The Earth Issue

Conversations with Hope Jahren, Michael Christie, Anuradha Rao, and more
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK:  
Writing To Save the Planet

BY TOM BEER

Few world figures in recent years have been as inspiring as Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swedish activist who is the face of today’s environmental movement. Her example led tens of thousands of students across Europe to skip school on Fridays to protest government inaction on climate change and still more young people and adults to march in the streets of the world’s cities. She has addressed the United Nations. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. In December, she was named Time magazine’s Person of the Year.

Sixteen of Thunberg’s remarkable speeches were recently collected in No One Is Too Small To Make a Difference (2019). In a starred review, Kirkus called it “a tiny book, not much bigger than a pamphlet, with huge potential impact.”

It’s just one of the dozens of outstanding titles about climate change and the environment that cross our desks here at Kirkus. Even works of fiction—Annie Proulx’s Barkskins (2016) and Richard Powers’ The Overstory (2018) spring to mind—are engaging with the fragility of the natural world and the deleterious human effect upon it. The range and excellence of these books are the raison d’être for this, our first-ever Earth Issue; we aim to highlight some of the best new writing about our planet—and about our efforts to save it.

In these pages, you’ll meet award-winning scientist and writer Hope Jahren, whose new book, The Story of More: How We Got to Climate Change and Where To Go From Here (Vintage, March 3), is drawn from the research she’s done on how human patterns have impacted our planet and the viability of life on it. Anyone who read her memoir, Lab Girl (2016), knows that Jahren has a sharp and appealing voice and an accessible way of writing about abstract problems. The new book is the product of a class she teaches on climate change at the University of Oslo in Norway, where she’s lived since 2016 (“I am worried about the future of science in America,” she explains).

Among the other authors we speak with in this issue: Michael Christie, whose novel Greenwood (Hogarth/Crown, Feb. 25) traces a family and a forest across generations; Allan Drummond, whose new picture book, Solar Story: How One Community Lives Alongside the World’s Biggest Solar Plant (Farar, Straus and Giroux, March 17), is part of his series of books about sustainability for children; and Anuradha Rao, whose YA book One Earth: People of Color Protecting the Planet (Orcar, April 7) correctly positions the activism of Indigenous people and other peoples of color at the forefront of the environmental movement.

Our editors and contributors have also compiled reading lists—encompassing fiction, nonfiction, children’s, and young adult titles—about the Earth, climate change, and climate activism. Although we’re at a distressing crossroad in our planet’s history, it’s stirring to see so much knowledge and creativity applied to this pressing issue. Reading about and understanding the problem is the first—but only the first—step to solving it.

Happy Earth Day.
you can now purchase books online at kirkus.com

CONTENTS
THE EARTH ISSUE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FICTION</th>
<th>YOUNG ADULT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS</td>
<td>INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVIEWS</td>
<td>REVIEWS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDITOR’S NOTE</td>
<td>EDITOR’S NOTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEW: MICHAEL CHRISTIE</td>
<td>INTERVIEW: ANURADHA RAO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROUNDUP: GREAT WORKS OF ECO-FICTION</td>
<td>ROUNDUP: YA BOOKS FOR EARTH DAY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEW: EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL</td>
<td>INTERVIEW: ADI ALSAID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSLATIONS: RICHARD PEVEAR &amp; LARISSA VOLOKHONSKY</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYSTERY</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCIENCE FICTION &amp; FANTASY</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROMANCE</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NONFICTION</th>
<th>INDIE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS</td>
<td>INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVIEWS</td>
<td>REVIEWS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDITOR’S NOTE</td>
<td>EDITOR’S NOTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEW: HOPE JAHREN</td>
<td>INTERVIEW: STEPHEN ERICKSON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROUNDUP: LANDMARK ENVIRONMENTAL BOOKS</td>
<td>SEEN &amp; HEARD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEW: BETTYE KEARSE</td>
<td>APPRECIATIONS: STEPHEN HAWKING’S A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME AT 40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHILDREN’S</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INDEX TO STARRED REVIEWS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVIEWS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDITOR’S NOTE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEW: ALLAN DRUMMOND</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROUNDUP: PICTURE BOOKS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERVIEW: LOIS LOWRY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOTHER’S DAY &amp; FATHER’S DAY PICTURE BOOKS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Robert Putnam returns with *Upswing*, a top-notch addition to the why-America-is-in-such-a-mess genre. Read the review on p. 83.
A Vermont doctor takes a position aboard a cruise ship after the death of her partner.

