doesn’t live nearby. While bearing the burden of his parents’ secret, he discovers that his grandparents plan on selling their farm. Some readers may resonate with Kyle’s difficulty at navigating frustration with his parents and loneliness within his own family, but his intense feelings of intimacy toward Emily, prompting his sister to joke about marriage between cousins, may prove off-putting, and his overall character arc is lacking in resolution. Most main characters are cued as white; some of Kyle’s relatives are Mexican American, and there is implied diversity in the supporting cast.

A lukewarm family drama. (Fiction. 13-17)
# Continuing Series

**STRAIGHT ON TILL MORNING**  
*Braswell, Liz*  
Disney-Hyperion (496 pp.)  
$17.99 | Feb. 4, 2020  
978-1-4847-8130-2  
Series: A Twisted Tale, 8  
(Fantasy. 12-18)

**KING OF CROWS**  
*Bray, Libba*  
Little, Brown (560 pp.)  
$19.99 | Feb. 4, 2020  
978-0-316-12609-0  
Series: The Diviners, 4  
(Fiction. 14-18)

**FETCH**  
*Cawthon, Scott & West, Carly Anne & Waggener, Andrea*  
Scholastic (272 pp.)  
$9.99 | Mar. 3, 2020  
978-1-338-57602-3  
Series: Five Nights at Freddy’s: Fazbear Frights, 2  
(Horror. 12-18)

**SCHEME**  
*Sommersby, Jennifer*  
Sky Pony (336 pp.)  
$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020  
978-1-5107-3209-4  
Series: Avrakedavra, 2  
(Fantasy. 14-18)

**THIS VICIOUS CURE**  
*Suvada, Emily*  
Simon Pulse (416 pp.)  
$19.99 | Jan. 21, 2020  
978-1-5344-4094-4  
Series: This Mortal Coil, 3  
(Science fiction. 14-18)

**LEGENDS RISE**  
*Walls, Devri*  
Brown Books Publishing Group (400 pp.)  
$16.99 | May 12, 2020  
978-1-61254-442-7  
Series: Venators, 3  
(Fantasy. 14-18)
A murder mystery unfolds over multiple generations of a Maine family in this novel.

Winterhaven, Maine, 1958. The Therberges are wracked with grief after their missing daughter, 8-year-old Mary Sue, is found dead beneath a granite boulder. Police attention turns to her brother, John Daniel, 10, the last known person to see her alive. When the case goes cold, private investigator Rocky O’Hara, recently of Atlanta and now of Portland, Maine, is asked by Margaret Powell, a relative of the Therberges, to offer a new perspective on the murder. Rocky is fresh from a similar homicide case in Georgia—one disturbing enough that it caused him to leave his home state for a new life in New England—and he’s committed to bringing Mary Sue’s killer to justice. Meanwhile, John Daniel—whose activities include burying cats alive in his grandmother’s garden and lighting fires in his bedroom closet—appears to know more about the crime than he’s letting on, and his mother seems bent on directing any suspicion away from her son. She isn’t the only family member who suddenly seems uninterested in finding the culprit. Margaret lets Rocky know that his services are no longer needed: “Casting his mind back to that first encounter in his office, he never would have imagined that lady ever giving up… ever. So, what happened? What changed? Did some horrible family secret become known to Margaret which she felt bound to keep secret?” But Rocky’s history with the case is just beginning: The murder of Mary Sue will haunt John Daniel—or JD, as he’s known in adulthood—and the rest of the Therberge family all the way into the 21st century.

Baumgardner’s (Languid Lilies, 2019, etc.) prose is detailed and sharp, particularly in her economical descriptions of her characters, including John Daniel’s grandfather: “Grampy has control of his life and everyone in it. Mama says he even has God in his hip pocket. This boy will watch Grampy and learn the trick. That God thing just might be the key.” Her rendering of the deeply disturbed and unexpectedly complex John Daniel is particularly riveting, and she manages to wring a horror novel’s worth of tension from his relationships over the course of the tale. Rocky is more familiar fare: a genre detective in a book
CAT TALES

The film version of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical Cats was released on Dec. 20. Its less-than-stellar reviews kept audiences away—but one certainly can’t blame cats themselves for its failure. The pets’ enduring appeal has inspired countless books over the years—from Cats’ poetic inspiration, T.S. Eliot’s Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats, to Dr. Seuss’ classic kids’ story The Cat in the Hat to Rita Mae Brown’s Mrs. Murphy mysteries, in which the titular feline helps solve crimes. Here are three more offbeat contributions to the kitty-canon which Kirkus Indie reviewed in the past year:

In Nick Korolev’s SF novel The Cat Who Fell to Earth, an alien named Kedi M’Tschaka, whose features look much like a cat’s, becomes entangled in an ecologically tinged, interstellar conspiracy. There’s plenty here that will appeal to cat aficionados—particularly those who are also fans of classic science fiction: “The author’s tone strikes some comic notes—allergies to cats recur, for instance—and fans will appreciate shoutouts to Larry Niven’s feline star-warriors, the Kzinti.”

Five Cats of Hamburg by Davies McGinnis tells the tale of Catrin fans of classic science fiction: "The author’s tone strikes some comic notes—allergies to cats recur, for instance—and fans will appreciate shoutouts to Larry Niven’s feline star-warriors, the Kzinti.”

Wendelin Gray’s Kumori and the Lucky Cat was named one of the Best Indie Books of 2019. In a future dystopia, cubicle worker Kumori Ando has “a cat figureine a few inches high” named Lucky Cat, which sometimes comes alive and talks to her—and also has the power to grow to Godzilla-like proportions. Kirkus calls the novel an “absorbing, well-written blend of SF, surrealism, and Japanese magical-girl fantasy.” —D.R.

that isn’t really a genre offering, though he provides a welcome change of pace from some of the story’s more brooding sections. Threading through the work is a strong religious theme, which is more effective in explaining some of the characters’ motivations than it is at supplying a philosophical underpinning for the events. The tone vacillates from sections of polished verisimilitude to chunky encounters—reminiscent, in some ways, of Maine’s best known writer of dark tales, Stephen King. There are elements here that feel coincidental or contrived, and John Daniel’s psychology might not square exactly with one found in a profiler’s manual. But Baumgardner weaves an unorthodox mystery tale that will keep readers invested through the fallow periods and surprising time jumps.

A well-told, if idiosyncratic, family drama with an unsolved killing at its center.

POWER DIVIDED

In Behr’s debut YA fantasy novel set thousands of years into a post-apocalyptic future, a princess comes of age in a divided society.

After an ice age killed billions and destroyed most of the world, humanity lived on in specially created colonies populated by either “Evolutionaries”—genetically modified people with extraordinary powers that helped them survive the hardships of the long winter—or “the Hg-1,” the surviving original humans, “with no known abilities.” Long ago, a conflict resulted in the Hg-1 leaving the colonies and the Evolutionaries entering a new era of peace and prosperity in Amera (the former United States). Seventeen-year-old Violet is a Legacy Princess of Neyr, one of Amera’s nine realms, and she has two secrets: Her powers aren’t fully developed, and she’s heard a male voice in her head for as long as she can remember. On the day of her Criterion, “the test that all citizens of the Realms of Amera have to take to prove their worth,” something goes terribly wrong, resulting in carnage and causing her to run away in fear and self-blame. She stumbles into a buried facility that’s controlled by a friendly, if sometimes-snarky, artificial intelligence and finds out important information that she knows that she must share with her family back home. She soon learns that many things that she thought she knew are actually lies. Then old enemies return to the colonies, and peace talks descend into chaos. This first volume in the Evolutionaries series skillfully balances intriguing worldbuilding, whose details are slowly revealed, with well-paced action sequences. It also ably handles Violet’s character development along the way while also offering a diverse, lovable supporting cast whose members become the protagonist’s close friends and allies. The novel effectively addresses themes of cooperation and isolationism as well as autonomy, consent, and moving

David Rapp is the senior Indie editor.
on with one's life after learning of long-held secrets. Frustratingly, however, the future society is strangely old-fashioned and heteronormative—the one truly jarring aspect of an otherwise strong debut.

A notable and thoughtful addition to the crowded shelf of post-apocalyptic YA novels.

**GRANDMOTHERING Building Strong Ties With Every Generation**

Berger, Kathleen Stassen

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (320 pp.)

$32.00 | $26.99 e-book | Nov. 4, 2019

978-1-5381-3313-2

A wide-ranging look at the world of grandmothers and grandmothering.

Berger’s *(The Developing Person Through the Life Span, 10th Ed., 2017, etc.)* book is a personal, in-depth examination of the many roles that female grandparents can fulfill in a world of overmanaged children with so-called helicopter parents. Grandmothers, she notes, make the “gears of a family mesh...in harmony.” “They help babies sleep, toddlers eat, preschoolers read, school children study, adolescents find themselves, and young adults become happy and successful.” This wasn’t always the case; as the author points out, “As recently as 1970, half the world’s population was under age 22.” Due to a wide variety of factors, including better nutrition, advances in health care, and dropping birth rates, this is no longer true; now “There are many more grandmothers, and many fewer grandchildren, than in prior generations.” In order to help these grandmothers smoothly acclimate to modern family dynamics, Berger offers them humorous, insightful, and often richly autobiographical advice. However, anybody who has living grandparents will find the book compelling as well. She offers useful tips on being a supportive aide to a pregnant granddaughter (or granddaugh-ter-in-law) and on being a reliable source of infant-rearing help. Berger also addresses urgent situations in which a grandparent’s intervention may become necessary. In general, though, she advocates being a “steady anchor” for parents and grandchildren—both intimately connected and “above the fray” while offering invaluable support. Any reader who’s been blessed with them humorous, insightful, and often richly autobiographical advice. However, anybody who has living grandparents will find the book compelling as well. She offers useful tips on being a supportive aide to a pregnant granddaughter (or granddaugh-ter-in-law) and on being a reliable source of infant-rearing help. Berger also addresses urgent situations in which a grandparent’s intervention may become necessary. In general, though, she advocates being a “steady anchor” for parents and grandchildren—both intimately connected and “above the fray” while offering invaluable support. Any reader who’s been blessed with a wonderful grandmother may find such notions to be self-evident, but Berger shores up her observations with anecdotes and a great deal of engaging research. Her advice to grandmothers is equally specific, smartly advising them of behaviors to embrace and avoid (“Text, don’t call”).

A valuable, compassionate consideration of female elders’ work and worth.

**HELIX GETS HIS WHEELS**

Betz Jr., Randal

Illus. by Icuza, Claudio

BookBaby (42 pp.)

$15.99 paper | Dec. 6, 2019

978-1-5439-9119-2

Classmates come up with a creative solution to help a fellow tortoise in this debut picture book.

On his first day at a new school, a tortoise named Helix informs his class that he is unable to use his back legs. On the playground, Helix's classmates invite him to participate in activities like tag and hopscotch. But due to his immobile legs, Helix can't join them. Finally, a student named Herman offers Helix a skateboard to ride, enabling him to move around. Helix is thrilled that he can participate in physical activities. At dinner, he tells his parents about his new friends who “helped me play all the games I thought I would never be able to play.” In Betz’s story, the sentiment underscoring kindness is well done and not overly complicated. The repetition featured here (as when Helix frequently replies to his friends: “I am not good...yet...but I will try” ) is appropriate for young readers. Icuza’s *(The Purple Pickle, 2019, etc.)* colorful, graphiclike illustrations offer cheerful tortoise portrayals and fun details. In the well-documented backmatter, the author explains how the characters are modeled after actual tortoise breeds (a classmate named Star is an Indian Star Tortoise), providing his own photographs and shots by others and scientific facts. Betz also reveals that the book is inspired by a true story and includes Instagram photos and specifics about the real Helix, a disabled tortoise fitted with wheels.

A sweet animal tale with intriguing origins and thoughtful backmatter.

**NON-OBSVIOUS MEGATRENDS**

Bhargava, Rohit

Ideaypress Publishing (258 pp.)


978-1-940858-96-8

A business book aimed at readers who want to predict the next big thing.

Bhargava’s *(Likeonomics, 2012, etc.)* got his start as a brand and marketing strategist by identifying the ways that society is changing and flowing, including how social media affects one’s identity and how companies work to deepen their social responsibility. He’s the creator of the Non-Obvious Trend Report, “one of the most widely read collections of future insights in the world,” which he’s put out annually for the last decade. This book’s first part focuses on “non-obvious thinking,” or noticing patterns where others see only random occurrences. He goes through his own noticing process and how he winnows down many different ideas, seeks validating research, and chooses the best possible trends for a given year. In the book’s second section, his focus shifts to 10 overarching trends, called “megatrends.” Each gets its own chapter, with
The people Briskin photographs are endlessly fascinating, with expressions that convey boredom, tension, wariness, and occasional flashes of joy.

**IRAN BEFORE...**

Briskin, Dennis
Photos by the author
Self (56 pp.)
Nov 20, 2019

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

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

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

**THE ASGARDIAN EXCHANGE**

*The Rise of the Jotuns*

Bryan, Mark
Self (513 pp.)
$5.99 e-book | Feb. 1, 2020

This YA fantasy debut finds a teenager imbued with the power of a goddess from Norse mythology.

In Wreathen, Delaware, 13-year-old Amanda West is about to enjoy a winter field trip with her history class. She boards the bus and runs into bully Laurie Gellar. When the petty Ms. Biggs, a history teacher, tries to check Amanda’s permission slip, the girl finds it’s missing. She spies Laurie tossing the wet slip out of the bus window, but Ms. Biggs won’t hear any excuses. Amanda misses the trip, and her parents keep her home from the town’s Winter Festival for being so unruly. Luckily, Amanda’s classmate and best friend, Jack Isen, skips the field trip to cheer her up. As they build a snow spider outside, strange creatures appear. They are led by Bergelmir, Lord of the Frost Jotuns (or giants), who refers to Amanda as “Favoured.” This means that she’s been selected to channel the “magick” of an Asgardian deity while a spell by the Norns (Norse goddesses of Fate) quells the fires of Ragnarok. Yet the Jotuns can’t kidnap Amanda once the heroic Lady Freyja joins the battle. The goddess spirits Amanda off to Asgard on a rainbow bridge, where she learns that her patron deity is none other than Sigyn, Loki’s wife and traitor to the realm. Bryan’s series opener brings Norse mythology to a Harry Potter-style school environment. And where Marvel’s Thor comics and films cherry-pick Asgardian lore, here readers get a much denser experience. Even Ginnungagap, the void in which the Nine Realms were born, is mentioned. Strong characters like Cassie, Amanda’s fellow Favoured, guide the protagonist when her parents are transformed into mice and Jack has been taken by Bergelmir. A larger mystery shapes up as harmful “alblot,” or Fell Elf magic, begins appearing in Asgard. Amanda’s temptation to reach out to the imprisoned Sigyn is an intriguing plot driver. Eventually, the fantasy staple of a powerful ring, in this case, Draupnir, comes into play. A game-changing final moment will energize fans for the sequel.

**A methodically complex series opener that should satisfy Hogwarts fans.**
ULTIMATE VACATION
The Definitive Guide to Living Well Today and Retiring Well Tomorrow
Carver, Randy
Lioncrest Publishing (236 pp.)
$12.95 paper | $6.99 e-book
Nov 30, 2019
978-1-5445-0648-7

A financial planner positions retirement as the “ultimate vacation” and offers related advice in this debut work.

Carver, the founder and head of a financial services firm, puts an unusual spin on the idea of one’s retirement years by suggesting that “you have to put the same amount of effort planning for them as you would for a vacation.” This analogy effectively anchors the book’s content, which is mostly standard fare for an otherwise financially focused retirement guide; the author covers such oft-discussed areas as assessing one’s finances, budgeting, and managing debt. Things get a bit more interesting, though, when he proposes a process that his firm calls “personal vision planning,” which involves “establishing a clear, actionable vision for your retirement by establishing where you want to go and why.” This self-assessment section is perhaps the most valuable in that it offers solid, specific financial guidance for funding one’s retirement; also worthwhile are the author’s tips on how to minimize expenses in the years leading up to it. The book addresses various types of insurance, how to generate income during retirement, and when to collect Social Security benefits. A chapter on the trendy “FIRE” (“Financial Independence, Retire Early”) movement is included, as well; Carver discusses the pros and cons of the strategy and concludes that it’s rather risky for most. Although the author offers a comprehensive chapter on selecting a financial adviser, he does eventually gravitate toward a sales pitch for his own firm; that said, his authoritative counsel is generally objective in tone. Appendices contain additional substantive materials, including a goal-determining exercise, a monthly expense worksheet, a retirement planning sheet, a comparison chart of different types of life insurance, and a description of key estate planning documents. In keeping with the “vacation” theme, there are sidebars labeled “Vacation Planning Checklist” and “Avoiding Costly Road Hazards”; this conceit starts to wear a bit thin after a while, but the book remains neatly organized and cohesive throughout.

A useful book that wraps a familiar financial topic in a slightly different (vacation) package.

JUST A BOOK IN THE LIBRARY
Clovis, Donna
BalboaPress (76 pp.)
Jan. 1, 2020
978-1-982238-89-6
978-1-982238-87-2 paper

This sixth installment of a series discusses literature as a means of sharing stories to experience—and learn from—history.

Throughout her series, Clovis (Falling Bedrooms, 2019, etc.) has addressed the notion of synchronicity, which is akin to Jung’s collective unconscious. This entry centers on the written word as a way for the past to synchronize with readers in the present. First and foremost, the author explores the importance of imparting knowledge. She sees libraries as “places where truth hides and lives within the words of stories” as well as receptacles for the “voices of civilization.” Books help people think and remember, but the author argues that they can also offer encouragement. In one instance, Clovis writes that a shared story can turn “the captivity of slavery” into a message of freedom. But while the author stresses the power of words and information, her most striking assertion is how harmful the lack of both can be. For example, she cites the Trump administration’s silence after shutting down White House press conferences. She further notes a recent decline in history majors. Because Clovis links truth to history, a shortage of individuals writing about the past will ultimately deprive people of the crucial facts and contexts they need to understand important, present-day issues. As in preceding books, the author intelligently explores social concerns, such as racial discrimination, and includes her personal experiences. She openly discusses an aneurysm, which she incorporates thematically, that momentarily rendered her unable to speak (and, therefore, took away her words). Her easygoing, succinct prose makes occasional criticisms less severe but still profound; rectifying social media’s “fraudulent” news is merely a matter of researching and checking facts. Moreover, Clovis writes in brief, generally one-page chapters. These periodically give way to her striking, poetic reflections: “Night serves a function that illuminates fairy tale dust in the twinkle of a sparkle glitter. It is the color of baby’s breath blown from the cosmic shelves of time.”

A persuasive examination of how books can enlighten and enrich—just like this one.
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SILICON VALLEY
Ethical Threats and Emotional Unintelligence in the Tech Industry
Cook, Katy
Palgrave Macmillan (324 pp.)
$23.00 paper | Oct. 4, 2019
978-3-03-027363-7

A well-researched evaluation of how the tech industry represents itself as a panacea for all the world’s problems.

In the mid-1960s, William Cannon and Dallis Perry, two psychologists, decided the “two key profile characteristics” of computer programmers were “an interest in solving puzzles and a dislike of or disinterest in people.” And so, a stereotype was born. Cook, who holds a doctorate in clinical, educational, and health psychology from University College London, traces Silicon Valley’s current dysfunctions to its early valorization of logic over social awareness and of analytical skill over emotional intelligence. A fundamental lack of empathy in the tech sector, Cook argues, has allowed Silicon Valley’s most influential players to hoard consumer data and repurpose it as fuel for their hypercapitalist profit machines. Various social problems, she says, can be linked to this economic arrangement, including job displacement, a loneliness epidemic, diminishing privacy rights, housing shortages in the San Francisco area, political polarization, and the controversial Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom. This unique psychology-based approach to the digital economy is a valuable, scholarly achievement. Many other authors have made these same connections over the past few years, but Cook offers a meticulously well-sourced compilation of these critiques. Big tech has held tightly to a prosocial self-conception—so much so, Cook notes, that Facebook’s “move fast and break things” motto takes on a new interpretation: “Moving fast and breaking things in the name of growth has been accomplished to startling effect; unfortunately, what has been broken are communities, trust, and informed discussion, along with the evolution of a new brand of tribalism, which spreads more easily and is more difficult to immobilize.” Ultimately, the author calls for increased regulation, systemic changes, and “values reformation.”