When we meet Jessie, she is grieving the recent deaths of her mother, her father, and her lover, and she is throwing her vibrator in the trash. Well, “you could hardly donate it to Goodwill for a tax deduction, or pass it down as an heirloom,” and who knows when it will be her turn to die? She doesn’t want her son finding it sitting alongside her VHS tape of Lesbian Hospital. Later that day, a woman’s battered corpse floats up to Jessie’s lakeside house. Enough is enough. With weak connections to her children and zero interest in “spending her twilight years baby-sitting” their offspring, she impulsively accepts a job as a cruise physician, offered by a doctor friend with whom she had an affair long ago. Despite her dour mood, he and others aboard the ship are interested in her—whether or not she will stop obsessively reading her dead lover’s journal and accept these advances, or at least cheer up a little, is the main plot of the book. The most interesting character is a truly awful bitch, the former Miss Florida Power and Light, around whom sex and death promisingly swirl. But when the interesting questions raised in her plotline are left unanswered by the end of the cruise, the reader may be as dissatisfied as everyone else. After several mishaps, “the mood aboard the Amphitrite was glum…Those who were not complete sociopaths had realized that they had been born into Western democracies through no merit of their own. They had paid tens of thousands of dollars to ride this luxury liner, eating and drinking themselves into prediabetic stupors, while others rode capsizing ghost ships, drinking their own urine.”

Barring Titanic stories, this could be one of the most depressing books about a cruise ever written.
THE FALLEN
Álvarez, Carlos Manuel
Trans. by Wynne, Frank
Graywolf (160 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-64445-025-3

A dreamlike yet insightful novel of a family and a country decaying from the inside.

Cuban writer Álvarez’s debut novel is slim yet contains remarkably detailed portraits of a family watching their country’s revolution creep toward failure in the 1990s. Diego, the son, is days away from completing his state-mandated military service. His mother, Mariana, is suffering from mysterious seizures that grip her without any notice. Armando, the patriarch, tries to manage a semiluxurious resort beset with corruption while also being hounded by party officials out for their own enrichment. And María, the daughter, is trying to care for her mother while also working at her father’s resort. The chapters alternate points of view among the family members, providing crystalline insights into each person’s experiences and the family’s overall dynamic. The characters narrate their own chapters and reflect on their lives and society around them. Armando, a stalwart supporter of Fidel and Che, laments the current state of Cuba: “...the hardest times are those when no one wants to do anything, times marked by a crisis of values, a spiritual simplemindedness, too little determination.” Armando, Mariana, Diego, and María all look to their pasts in order to understand the struggles of the present. The reader is pulled into a vivid story that’s tender yet never touches on sentimental. Instead, the book pulses with a vivid realism and humanity that is heightened by Wynne’s poetic translation. The country and the family are both afflicted with a malaise that has seeped into their bones and is hard to shake loose. Armando finds comfort by falling into a revolutionary idealism that fewer and fewer people believe in, Mariana’s seizures provide a perverse means of escape, Diego’s nightly patrols at the military base allow him to fall into the chasm of memory, and the pressures of running the family, if not the business, fall on María. Each member of the family, even the country itself, walks a fine line between happiness and dissolution. Álvarez has written an unnervingly subtle and effective exploration of the cost of blind idealism on families.

SAFE
Barnett, S.K.
Dutton (336 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-5247-4652-0

Jenny Kristal was only 6 when she disappeared while walking to a friend’s house.

Twelve years later, a young woman claiming to be Jenny presents herself to the Long Island police, saying she’d like to go home to her parents, Jake and Laurie, and her older brother, Ben, who was 8 when Jenny went missing. While the FBI isn’t quite satisfied with her story of the mysterious “Mother” and “Father” who abducted her, Jake and Laurie are beside themselves and don’t hesitate to bring Jenny back into the fold. They’re ecstatic that she remembers so much of her childhood with them before her abduction and are eager to get on with their lives. So is Jenny. But Ben has different plans. Jenny’s disappearance took a heavy toll on him, and his welcome is not quite as warm. In fact, his attitude is downright hostile. After years of enduring one horror after another, Jenny fears that her newfound safety and security with her family may be fleeting, and a highly honed sense of self-preservation tells her that something isn’t right in the Kristal house. Someone is slipping in and out of her bedroom during the night, and a cryptic phone call and ominous Facebook messages lead Jenny to believe that she may be in danger. The pseudonymous Barnett takes an all-too-common premise and winds it into a twisty and tense exploration of family secrets, survival, and the often blurred lines between fantasy...
As I write this, the publishing industry is reacting to the spread of COVID-19 by canceling events and telling employees to work from home. People around the country are stockpiling canned food and toilet paper and preparing to spend a lot more time inside for the foreseeable future. If you don’t have a library card, now’s the time to get one: With it, you’ll be able to borrow e-books, audiobooks, and magazines while still socially distancing yourself.