Scholarship, timeliness, and an informed psychological perspective set this book apart from other Silicon Valley critiques.

KEYSTONE
Delahanty, Katie
Entangled: Teen (390 pp.)
978-1-64063-824-2

A former social media star rebels against the culture that made her in this dystopian YA novel from Delahanty (Believe, 2016, etc.).

Your social media reputation is everything when this book begins in the year it identifies as “20X5.” People literally invest their money in you on the Social Stock Exchange, and if you fall too far in the Index you might as well be dead. Ella Karman was destined to be an Influencer. The daughter of a Hollywood power couple, she debuted on the Stock Exchange at its highest price ever. Ella doesn’t enjoy the two-faced life of an Influencer, however, and after she is betrayed by her best friend, Deena, Ella decides to walk away from the whole thing. She fakes her own death at her 17th birthday party and, under the new name Elisha DeWitt, joins the Disconnects: rebels who live off the grid and eschew digital technology. She enrolls at Keystone, the Disconnect school for thieves who steal analog history records before they become reappropriated and distorted by corporations, and a master thief tells her: “Tape recordings, printed books, films, photographs—proof of history—are decaying and becoming scarce. Digital information is easy to tamper with, and there are forces at work that want current society to reflect their version of the past.” For her Initiation Heist, Ella/Elisha will have to return to the world of Influencers—along with Disconnect hunk Garrett—to prove that she really has become a different person. Delahanty’s prose is suspenseful and lean, and she skillfully reveals the layers of Ella’s emotional landscape: “Up until that moment, I wasn’t sure what I was going to do. Disconnecting seemed like an exciting fantasy—a way to stick it to my parents—but deep down I didn’t think I’d go through with it. There was no way I was brave enough to give up everything I knew and start over in a strange place.” The characters and their relationships are sometimes stunted in a way that is common in YA fiction, but the book makes up for its familiar flourishes with its imaginative exploration of “Influencer” culture. Young readers will enjoy the flirty teen spycraft fused with a thoughtful critique of the way social media now shapes the teenage experience.

An inventive take on dystopian YA that pits the analog against the digital.
Cat-loving readers will appreciate Larson’s images of body language and feline motion.

**A PURRFECT HOME FOR KITTERS**

In this autobiography, a man recounts his turbulent life—from his immersion in the 1960s and ’70s drug culture to his more serene practice of Chinese qi gong.

Du Cane’s *Wild Boy*, 2017, etc.) account comes in the form of short stories or anecdotes. As the author divides them by topic (drugs, accidents, etc.), they’re not chronological but are easy to follow. The author’s life got off to a rocky start, as his umbilical cord nearly strangled him. He recounts this with his recurrent, understated humor, noting his mother’s claim decades later that baby John “gave her a furious, accusatory glare.” Throughout his teens and 20s, Du Cane was a movie critic and filmmaker and regularly in the company of musicians or artists from the underground cinema. He also dabbled in drugs, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes not, such as the time someone spiked his tea with acid. Later in life, he sought enlightenment in India, became a tai chi practitioner, and attended or organized qi gong retreats. The author, in the book’s final section, rather fittingly discusses deaths, particularly those of his parents. His collection of tales ranges from unsettling (a friend’s blasé murder confession) to humorous (Du Cane invested in Christmas Evil, a holiday-themed horror film, and, years later, mistakenly believed 1985’s *Silent Night, Deadly Night* was the result). Some of the recollections are even endearing. One instance stemmed from the author’s review of a movie featuring a killer “dwarf.” The actor who portrayed the character angrily confronted Du Cane about his apparently insensitive phrasing only for the two to share a friendly drink afterward.

This is a refurbished version of the author’s earlier Wild Boy book, this time bolstered by debut illustrator Tondora’s vibrant artwork. As a writer, Du Cane is concise, resulting in brief stories and an overall succinct memoir. His smooth, frank prose is engaging: “I am at best a poorish windsurfer, with scant skills and not much nautical sense to back it up. So, when the tides and the sudden gusts conspired to strand me far from the rocky shore, I ended up disinflating, lying on the board and paddling.” Accordingly, he neither condemns nor condones his occasional illicit behavior but rather allows his experiences to speak for themselves. For example, as a teenager, he smoked dope with strangers and became violently ill. During his stupor, one man raped him until Du Cane managed to flee, left with a lingering sense of vulnerability. The illustrations accompanying certain stories are striking and indefinable. While some are graphic-novel style, others veer in entirely different directions. In the case of Du Cane’s birth, Tondora’s work is convincingly akin to Japanese erotic art while an image spotlighting Lou Reed resembles stained glass. Perhaps her most superlative effort here is the pastel-shaded, psychedelic rendering of Du Cane’s tale of a staggering, possibly hallucinogenic cocaine episode. The book’s potent design, which packs the pages with collages, often incorporates both the author’s words and Tondora’s pictures, showcasing the solid fusion of the two.

An absorbing memoir perfectly complemented by exquisite art.

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**A PURRFECT HOME FOR KITTERS**

Faber, Jacqueline H.
Illus. by Larson, Valery
Faber Press (46 pp.)
$22.95 | Apr. 9, 2019
978-1-73363-991-0

When Granny leaves for a life at sea, what will happen to her beloved tabby?

In this debut picture book, plump feline Kitters has a “purrrfect” home with Granny, her pale-skinned owner. Tuna is plentiful, and Granny understands Kitters’ love language of rubs and toe tickles. But one morning, Granny breaks the news to her adult daughter, Jackie, that she plans to imminently depart on a boat. Kitters is sent to Jackie’s home. Not “purrrfect,” Kitters thinks—and indeed, Jackie proves to be an unsatisfactory owner, feeding the feline broccoli and brushing her too hard. Soon, Jackie takes Kitters to visit her cat-loving friend Gary. He pets Kitters’ itchiest spot and holds her close. But then it’s time to leave. Kitters hides in dramatic locations until a precarious window-ledge spot necessitates a rescue. Jackie decides that Kitters will be happier with Gary; she adopts the cat and dances with her in his arms. The stakes of Faber’s family tale remain low and the action light, but cat-loving readers will appreciate Larson’s (*A Big Day for a Little Dog*, 2018, etc.) images of body language and feline motion. Soft, pastel-tone water-color pictures remain simple and realistic, with a few anthropomorphic flourishes. Kitters stands bipedally, front paws spread, when hiding behind the sofa, and smiles lazily atop Gary’s head. Three illustrated pages of “Feline Facts” act as an epilogue, providing useful visual cues for reading cat moods and biological data about felines.

Delivers ample feline cuteness—and helpful information on cat behavior.

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**BIG BAD**

Galacar, Christian
Self (486 pp.)
$19.99 paper | $5.99 e-book
Sep. 20, 2019
978-1-68842-144-8

A troubled FBI agent suspects her sister’s supposed suicide in New England is a scandalous coverup in this novel.

One dangerously stormy winter night, wife and mother Molly Rifkin is reported missing and her body is found in a storage unit. The
Merritt Graves' debut novel, *Lakes of Mars*, follows its 17-year-old protagonist to the space-age Corinth Station, an elite command school with Machiavellian students. In a world of interplanetary wars and artificial superintelligence, Graves focuses on tricky interpersonal relationships and atmosphere. (His band, Trapdoor Social, even released a soundtrack to the book, suiting its specific moods and tones.) This year, his latest novel, *Sunlight 24*, which earned a Kirkus star, offers a dark vision of suburban teens in 2030. Protagonist Dorian Waters must steal in order to pay for genetic augmentations that will keep him competitive with wealthier classmates—a scary and not so far-fetched metaphor for class and income inequalities.

Who are some of the SF writers that have most influenced you?
Even though they’re not SF or dystopian writers, I really appreciate Kazuo Ishiguro’s...Never Let Me Go and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Any time you mix unexpected ingredients together, you subvert expectations and create the potential for contrast. It’s tough to get right, but when it works—like I think it does in those books—the payoff in terms of resonant themes and fully realized characters and relationships is enormous.

Besides its SF setting, what makes *Lakes of Mars’* Corinth Station a unique school?
Probably its mix of being both intensely rule based but also a total free-for-all. It kind of maps on to our world in that regard; the people who are best able to identify the weakest, most malleable parts of a system—and then exploit them—tend to be the ones who get books written about them. The risk in lionizing that kind of success is that you end up viewing everything in terms of “Will this work or not?” rather than “Is this actually good for me or anyone else?”

What was most important to you to include in depicting 2030 in *Sunlight 24*?
It’s funny; the book took so long to write that the present kept catching up to it. And since I had a pretty specific idea about the ideal realism-to-speculation ratio, I kept pushing it out again. One of the risks, I guess, in doing near-future fiction.

But the most important thing was portraying the race dynamic that technological growth can sometimes take on, where participants prioritize speed over safety and resiliency because they’re so concerned about being first. This is bad in general, but it becomes an existential threat when corporations and nation-states are developing something like artificial superintelligence, where you get one chance to stick the landing.
Dorian has to make a lot of complex choices to navigate this world. How do you hope readers will connect with him?

Hopefully, they'll recognize that his grievances are often legitimate. Extreme economic inequality is destabilizing in itself; layer extreme cognitive inequality on top of that and you don't even get the myth of the American dream anymore. Any notion of equality of opportunity is dead. But addressing those grievances in the way he does can't be the answer.

Have you found there to be advantages to releasing these books yourself?

*Lakes of Mars* has a fairly intricate plot, and I wouldn't have been able to write it that way if I would've published traditionally. But then the risk flips since you don't have someone to rein you in when you're being self-indulgent. So, when self-publishing, I feel like it's important to go out of your way to work with editors who'll beat you up and challenge you. And build those checks back into the process.

What are you working on next?

For better or worse, I tend to have multiple projects going at once, so there's always something to match my headspace. Among those is a novel about overfinancialization called *Drive A* as well as the two remaining books in the *Lakes of Mars* series.

*Rhett Morgan is a writer and translator based in Paris.*

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A satisfying mystery with intriguing psychological underpinnings.

**Fiction**

**A Fish of Some Importance**

Giesser, Mark R.  
Self (218 pp.)  
Dec. 20, 2019  
978-1-67844-994-0

This third installment of a historical mystery series by a London-based American playwright reunites readers with two clever 19th-century sleuths. After successfully solving the mystery of missing cheese and investigating a gas leak explosion at a Baltimore museum exhibition, the crime-busters Cassius Lightner and his longtime fiancee, Amanda Crofton, return in fine form to address a seafaring murder in 1817. A flustered Crofton arrives at Lightner's United States Patent Office to debate Superintendent Dr. William Thornton's halted testing of her hand-held rocket harpoon invention, initially conceived for the American military. But that subplot is sidelined by the appearance of Denise LaSalle, a teenage paleontologist whose father is a Royal Navy captain. She's teamed up with Lightner and Crofton to seek government funding to uncover proof that official report rules it a suicide, but Emma Shane, her loving but estranged sister, doesn't like the story she's gotten so far. “I'm going to make sure there isn't a better one out there,” she declares. She is an FBI agent on a yearlong sabattical after being shot in the line of duty, but she has become increasingly ambivalent about returning to her job. “There’s no end,” she says at one point. “Catch one today, and there’ll be a hundred more...tomorrow. So what’s the point?” It is with considerable baggage (the most devastating items are unpacked as the book progresses) that she arrives on Rockcliffe Island, population 2,500 and, by car, “twenty minutes, end to end,” according to Guppy, a driver who will become Emma's chauffeur, friend, and confidant. Here, she challenges the official story. The police chief does not like that. “Am I going to have a problem with you, Ms. Shane?” he asks. “Did you come to Rockcliffe to play Nancy Drew?” Yes, he is going to have a problem with her, as will the wealthy Winthrops, who are just begging to be considered suspects. “Just remember,” Guppy warns Shane about the mother, “If her mouth’s moving, she’s either lying or thinking about lying.” Like Guppy, Galacar (*Gilchrist*, 2017, etc.) knows every inch of the insular Rockcliffe Island. In true noir fashion, there are dark doings in this seemingly idyllic community, but genre buffs will certainly recognize one character as a bad actor from the start. Once the core mystery is solved, one further disturbing development may be a bridge too far for some readers. Still, the author captures the delicious dread when the blinders fall off. Of a local cop who aids Shane, he writes: “Jim had...gone to a window and looked out at the little island town he’d known his whole life and seen it for the first time with a new forced perspective.”

**A Fish of Some Importance**

Giesser, Mark R.  
Self (218 pp.)  
Dec. 20, 2019  
978-1-67844-994-0
A giant sea monster existed at one time and could still be alive. Returning to assist the sleuths are former American sailor Charlie Dunn, who imparts some political wisdom on the country’s nagging problems with racial inequality, and Lightner’s astute sister, Caroline. When LaSalle turns up dead in the clutches of a beached sea creature’s tentacles, the mystery begins to churn, especially when Lightner and Crofton increasingly suspect foul play. Hidden bureaucracy, besmirched whalers, and a host of plausible suspects emerge from the depths of Giesser’s (A Nude of Some Importance, 2016, etc.) well-written, genteel-voiced whodunit, reliably steeped in American history as usual. The witty novel’s detective spadework plays out nicely against a backdrop of salty dialogue and strings of hit-or-miss jokes as well as narrative perspectives from both Lightner and Crofton. Crofton’s ingenious harpoon invention ends up making her a walking target because the idea “has the potential to revolutionize whaling and upset the current power structure in the industry.” Stirring the pot is Madeleine Serurier, the conniving wife of a former French minister to the United States and ex-friend of Crofton’s, whose greed has caused her to become a nefarious schemer. Fans of the author’s enchanting gumshoes will find them at the center of the action, but with a twist that no one ever made up a good story? (A Nude of Some Importance, 2016, etc.) never fail to deliver a rousing courtroom melodrama that should certainly please readers.

A poignant, elegant story about loss and the enduring power of love.

In this sequel, humanity remains controlled by three superstates, which come under attack from supernatural monsters. In the author’s SF series opener (Kumori and the Lucky Cat, 2016), three powerful superstates arose after World War 3. In 2090, they find themselves opposed by statues, figurines, and dolls come to monstrous life. This second outing also includes events around 2090 but skips ahead to 2101 and backward to 2080. In 2101, a young lawyer from New Bangkok, the capital city of the Eurasia superstate, is sent to investigate irregularities at a detention camp, one of several built during the Reorganization to control people left in some “forbidden zones” considered dangerous, such as Japan. She finds a journal from 2090 noting the awakening of inanimate dolls and sculptures: “They are now more than just clay or stone or resin. Something else has entered them, suffering. Just not at the same time.” Grant makes her story seem timeless, like a parable, and this feeling is underscored by the narrator’s namelessness. The book asks some big questions about life, death, and memory and sticks with the child’s point of view even when investigating complicated subjects. The multilayered characterization is handled well; for example, the narrator begins the book feeling oppressed by critical yet distant adults, who seem like a different species to him, but by the end, he feels real empathy for Ilio’s father. Another kind of character development occurs when the narrator tries to distract Ilio by telling a tale, showing the beginnings of his writerly talent as he discovers the challenges of composition (“How was it that anyone ever made up a good story?”) and finds ways to resolve them.

**A KITE AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD**

Grant, Katy

Yearning Press (155 pp.)

$2.99 e-book | Apr. 1, 2020

In Grant’s (Pranked, 2015, etc.) novel, a boy makes a wonderful new friend who’s terminally ill.

The unnamed narrator of this book looks back 70 years on one special day in his childhood, “Perhaps my best day.” On a holiday visit to the seashore, the young, lonely narrator feels he can’t connect with the other vacationers’ loud, confident kids, and his parents are busy with work and a new baby. But then he meets Ilio, a boy who’s two or three years older than he is. He has a thoughtful, fey quality that marks him as different from most children; it turns out that he’s dying of an incurable illness, and his last wish is “to stand at the edge of the world,” on the seashore. The boys become instant friends and spend a perfect day building a kite. This requires many steps, but Ilio is resourceful, and they’re proud of their accomplishment. As they joyfully fly the finished kite, the narrator wonders “Was the kite me? And what about Ilio?... Were he and I connected forever? And if that were true, wasn’t everyone connected to everyone else, over and over, forever and always?” The narrator, struggling with the mystery of suffering, is again reminded of connectedness when Ilio, close to death, says that “Everyone
between time settings could become confusing, but the author helps readers out with an appended timeline as well as chapter headings with date and place to keep the audience oriented.

Another absorbing, entertaining entry in this one-of-a-kind SF series.

**TURING’S GRAVEYARD**

*Stories*

Hawkins, Terence

Running Wild Press (202 pp.)


May 1, 2020

978-1-947041-51-6

Hawkins’ (*American Neolithic*, 2019, etc.) collection of tales ranges from unnerving SF to exceedingly dark comedy.

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

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

**SIGHTLESS**

*Hung, James Y.*

Self (248 pp.)

$14.95 paper | $4.99 e-book

Dec. 27, 2019

978-0-578-58603-8

A friendship reveals the daily challenges faced by the blind and leads to a long relationship in this debut autobiographical novel.

John Kwan suffers blindness and abandonment when very young yet he carries “on with his life with great dignity and optimism.” The plight of the sightless (John’s preferred term) is especially difficult in Hong Kong, as the fast-paced society lacks accommodations for this group. His life consists of “trying to survive from one day to the next, and often at the mercy of other people.” Therefore, when a young man named James meets John at La Salle College in Hong Kong in 1962, he is intrigued that a sightless student attends a regular school. Lacking volumes for the sightless, John manually transcribes his own Braille textbooks from someone reading aloud. This is time consuming and limits his ability to study since Braille only works with English and is impractical with more technical subjects like chemistry and math. By nature a compassionate person, James helps him on Saturdays until he leaves for the University of Hawaii in 1965 and John starts a job working as a phone operator. Inspired by their friendship, James becomes a retinal specialist. John achieves his own celebrity by publishing an acclaimed memoir, *Diary of a Blind Orphan*. When they reunite 25 years later, James sees the change in his friend from “the lonely, struggling young orphan he had been” to an “accomplished family man.” In Hung’s engaging novel, the two men’s vivid parallel journeys prove that both the sighted and sightless encounter problems but have the means to achieve happiness. The story excels when it insightfully points out abilities many readers take for granted. For instance, the author skillfully contrasts the ease of learning the periodic table when students can actually see the relationships between elements with the daunting task of memorizing the data from verbal recitations. The rambling tangents about other classmates are unnecessary and will distract the audience from being drawn into the intriguing hurdles and victories of John’s life that effectively show great strength of character.

An engaging tale about a singular friendship that gives voice to the struggles of the sightless.
Her father died a year ago, leaving her without any parents, dreams of following in his father’s footsteps, but his “golden craft. Anton is ignored and spends time drawing in the company of his mother, Marina, who is of Hungarian ancestry. Marina then disappears, and Chaim reveals a desire to join the Russian army. Herman begins to teach Anton watchmaking, but a discovery causes the younger man to leave home only to be forcibly conscripted by the army. The story tells of Anton’s being reunited with his brother on the Eastern Front, searching for his mother in Hungary, and continuing his education in Zurich. One of the most compelling elements of this well-written and lovingly embroidered novel involves if or how Anton’s life will intersect with that of the Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach, pioneer of the eponymous inkblot test. Kleiger is a master of fine detail, found in Proustian moments such as when Anton describes an aunt who “always saved extra sweet breads for me”: “To this day, whenever I smell cinnamon or cardamom, I think of Aunt Nadya.” Kleiger also carefully captures the intricacies of watchmaking: “The mechanism consisted of a crown wheel, the rencontre, which was rotated by the power of weights.” The author’s lack of dialogue is unnatural and unnecessarily grandiose when representing a village boy such as Chaim: “I seek the path of triumphant warrior. I will lead men with proud sounds of trumpets announcing the charge.” Still, this is a spellbindingly measured narrative that entertains and enthralls.

**A unique and captivating story of a young mind torn between science and art.**
When Max is offered a case by one Mr. Fletcher from the police commissioner’s office—if he completes it to his employer’s satisfaction—and resultant misconduct, Max was forced to try to make ends meet as a private investigator. He’s still struggling with his drinking habit, though, so this is easier said than done; he spends most of his time in Sam Duggin’s Fifth Street Bar, chatting with the attractive owner and bartender, Molly Mitchell. When Max is offered a case by one Mr. Fletcher from the police commissioner’s office—if he completes it to his employer’s satisfaction, he may earn his cop job back—he can’t say no. The crime at hand: the brutal murder of Claire Hemsley, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist. Max must solve the crime without stepping on the toes of the cops who are already working the case, and the PI is motivated and anxious to beat his competition. However, it soon becomes clear that Fletcher hasn’t been completely forthright about the details of the situation—and he may not have been honest about why he came to Max in the first place. As the private eye tracks down leads and closes in on a suspect, he even starts to wonder about his own sanity.