Any of the works of eco-fiction mentioned in our roundup on page 18 would make a great, and timely, choice of reading material, but you might be looking for something a little more, shall we say, diverting. If you haven’t read *Wolf Hall*, that would be a great place to start, especially since *The Mirror & the Light*, the conclusion to Hilary Mantel’s trilogy, has just been published. (See our review on page 21.) While you immerse yourself in Tudor England, you’ll enjoy imagining someone as uber-competent as Thomas Cromwell directing our coronavirus response.

Also on the theme of long and absorbing, Alexander Chee’s *The Queen of the Night* tells the story of a star soprano in 19th-century Paris; read it to scratch that opera itch while live performances are unavailable. Our starred review says: “Richly researched, ornately plotted, this story demands, and repays, close attention.” Or how about Ann Patchett’s *Bel Canto*, which another starred review calls a “remarkably compelling chronicle of a multinational group of the rich and powerful held hostage for months.” There’s an opera singer in there, too, but on second thought, maybe this isn’t the book to take your mind off current conditions.

It would be a good time to discover a new (to you) author with a substantial backlist to dip into; I love recommending Barbara Trapido to people who don’t know her brainy, quirky novels. Our review of *The Traveling Hornplayer* gives a nice description of her work: “Trapido blithely analyzes her people’s sometimes disastrous comings and goings in a bittersweet, often very sexy romance reminiscent of the fiction of Muriel Spark, Beryl Bainbridge, and perhaps Rose Macaulay. But she is triumphantly her own woman.”

Or try Andrea Levy, a British author who chronicled the lives of a generation of Jamaican immigrants. *Small Island* was her fourth novel, but after winning both the Whitbread Book of the Year and the Orange Prize, it became her first to be published in the U.S.

After I read it, I had one of those supremely pleasurable experiences of buying an author’s entire backlist and racing through the whole of it. Our starred review says Levy “draws on her Jamaican background in the alluring story of two couples, one Jamaican and one English, whose paths cross in WWII-era England...An enthralling tour de force.” And if you like it, try the more comic *Fruit of the Lemon*.

I’ve had good luck recommending *The Makioka Sisters* to friends; it seems to be one of those novels not many have heard of but everyone loves once they discover it. Written by Junichiro Tanizaki in the late 1940s and originally published in serial form, it’s like a combination of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Buddenbrooks*. Set a few years earlier, in the time just before World War II, it’s about an aristocratic Osaka family with four daughters as they try to find a husband for the third, Yukiko, and hang onto a way of life that is swiftly vanishing. Tanizaki creates a whole world in his book, and I think you’ll be thrilled to spend time there.

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
and reality and predator and prey. And almost nothing is quite what it seems. Jenny is a shrewd observer of human nature and a frank and dryly humorous narrator, but is she a reliable one? Readers will likely think they know where this runaway train is headed, making the final twists that much more surprising.

A creepy and darkly addictive thriller.

THE VANISHING HALF
Bennett, Brit
Riverhead (352 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-525-53629-1

Inseparable identical twin sisters ditch home together, and then one decides to vanish.

The talented Bennett fuels her fiction with secrets—first in her lauded debut, The Mothers (2016), and now in the assured and magnetic story of the Vignes sisters, light-skinned women parked on opposite sides of the color line. Desiree, the “fidgety twin,” and Stella, “a smart, careful girl,” make their break from stultifying rural Mallard, Louisiana, becoming 16-year-old runaways in 1954 New Orleans. The novel opens 14 years later as Desiree, fleeing a violent marriage in D.C., returns home with a different relative: her 8-year-old daughter, Jude. The gossips are agog: “In Mallard, nobody married dark....Marrying a dark man and dragging his blueblack child all over town was one step too far.” Desiree’s decision seals Jude’s misery in this “colorstruck” place and propels a new generation of flight: Jude escapes on a track scholarship to UCLA. Tending bar as a side job in Beverly Hills, she catches a glimpse of her mother’s doppelgänger. Stella, ensconced in white society, is shedding her fur coat. Jude, so black that strangers routinely stare, is unrecognizable to her aunt. All this is expertly paced, unfurling before the book is half finished; a reader can guess what is coming. Bennett is deeply engaged in the unknowability of other people and the scourge of colorism. The scene in which Stella adopts her white persona is a tour de force of doubling and confusion. It calls up
Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, the book’s 50-year-old antecedent. Bennett’s novel plays with its characters’ nagging feelings of being incomplete—for the twins without each other; for Jude’s boyfriend, Reese, who is trans and seeks surgery; for their friend Barry, who performs in drag as Bianca. Bennett keeps all these plot threads thrumming and her social commentary crisp. In the second half, Jude spars with her cousin Kennedy, Stella’s daughter, a spoiled actress.

Kin “[find] each other’s lives inscrutable” in this rich, sharp story about the way identity is formed.