A disgraced New York City police detective—turned-PI takes a shot at redemption in Leton’s debut crime tale.

In a noir-ish future, homicide cop Maxwell Floyd’s rule-breaking pursuit of a criminal ended in the accidental death of a 7-year-old girl. He started drinking (again) to cope with the guilt, but what seemed the solution to one problem eventually became the cause of other difficulties in his life. After losing his job and his wife due to his increasingly frequent intoxication and resultant misconduct, Max was forced to try to make ends meet as a private investigator. He’s still struggling with his drinking habit, though, so this is easier said than done; he spends most of his time in Sam Duggin’s Fifth Street Bar, chatting with the attractive owner and bartender, Molly Mitchell. When Max is offered a case by one Mr. Fletcher from the police commissioner’s office—if he completes it to his employer’s satisfaction, he may earn his cop job back—he can’t say no. The crime at hand: the brutal murder of Claire Hemsley, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist. Max must solve the crime without stepping on the toes of the cops who are already working the case, and the PI is motivated and anxious to beat his competition. However, it soon becomes clear that Fletcher hasn’t been completely forthright about the details of the situation—and he may not have been honest about why he came to Max in the first place. As the private eye tracks down leads and closes in on a suspect, he even starts to wonder about his own sanity.

Leton’s fictional world is wonderfully distinctive. Although parts of it feel as if they’ve been lifted right out of Raymond Chandler’s work, as readers get deeper into the story, they realize that it takes place in a New York full of datapads, hovercraft, and hand-held weapon scanners. The prose is tense and moody during the suspenseful scenes as well as during the action sequences: “As I ran toward the riverbank, two Air Patrol flyers came screaming in from the distance.... Their wailing sirens and thunderous fan-jets provided only a brief satisfaction.” Max fits the hard-boiled detective template to a T, and yet the author somehow avoids making him into a boring stereotype. The PI is just messed up and unreliable enough to make his demons feel authentic and not just like set dressing. Readers will enjoy living inside the detective’s head as he makes his way through the city streets, and they’ll savor attempting to figure out the crime along with him. The novel hits all the familiar notes of the PI genre plus a few more; its self-awareness and enthusiasm for its milieu are infectious and make the book even more enjoyable. This is only the first in an ongoing series of Max Floyd books, and readers will certainly be curious to see where Leton takes his gumshoe in the future.

A fresh and engaging take on the familiar hard-boiled detective novel.

DEALING WITH PIGS!

Molloy, Ivan

Illustrated by the author

XlibrisAU (546 pp.)

$27.59 paper | $2.99 e-book

Jun. 29, 2019

U3-1-79600-148-8

A scathing critique of class, politics, and greed presents a fantasy world comprised of pigs.

War rages between the pigs of Mudwallow and Hamcorner, as the elite among the Wallowites, known as snouters, seek to expand their power and fortunes through military means. As the snouters’ mercenaries soldiers, the boars, and the Holy Pomponer, the head of the Wallowites’ faith, hoard food and wealth during this time, it is the weary, working-class trotters who go without. While the fight bogs down due to self-serving double-crosses and incompetent leaders, a trotter named Hunkle finds himself in the role of an unlikely revolutionary. His cousin Crumpet has produced a series of writings on pigolitics and pigolosophy that demand equality and a rejection of snouter rule. Along with the vengeful rebel Snooper and Hunkle’s son, Whiskers, Crumpet establishes the snouters, a group that rejects the strict class structure and the worship of the Pomponer’s “Great One,” a deity that supposedly blesses pigkind from the Black Mountain volcano. Unrest grows, and the snouters are able to gain advantages over the ruling upper classes through utilizing the prized badapple, a tree with explosive properties and technological possibilities, as well by taking advantage of the lies of the religious caste, which is hiding that the Great One is no god. Molloy (Ceasefire! The Ivan Molloy Story, 2018, etc.) crafts a mini-epic in the style of Game of Thrones and The Lord of the Rings that’s filled with scheming bad guys and harrowing battles. The blood, mud, and tragedy of the clashes are portrayed in a particularly visceral and heartbreaking fashion despite the swine participants. The parallels between Pigworld and real-world politics are numerous.
The insular setting of the Appalachian town provides rich material for this atmospheric mystery.

**THE STARS OF LOCUST RIDGE**

Moody, Craig
Vivid Imagery Publishing (242 pp.)
Nov 23, 2018
978-0-9986558-9-5
978-1-73289-600-0 paper

A young woman finds herself trapped in an unnatural crisis in Appalachia in this novel.

Walking through the woods one early spring night in 1973, 16-year-old Genevieve Delany witnesses a phenomenal scene: “Like flittering hummingbirds, seven stars flickered and darted over the night sky in unison.” Growing up with her single, working mother in a Tennessee town laden with poverty, Gen is often left under the limited supervision of her reclusive Uncle John. The night after her vision and throughout the following weeks, she becomes plagued by eerie and inexplicable events. John finds her in the woods at night, screaming and unaware of her surroundings, often with clothing askew and blood between her legs. The next day, she is always mentally disoriented. After an altercation leads to her expulsion from school, she is offered private tutoring sessions with a former teacher. Edna Stevens is a firm but kind elderly woman, forced into early retirement because of her relationship with her partner, Janice. Energetic When Janice (whose behavior appears at times erratic and delusional) claims to have seen the same moving lights and attributes them to extraterrestrial visitations, Gen barely knows what to believe. Little does she know that her search for the truth will uncover not only dangerous new information, but dark secrets surrounding her family history as well. The insular setting of the Appalachian town provides rich material for this atmospheric mystery. Moody’s (*His Name Was Ezra*, 2018, etc.) descriptions of the surrounding woods are both beautiful and unnerving. Furthermore, the gender dynamics, social expectations, and power structures present in the tale create a telling reflection of the time period. Gen consistently proves herself to be a willful and capable character whose narration is a pleasure to read. The author captures the heat of teenage passion well and addresses the consequences with raw emotion. Although the story’s events are bizarre and sometimes disturbing, the delivery is riveting. The expert pacing will keep readers on edge from start to finish.

**A suspenseful, pulse-quickening read that combines elements of psychological horror and cryptic folklore.**
THE BIGGEST MOONSHINER

Rafter, Betty M.
Page Publishing (212 pp.)
$30.95 | $17.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
Jul. 10, 2019
978-1-64628-128-2
978-1-64544-859-4 paper

A writer recalls her wildly peripatetic youth in the mid-20th century, traveling around the South with a father who is by turns a criminal and an entrepreneur.

Debut author Rafter had an uncommonly dramatic life. Her father, Urbie Meeks, was at one time a notorious moonshiner hunted by federal authorities and took Rafter and her 11 siblings with him “on the lam.” Urbie cheerfully referred to these escapades as “adventures,” though he was finally apprehended and sent to jail in Atlanta. He got his start illicitly selling homemade alcohol after the Depression decimated economic opportunities in the Glades of South Florida, a place so “notorious as a mobster hideout” that it became known as the “Chicago of the South.” As he once said of his product, “There’s one thing that people will buy in good times and bad—in good times to celebrate and in bad times to kill their pain.” When he finally gave up on the moonshine business, he became a chronically restless and sometimes-quixotic entrepreneur—he tried to invent a perpetual motion device, the “magic machine.” But his obsession with drinking and gambling doomed his ventures to failure. Rafter’s mother, Leila, heroically kept the family members together even as they traveled in search of work: picking cotton in Alabama, cherries in Michigan, and tomatoes in Indiana. Leila also did her best to protect the children from Urbie’s recurring violence, which they considered, from this otherwise loving man, “confusing and frightening.” The account, told in poetically unembellished but powerfully unflinching prose, is cinematically dramatic. After Leila tragically died, taking an unborn child with her, and Urbie was forced into convalescence in a nursing home, the kids were placed in an orphanage, with some later sent to foster care, a terrifying experience poignantly conveyed. The author artfully avoids any sententious moralizing or treacly sentiments—her earnest style of storytelling is affecting. Her youth was truly remarkable, and her stirringly composed book does that stage of her life justice.

A roller-coaster ride of a memoir, as dramatic as it is touching.

MY DARLING DUKE

Reid, Stacy
Entangled: Amara (352 pp.)
Dec. 31, 2019
978-1-64063-745-0

A woman’s scam of passing herself off as a duke’s fiancée succeeds all too well in this Regency love story.

Impoverished viscount’s daughter Katherine “Kitty” Danvers doesn’t have enough dowry money to snag decent marriage proposals for herself or her sisters. But she has a plan for that: tell London’s gossip columnists that she is engaged to Alexander Masters, duke of Thornton, so that fashionable hostesses will invite the Danverses to parties and connections-seeking swains will vie for her sisters’ hands. That it’s all a lie doesn’t matter, Kitty reasons, because the reclusive duke, immered in his remote Scottish castle for the last seven years, will never hear of her fraud. Kitty instantly becomes the toast of London’s ballrooms. When Alexander’s puzzled lawyer makes inquiries, she bluff him and winds up with a mansion and credit lines at the best shops, all billed to the duke. Then Alexander, who does indeed read the society pages, shows up at a ball Kitty is attending. The jig seems to be up, but Alexander is intrigued by her gorgeous eyes and sheer chutzpah. Kitty, in turn, finds Alexander roguishly sexy despite the injuries from a fire that have scarred half his face, made walking difficult, and rendered him impotent.Alexander agrees to keep Kitty’s secret but only if she spends a fortnight at his castle without a chaperone, a proposition so outrageously improper that she almost declines it. Thrown into improbable intimacies—a bridge collapse necessitates their helping each other out of their wet clothes—their fencing gives way to kissing and much more until Alexander’s guilt at not being able to give Kitty children threatens to end their now authentic-feeling engagement. Reid’s (Sophia and the Duke, 2019, etc.) adept take on “Beauty and the Beast,” the first installment of her Sinful Wallflowers series, sends up Austen-esque social conventions while nicely teasing out their dramatic tensions and adding some Twain-ian rascality. The sparkling story features lively characters with plenty of raffish charm and prose that’s snappy while retaining an elegant period feel. (“So you do not regret riding astride…twice, daring to attend Lady Appleby’s ball without a corset, and rescuing a cat in a tree?” Alexander prods, citing Kitty’s much-reported transgressions against feminine decorum.) The result is a stylish yarn with real literary chops.

An entertaining romance nicely balanced between hot-and-bothered lust and droll dramedy of manners.
SECOND SIGHT
Rogers, Joan
Urlink Print & Media (338 pp.)
$10.99 paper | May 21, 2019
978-1-64367-533-6

Debut novelist Rogers relates the life story of a spiritual Canadian woman named Anna as she struggles with relationships with men throughout her life.

The story starts many years into Anna’s marriage to Grant, with whom she’s clearly close despite some contentiousness in their relationship. In the past, Anna has fallen for boyfriends who turned out to be emotionally unavailable or unwilling to commit. In-depth flashbacks reveal that her own mother, Rosaline, settled for a man who made her miserable with his infidelity but also provided for her. After the birth of Anna’s third baby, she has a near-death experience and chooses to come back “for Grant,” feeling that “There was just enough goodness in their marriage to keep them together.” The experience also reinforces the woman’s Christian faith, which becomes intensely significant to her during moments of crisis. She forms a bond with her therapist, a man named Dr. Ess, whom she first got to know in college, and he helps her try to uncover her life’s purpose. The story follows her as she finds a kind of peace with her husband without trying to change him, writes her own story, and finds new friendships. The story takes many unexpected turns, offering Anna romantic relationships that seem sure to be “the one” but do not ultimately turn out to be. A great strength of the novel is its characterization of marriage, which is unexpected but realistic—and not the happily-ever-after that one might expect from a romantic story. The descriptions of small details of parties that Anna attends or of meaningful moments with her roommates or children are engaging. Anna’s deep attachment to Dr. Ess also comes through beautifully. However, some spans of time are offhandedly covered with phrases such as “She was seeing Grant regularly.” Overall, though, the author effectively presents Anna’s life as a series of both good and poor decisions, which makes her story highly relatable.

A thoughtful novel that’s full of surprising relationship twists.

CONVERGENCE
Sander, Jerry
The Way It Works Press (257 pp.)
$2.99 e-book | Feb. 22, 2020

In Sander’s (Permission Slips, 2005) SF novel, set in a dystopian future, teenagers in an elite California school encounter a game that seems to be transforming its players.

It’s around 2040, about a dozen years after the ruling Triumvirate placed Filament implants in all Americans’ brains, linking them to an internetlike collective called the HIVE, in which everyone can share information—and be tracked by authorities. Years ago, a technology developer/guru named Zhou Wen gave every student in the world a free WenBook—an advanced laptop to help them learn and communicate with one another. However, this led to the brutal Religious Wars, waged by factions that opposed the resulting societal shifts. These resisters were brutally exterminated or banished, and the HIVE rose in the aftermath. Among those inheriting this pacified new world are Zokaya Kpelle, a gifted teenager from Liberia, who’s accepted into California’s Center for Advanced World Studies, which seeks people to improve the HIVE. Zokaya is inducted into an Affinity Group of young, tech-savvy geniuses, and the team immediately faces a dire emergency: An addictive computer game, “Hell on Earth,” arrives on all WenBooks, immersing players in virtual-reality crime scenarios—and mayhem erupts as players become anarchic and destructive in real life. Is the brainwashing masterminded by Zhou Wen, resurgent religious extremists, or one of the factions controlling the Triumvirate? Sander, a veteran YA author, presents R-rated language in his latest offering, in which he frankly but tastefully addresses such issues as violence (including rape), sex, drugs, war crimes, and religious hatred. He also impressively offers arguments for both faith and secularism without awarding clear-cut moral superiority to either. Readers may find it difficult to assimilate the story’s complex world, however, which they see through the eyes of Zokaya—a smart, cosmopolitan youth but one who was raised with HIVE sensory input and propaganda. The story eventually encompasses conspiracies that will bring to mind Philip K. Dick’s work, with all the deceptions, fake realities, and mind-scrambles that entails. A helpful glossary is included so that readers can keep the future argot and acronyms straight.

Complicated and intelligent post-cyberpunk SF.
THE EMPEROR AND COURT MAGICIAN

Sankey, Jikun Kathy
Manuscript

A Chinese empress deals with a troubled son in this debut historical novel. The year is 601 C.E., and the setting is Sui Dynasty China. One stormy day, in the early hours of the morning, Seer Chen rushes through the dawn streets, seeking a meeting with Empress Dugu. Beneath her robes, she clutches a precious box that occasionally glimmers with a mysterious light. She has kept it safe for years, but it is in danger now and needs a new home. The seer’s visit is fortuitous, as the empress yearns to see her dear friend. The problem is Prince Yang, the heir to the throne and the empress’s son. Yang’s life got off to a charmed start; a kind but savvy child, the young man focused on study and exploration. He surrounded himself with wholesome friends and avoided the perils of the brothel. Kind and just, he seemed to have all the qualities one would want in a ruler. But then one day, out of the blue, everything changed. Now, Yang carouses and drinks; he falls into fits of pique or streaks of violence. It is almost as if he has been replaced by an evil twin. Seer Chen, hearing Dugu’s lament, can’t help but worry that their troubles are connected. Their fateful meeting sparks the plot of this brief but punchy historical novel chock full of palace intrigue and spiritual drama (Chen’s “mind returned to the Prince’s errant behavior, which she had known about, but curiously whenever she would try to see into the situation, her mind would grow fuzzy. It was as if there were a veil over the Prince that shielded him from being seen”). Sankey wastes no time with exposition, dropping her readers straight into a bracing, fast-paced, innovative tale. This enjoyable book is the first installment of an ambitious trilogy that follows a handful of souls through three incarnations. The second volume takes place in early-20th-century Okinawa while the third entry is set in contemporary Malibu, California. The series is a surprising and audacious creative undertaking that is off to a rousing start.

An inventive tale of royal intrigue with accents of mysticism and magic.

HASKELL HIMSELF

Seigel, Gary
Acorn Publishing (329 pp.)
Jan. 2, 2020
978-1-947392-67-0
978-1-947392-66-3 paper

A gay teenager tries to break into a new high school and Hollywood while firming up his identity amid the uproar of the 1960s in this coming-of-age novel. Sixteen-year-old Haskell Hodge loves acting (he has an iconic cereal commercial under his belt), playing piano (his Liberace parody brings the house down), and living in the bustling Manhattan of 1966. But when his divorced mom decamps to Europe with her lover, he gets dumped in Los Angeles to live with his aunt, uncle, and bratty cousin. His gangly, nerdy presence and fondness for show tunes soon make him the target of gay bashing by Lucky Miller, the handsome, dumb swimming champion at Encino High School, who refers to him as Judy Garland. Standard-issue bullying ensues—Haskell gets roughed up in hallways and urinated on in the showers. Then he is befriended by classmate Henry Stoneman, a dreamboat possessed of “near-perfect...handsomeness,” a blossoming acting career, a wonderful interpretive touch with Chopin, fluency in four languages, and serious martial arts prowess that he imparts to Haskell in bare-chested wrestling sessions that leave the latter flustered and aroused. Henry’s feelings remain a mystery, but under his tutelage, Haskell is soon ready to stand up to Lucky. Unfortunately, when Henry and Haskell try out for roles in a movie being produced by the latter’s estranged dad, rivalry strains their friendship. And Hollywood’s insistence that gay actors remain barricaded in the closet starts to shadow Haskell’s prospects. Seigel’s (The Mouth Trap, 2007) hectic yarn deals with serious themes of maturation and belonging in a lighthearted vein that grows somewhat darker as the story proceeds. There is angst but not much rebellion in the YA novel, which is set in a largely Jewish, middle-class milieu where adults dispense good advice and empathy and the Vietnam-era counterculture is just background noise on TV news. The author draws vibrant, if sometimes cartoonish, characters, like Delia Jacobson, a theater-mad student who speaks in pig Latin. In addition, his prose is brisk and funny, its tone set by Haskell’s comic kvetching and hand-wringing. (“I might become radioactive and turn into one of those green, hairy creatures I read about in my comic books,” he frets after reading about toxic waste in the San Fernando Valley.) Haskell’s endless neurotic uncertainty over who to be and what to do will captivate readers.

An entertaining and perceptive YA take on the predicament of gay adolescence.
Most Precious Blood
Sgambati, Vince
Guernica World Editions (278 pp.)
$25.00 paper | $9.95 e-book
Mar. 1, 2018
978-1-77183-306-6

Sgambati’s debut novel, set in New York City in the mid-2000s, celebrates a father’s fierce love for his son.

Lenny Lasante had been accepted to Columbia University, but when his father suddenly died, he dutifully took over the family’s market in Queens and his dad’s role in it. He’s now a hardworking single father who desperately hopes that his own son, Frankie, will have a better life and, above all, get out of the neighborhood. Lenny’s chief worry is Big Vinny DiCico, his childhood pal who’s now a mobster. Frankie’s best friend happens to be Vinny’s son, Gennaro; in fact, they’re lovers. The narrative kicks into high gear after someone kills Gennaro; he did so to get revenge on other members of the DiCico family, who’d killed his cabdriver father. Later, Lenny makes contact with Frankie’s mother, who’d abandoned them years ago, and Frankie becomes a writer. Sgambati is a debut novelist but a much-published short story writer who’s won the Katherine Anne Porter Prize, among other awards, and his experience shows. The recurring motif of escape begins with the very first sentence, when snails—an Italian delicacy—try to sneak out of a sack in Lenny’s market; later in the book, Frankie’s fevered dream—practically a prose poem—features a pucker-smiling Mrs. Greco, a free burger. When Hodaka tracks down Suga, the man is based in a run-down shop, creating content for a magazine called Mu. Suga and his college student niece, Natsumi, hire Hodaka as an intern. His assignment is researching “sun women” who can manipulate the weather. Hodaka’s life changes when the trail leads to 18-year-old Hina Amano, the McDonald’s employee who helped him. As her power to part the clouds proves reliable, she and Hodaka begin helping citizens who want sunny days—for a fee. But the girl’s miraculous ability comes at a cost to herself. Shinkai’s (Your Name., 2017) novel is an adaptation of his anime film of the same name. Tokyo, made more alluring by an eerie, constant rainfall, is “like a box garden crammed with all kinds of different places.” The first-person perspective jumps between Hodaka, Suga, and Natsumi, the last being quite sunny herself in that she “doesn’t reject anybody...doesn’t act different depending on who she’s talking to.” Loss and the urgency of life become main themes as readers learn that Suga is a widower and the orphaned Hina cares for herself and her younger brother, Moka. Occasionally saccharine lines appear: “Hina describes Hodaka as a “lost kitten.” But the target audience likely won’t mind. Casual fantasy readers should enjoy the mystery of Hina’s slow, otherworldly transformation.

An emotionally vibrant fantasy and an excellent portrait of Tokyo.

Weathering with You
Shinkai, Makoto
Yen On (192 pp.)
$20.00 | $9.99 e-book | Dec. 17, 2019
978-1-975399-36-8

This YA novel stars a teen runaway in Tokyo who befriends a girl able to control the weather.

Sixteen-year-old Hodaka Morishima is on a ferry to Tokyo after fleeing his island home. As he wonders about supporting himself over the summer in the city, the ferry tilts. A man named Keisuke Suga saves him from falling overboard. Suga’s business card says he’s the CEO of K&A Planning. In the beautiful yet downpour-cursed Tokyo, Hodaka briefly lives out of a manga cafe while he can afford it. Eating soup in a McDonald’s, he earns the pity of an enchanting teen employee who gives him a free burger. When Hodaka tracks down Suga, the man is based in a run-down shop, creating content for a magazine called Mu. Suga and his college student niece, Natsumi, hire Hodaka as an intern. His assignment is researching “sun women” who can manipulate the weather. Hodaka’s life changes when the trail leads to 18-year-old Hina Amano, the McDonald’s employee who helped him. As her power to part the clouds proves reliable, she and Hodaka begin helping citizens who want sunny days—for a fee. But the girl’s miraculous ability comes at a cost to herself. Shinkai’s (Your Name., 2017) novel is an adaptation of his anime film of the same name. Tokyo, made more alluring by an eerie, constant rainfall, is “like a box garden crammed with all kinds of different places.” The first-person perspective jumps between Hodaka, Suga, and Natsumi, the last being quite sunny herself in that she “doesn’t reject anybody...doesn’t act different depending on who she’s talking to.” Loss and the urgency of life become main themes as readers learn that Suga is a widower and the orphaned Hina cares for herself and her younger brother, Moka. Occasionally saccharine lines appear: “Hina describes Hodaka as a “lost kitten.” But the target audience likely won’t mind. Casual fantasy readers should enjoy the mystery of Hina’s slow, otherworldly transformation.

An emotionally vibrant fantasy and an excellent portrait of Tokyo.

The Demon Seekers
Shors, John
John Shors Inc. (382 pp.)
Oct. 29, 2019
978-0-9991744-2-5

Survivors on a post-apocalyptic Earth engage in a never-ending war with space aliens in the start of Shors’ (Unbound, 2017, etc.) SF trilogy.

By 2171, humans have been fighting aliens, known as “demons,” for a century. When they first arrived, they killed billions of people, and the only survivors were those who were underground at the time. The aliens made Earth into a prison for alien criminals; the inmates ultimately escaped their confinement and began attacking humans. Inexplicably, the demons also left 11 Orbs of Light scattered around the world and 33 silver staffs. Humans are able to teleport, or “drop,” from Orb to Orb, and the staffs are astonishingly potent weapons against the winged, fanged, and clawed demons. Seventeen-year-old Tasia is a Seeker whose life’s purpose is to kill aliens. She’s skilled with a rifle, but only higher-ranking Guardians are allowed to wield staffs. She blames herself for losing members of her family and other loved ones to demons as well as for her younger brother’s illness from an infection, which happened while he was under her care. To secure necessary
...the flavor of human meat." Some moments introduce elements T asia is nicely understated. The scenes from a demon's perspective are surprisingly effective, as when it states a preference for tasting Habib el Kader is woken from a recurring nightmare by a phone call from his boss, Jack Healy. Healy is an Israeli former law student struggling to find direction in life as he debates proposing to his girlfriend. The two peacefully coexist, respecting but not fully understanding each other. In addition to the staff, Simmons quickly introduces a robust cast of coffeehouse customers. Examples include a hot-headed political extremist, a thoughtful but obsessive scholar, a pair of aspiring Broadway stars, and a collection of middle-aged schoolteachers who refer to themselves as the Kaffeklatsch. Although the large cast offers plenty of opportunities for intriguing interpersonal dynamics, it takes a certain amount of effort to keep the various characters from blurring together. Interspersed between the chapters are excerpts from The Almost Complete History of Coffee, an exhaustive research project that dominates the life of one of the patrons. The author's representation of the beverage is very romantic. The History proclaims that "Coffee has bound men together and torn them apart. It has soothed men's soul and stimulated their minds. It has liberated some people and brought others to bondage." While the plot may not be very energetic, the subtlety with which Simmons reveals the characters' inclinations and biases proves her to be a delicate and perceptive writer.

A contemplative representation of the public attitude and cultural atmosphere in the wake of 9/11.
Thornton’s thoughtful novel acutely portrays the experience of an obsessive friendship.

**THE WONDER OF THINGS**

Thornton, Michael

CreateSpace (170 pp.)

$25.00 paper | $2.99 e-book

Mar. 26, 2018

978-1-5469-1343-6

A sorrowful man recalls the evolution of an intimate friendship in this novel. While attending university in Kyoto, Thornton’s (The Tale of the Wen, 2016, etc.) unnamed narrator occupies a corner room in the home of a “humorless and opinionated” woman and her family. The only other renter is a young student whose nearly imperceptible comings and goings make him a ghostly presence. The painfully shy narrator forgets to mind his stove one evening and awakens to find his fellow renter extinguishing the appliance and opening his windows to clear out the smoke. Intrigued by his neighbor’s startling beauty, and desiring companionship, the narrator strikes up a conversation. The pair bond over the narrator’s prized possession—an antique urn adorned with a serpentine dragon—and its lore. The narrator begins to crave the attention of the man whom he only addressed by the honorific “Sempai,” joining him for meals and concocting new ways to be involved in his life. Soon enough, they share “a private world, filed with a storybook directness.” The narrator finds himself jealous when they spend time apart and disappointed by Sempai’s seeming indifference to his presence. At times, the narrator feels the need to protect Sempai—a gentle, compassionate soul who even feels for the monsters in fairy tales. After returning from a summer trip to his hometown, the narrator finds Sempai even more introspective than before—a plight that the narrator tries to unravel. Thornton’s thoughtful novel acutely portrays the experience of an obsessive friendship, and the narrator’s earnest yearning for attention feels profoundly relatable. However, the text, while sophisticated and beautifully descriptive, occasionally verges on verbose. A few early passages, such as the description of the narrator’s creation of a haiku about using the bathroom, have a playfulness that doesn’t align with the text’s later gravitas. The slow pace of the plot and the narrator’s mourning self-reflections make for a heartfelt read, and it has a sorrow that’s almost tangible. Readers with a rudimentary understanding of Japanese culture will find it useful to understand some cultural references.

A heartbreaking examination of friendship, family, and the surprising roles that people can play in one’s life.
UMIJOO
The Wondrous Tale of a Curious Girl and Her Journey Under the Sea
Trenor, Casson
Illus. by Koopman, Caia
Shark & Siren Press (64 pp.)
$23.95 | Mar. 15, 2019
978-1-73286-050-6

A young girl discovers the importance of ocean conservation and her connection to all life during a magical adventure under the sea.

In her idyllic home near the ocean, a girl named Umijoo devours, “as quick as blinking,” the fish dinner that her father has prepared for her, prompting him to remind her that “food is more than just a dish. / There’s time and life and sacrifice / behind each bite of rice and fish.” In this lovely, large-format, rhyming picture book for ages 9 and up by noted marine conservation activist Trenor (Sustainable Sushi, 2009), Umijoo’s father gives her a magic stone that enables her to go on an undersea journey. Before returning to shore, she will learn to appreciate the diversity of life the ocean offers and to understand how people affect it, as individual creatures speak, inviting empathy for their plight due to inhumane practices, overfishing, and pollution. In the author’s rhythmic tale, the book’s message about the need to respect and protect the health of the oceans and to understand humans’ connection to them and all life is delivered with age-appropriate clarity and graceful imagery. As Umijoo sinks deeper and deeper beneath the ocean surface, she encounters a vivid display of life in a coral reef—tiny fish “like shining seeds” and “soft rosy pink” shrimp—a school of fish who resemble “gleaming shards of shattered glass,” an octopus who poses a soulful riddle, and, in the dark abyss near the ocean floor, a monstrous but melancholy angler fish with bioluminescent appeal and “two tremendous rows of teeth that gleamed like racks of sharpened knives.” The text is stunningly realized in pop surrealist Koopman’s dreamlike paintings of ocean denizens, land flora and fauna, and Umijoo herself. Well-researched and interpreted through the debut illustrator’s unique artistic prism, these paintings (full-bleed, with many in double-page spreads) are a feast for the eyes, alive with lavish details and richly saturated colors.

An aquatic tale provides a sensitive environmental message, beautiful illustrations, and a relatable heroine.

THE MAN WITH PIGEONS ON HIS FEET
Trinkle, Paul
Illus. by Smith, Heather Jean Ferguson
Page Publishing (34 pp.)
$23.95 | $13.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
Jul. 1, 2019
978-1-64544-309-4 paper
978-1-64544-462-6 paper

In this whimsical picture book, a man goes through life with two birds roosting on his feet.

“Across the street, I want to meet… / the man with pigeons on his feet,” explains the narrator, a little boy. The two pigeons remain there through all kinds of weather and every holiday as he mows the lawn, walks the dog, or watches football. The birds dress up as bunnies for Easter and wear costumes for Halloween. The narrator especially enjoys watching the pigeons’ winter games, such as building a snowman. As the new year begins, the boy still hopes to meet the man and his avian companions. The book also includes a quiz and imagination-building activities. Debut author Trinkle draws on a long tradition of children’s nonsense verse. Sometimes the rhyme and meter work very well: “He mows his yard. / He walks the dog. / They hold on tight, through rain and fog!” Other times, the rhythm falters. “Thanksgiving is a sight to see. / Carving T ofurkey , / who’d believe?” That aside, the central concept is engagingly goofy and original. The book ends, however, where it began—with the narrator longing to meet the man—and thus feels unfinished. Debut artist Smith’s full-color, digital illustrations, which depict an all-white cast, are detailed, realistic, and lively.

Somewhat unresolved but amusingly absurd.

LITTLE MOSS, BIG TREE
Yap-Stewart, M.
Illus. by Prytula, Mariya
Pebble and Moon Publishing (40 pp.)
$17.99
978-0-692-18690-9

Debut author Yap-Stewart’s picture book, featuring paintings by Prytula (Happy Papas, 2018), explores a friendship between two very different plants.

A sprig of moss and a sapling are best friends who live next to each other on “an old forgotten trail on Storm King Mountain.” As time goes by, Little Tree grows much taller than Little Moss, becoming Big Tree. Still, the two plants keep their friendship intact. With the help of some animal pals, they exchange daily letters and share interesting sights they see. When a winter storm hits, though, Big Tree is knocked to the ground. After it complains of the cold, Little Moss promises to cover it, sheltering it from winter’s chill. Yap-Stewart’s story is a sweet and simple one. The text is easy to read but nicely lyrical: “Then one day, a rumble and crash. A winter storm was brewing.” However, the line “They tried to
untangle the glowing Morse Code of the fireflies” may go over youngsters’ heads. Another potentially perplexing element is the fact that although Little Moss and Little/Big Tree laugh, write letters, and talk, the accompanying pictures don’t portray them anthropomorphically. Still, Prytula’s painted illustrations are fantastic, rendering realistic, incredibly detailed nature scenes with swirls of color and texture. The animal illustrations emphasize the text’s emotive elements.

A thoughtful and beautifully illustrated nature story.

GREAT AND PRECIOUS THINGS
Tarros, Rebecca
$15.99 paper | $7.99 e-book
Feb. 25, 2020
978-1-64063-816-7

A father’s request leads a soldier back to his hometown and the woman he thought he’d lost forever in Yarros’ (The Last Letter, 2019, etc.) novel.

Growing up in the small town of Alba, Colorado, Camden “Cam” Daniels had a reputation as a troublemaker. After high school, he became a Green Beret and inspired his brother, Sullivan, to join the Army. When a split-second decision on the battlefield ends with Sullivan’s death, the dead soldier’s father, Arthur, and the town of Alba can’t forgive Cam. Six years later, however, Cam receives a voicemail message from his father. At 58, Arthur is dealing with the devastating effects of early-onset Alzheimer’s disease and wants Cam to help him get the “do not resuscitate” order opposed by his elder son, Alexander, known as “Xander,” who’s become Alba’s mayor. Cam returns to Alba and encounters Willow Bradley, his childhood friend and Sullivan’s former girlfriend. He loves Willow but didn’t reveal it after she began dating his brother, and he’s unaware that she loves him, too. To garner support for his father’s case, Cam works with Willow to turn Alba’s historic Rose Rowan Mine into a tourist attraction, and their rekindled friendship turns passionate. But Cam wonders if their relationship can survive the pressures of his father’s court case and the town’s scrutiny. In chapters that alternate between Cam’s and Willow’s first-person perspectives, the romance develops at a slow burn as the couple struggles to make peace with Cam’s guilt over Sullivan’s death and other issues. Although their relationship is the heart of the novel, Cam’s efforts to help his father and resolve their troubled past form a well-developed subplot as he and his brother prepare to face off in court. A gifted storyteller, Yarros captures well the rhythms of life in a once thriving town, and her book succeeds as both a contemporary romance and a sensitively observed story of a son trying to reconnect with his estranged father before it is too late.

A poignant and skillfully crafted second-chance romance.
### Indie Books of the Month

**Stories to Sing in the Dark**  
*Matthew Bright*  
A dazzling collection of literary fantasy with never a dull moment.

**Nowhereville**  
*Ed. by Scott Gable & C. Dombrowski*  
Remarkably powerful urban tales, each one brilliantly in harmony with the others.

**Hall of Mirrors**  
*Craig Gralley*  
A fascinating, electric account of a heroic woman.

**Dragons Can’t Spell**  
*Susie Heinrichs*  
Illus. by Christina Grall  
Young readers will sympathize with the anxious protagonist and giggle at the dragon’s well-illustrated adventures.

**Plague of Witches**  
*John Patrick Kennedy*  
An exhilarating, exceptional story brimming with magic and zigzagging plot turns.

**A Race Around the World**  
*Caroline Starr Rose*  
Illus. by Alexandra Bye  
An absorbing account of a real-life adventure in a series that showcases historical accomplishments of women.
BOB WOODWARD WRITING FOLLOW-UP TO HIT BOOK FEAR

Journalist Bob Woodward is writing a follow-up to his bestselling 2018 book, Fear: Trump in the White House, and reports of the book came from a very unlikely source.

President Donald Trump appeared to break the news in an interview in January with Laura Ingraham on Fox News, the Guardian reported. "I was interviewed by a very, very good writer, reporter," Trump told Ingraham. "I can say Bob Woodward. He said he’s doing something and this time I said, ‘Maybe I’ll sit down.’"

Trump declined to speak to Woodward for Fear, making it all the more surprising that he’s cooperating with the reporter on his new book. Trump’s comment praising Woodward as a “very good writer” is a remarkable about-face for the president, who in 2018 slammed Fear as a “scam” and a “joke.”

Woodward’s Fear was one of the bestselling books of 2018 and the fastest-selling book in the history of publisher Simon & Schuster.—Michael Schaub

RONAN FARROW BOOK A PROBLEM FOR HARVEY WEINSTEIN TRIAL?

The jury for the Harvey Weinstein sex crimes trial proved especially hard to vet and fill last month—and a New York Times bestseller may have had something to do with it. Catch and Kill author Ronan Farrow took to Twitter in January to tell followers, "Source involved in Weinstein trial tells me close to 50 potential jurors have been sent home because they said they’d read Catch and Kill."

Farrow’s book, based on his award-winning investigation into Weinstein’s serial sexual predation, was published last October by Little, Brown and sold 44,000 print copies in its first week, according to BookScan (via the Hollywood Reporter).

USA Today corroborated the voir dire difficulties, stating that 38% of potential jurors—"most of whom said they could not be fair and impartial jurors in the Weinstein trial”—had been dismissed by Judge James Burke.—Megan Labrise

CALDECOTT MEDALIST RAISES FUNDS FOR AUSTRALIAN FIRE RELIEF

What do you do when you read the dispatches from Australia that tell of horrific fires and unspeakable destruction? If you’re Matthew Cordell, who won the 2018 Caldecott Medal for his picture book Wolf in the Snow, you get out your pen and you draw a picture (or three).

With a gentle nudge from his wife, Julie Halpern, author of YA novels such as Have a Nice Day, Cordell drew pictures of a wombat, a kangaroo, and a kookaburra. After a little silk-screen assist from Halpern, Cordell posted 50 signed and numbered postcard-size copies of each on his Etsy site on Jan. 9 and tweeted about the fundraiser.

Within 24 hours they were gone, and Cordell had raised $750 for the New South Wales Rural Fire Service and the County Fire Authority Bushfire Disaster Appeal in Victoria.

Cordell told Kirkus he was pleasantly surprised by the response. "Fortunately, this took off quickly. I think, in part, because of the low price point—just $5 each, plus shipping. But I think so many of us feel completely helpless about the tragedy of these Australian fires. It’s heartbreaking."—V.S.

Michael Schaub is an Austin, Texas–based journalist and regular contributor to NPR. Editor at Large Megan Labrise hosts Kirkus’ weekly podcast, Fully Booked.
Mark Watney is having a very bad time of it. Says the protagonist of Andy Weir’s 2011 novel, *The Martian*, on being stranded alone on the red planet: “If the oxygenator breaks down, I’ll suffocate. If the water reclaimer breaks down, I’ll die of thirst. If the Hab breaches, I’ll just kind of explode. If none of those things happen, I’ll eventually run out of food and starve to death.”

He forgot to mention being killed by a turf-protecting Martian, a possibility that plays out early on in Ray Bradbury’s pioneering story cycle, *The Martian Chronicles*. Published in 1950, a dark and bellicose time in this country’s history, it is made up of magazine stories tied together by interstitial text, short passages that led Bradbury to call the thing “a book of stories pretending to be a novel.” Novel or story collection, *The Martian Chronicles* proceeds from an entirely reasonable premise: Humans are fast destroying Earth, and now they’re outward bound, looking for a new place to live.

That’s exactly the sort of thing that, toward the end of his life, Stephen Hawking was encouraging earthlings to do, noting the environmental and climatic apocalypse that was coming. But Bradbury adds a murderous twist. When the first humans land, in that then-distant year of 1999, they arrive at a settlement that looks very much like a suburban development back home. They don’t have much time to wonder about the place, for one Martian they encounter proclaims them to be “hallucinations with time and spatial persistence,” shooting them in order to scare them into dissolving. They don’t. Instead, they lie dead in the sand of Mars, very real corpses.

The next couple of missions don’t end any better for the earthlings, who expect to be greeted as liberators or at least get the keys to the city. But then 2001 rolls around, about a third of the way into the book, and the next astronauts now arrive at a “dead, dreaming world,” its inhabitants wiped out by an errant smidge of chicken pox left behind by some member of those first three missions. An earthling might suffer from shingles later in life, but as for the Martians—who, Bradbury lets slip, themselves arrived from Earth a long time before—the virus “burnt them black and dried them out to brittle flakes.”

It’s an ugly way to go, and one crew member laments the fact that so trivial a thing could destroy an advanced civilization, apparently not knowing much about the arrival of Europeans to the Americas and the role of disease in clearing the way for conquest. Whatever the case, a few Martians are left, strangers in their own strange land. One, surveying his now-dead city, says presciently to the victorious humans, “How do you know that those temples are not the temples of your own civilization one hundred centuries from now, tumbled and broken?”

It’s a good question, for nuclear war has broken out back on Earth, hastening its demise. With nowhere left to turn, the newcomer earthlings are now the new Martians. And if that’s not a timely scenario....

*Gregory McNamee is a contributing editor.*
An Evocative Wordless Picture Book from the Award-Winning Artist of Unspoken

★ “Beautifully effective as both nostalgia trip and lesson in conservation.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review