PARAKEET
Bertino, Marie-Helene
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
(240 pp.)
$26.00  |  Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-374-22945-0

One week before her wedding, The Bride is confronted in her Long Island hotel room by the spirit of her dead grandmother, embodied in the form of a parakeet, who begs her to reconnect with her estranged brother, a reclusive playwright who has made his career by staging the worst moment of The Bride’s own life.

The main character of this self-assured, strange, and winning book is a young woman in the final stages of preparing for her wedding to the groom, an elementary school principal whom she likes because he “doesn’t have to be drunk to dance.” However, as the wedding date approaches, The Bride’s psychological landscape becomes increasingly hazardous, and all her life’s certainties come under review. Following her grandmother’s avian visit, The Bride—who works as a biographer for people with traumatic brain injuries, helping them reconstruct their lives prior to their traumatizing events—travels back into the city to finalize her wedding plans, meet with her current client, pick up a new wedding dress (her original one has been liberally befouled by parakeet granny), and arrange a meeting with her brother, Tom, whose acclaimed play, Parakeet, is back on Broadway. The Bride lost contact with her brother over the course of the 10 years that have passed since their grandmother’s death and her own traumatizing event, a random act of violence that forms the central story of her brother’s play. When she finally does manage to hunt Tom down, she discovers that in those 10 years he has transitioned into Simone and must reenter her life, if she deigns to, as The Bride’s sister. From there—in the bright, prismatic, and fleeting language of the internet age—Bertino traces The Bride’s ping-pong journey in and out of the lives, and sometimes literally the bodies, of her frosty and judgmental mother; her professionally competent best friend; strangers who might be former lovers or alternate versions of herself; parakeet costumed performers who are being paid to reenact the Bride’s past, present, and potential future; and a Japanese lifestyle-blogging reptile in a suit and tie, to name a few of Bertino’s many memorable characters. The book’s linguistic pyrotechnics and the shimmering, miragelike nature of Bertino’s images demand a lot of the reader, but the relatability of The Bride’s honest and earnest attempts to do her best with the uncooperative life she has been given resonate on a deep, perhaps even universal, frequency.

A vivid book about lives visited by violent strangeness but lived with authentic humor and hope.
MRS. LINCOLN’S SISTERS
Chiaverini, Jennifer
Morrow/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-06-297597-3

In 1875, Robert Lincoln committed his mother to an asylum for the insane. How did former first lady Mary Todd Lincoln fall from grace to incarceration at Bellevue Place?

Well known for her extensive Elm Creek Quilts series, Chiaverini now returns to the intimate circles of the political elite during the Civil War era, which she most recently explored with Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker (2013). Leaving behind the often distracting intricacies of quilt- and dressmaking, Chiaverini builds a believable domestic sphere in which the women surrounding Mary—women who have also mourned the losses of husbands and children—try to puzzle out when she began to lose her sanity and whether her griefs truly transcend their own. Each chapter is told from the perspective of a different sister, which leaves Mary's own thoughts and intentions tantalizingly mysterious. Mary's three sisters—Elizabeth, Frances, and Ann—each recall Mary's early life, from being the apple of her father's eye to being banished to boarding school by her uncharmed stepmother to her surprising marriage to Abraham Lincoln. Once the Lincolns moved into the White House, her sisters recall, Mary's quirks, including holding grudges and indulging in shopping sprees, became cause for marital strife and national criticism. The subsequent deaths of three sons, as well as Abe's assassination, plunged Mary into the crisis that eventually led her remaining son, Robert, to have her committed. But as the sisters valiantly try to explain away Mary's eccentric behavior, Mary again descends into paranoia and threats of violence.

An engaging glimpse of women's privilege and anguish during the Civil War era.

THE SECOND HOME
Clancy, Christina
St. Martin's (352 pp.)
978-1-250-23960-0

A single summer at their Cape Cod vacation home shatters the harmony among the three Gordon teenagers, splitting them off on separate, life-altering trajectories.

With its fond descriptions of Cape Cod's land- and seascapes and an evocation of a historic house layered with love and secrets, Clancy's debut clearly has its eye firmly set on the summer-read market. Her family-based story is narrated from the perspectives of Ed and Connie Gordon’s children—daughters Ann and Poppy and son Michael, whom they adopted after his mother died when he was 16. The kindly, pot-smoking Gordon parents are teachers based in Milwaukee, but the family's summers are always spent on the East Coast, in the comfy saltbox house originally owned by the children's great-grandfather. It's there, in 1999, that fractures develop, as Ann starts babysitting for the Shaw family and Poppy begins to break away, to surf and take drugs. Michael, a mistrustful teen with a history of abuse, is attracted to Ann, and his feelings might be reciprocated, but the budding—if inappropriate—attraction between them is eclipsed by an unhealthy relationship that develops between Ann and Anthony Shaw, father of her charges. The older man's pursuit of 17-year-old Ann will lead to a crossroads for her and for Michael, too, as manipulative Anthony enmeshes both of them in an intricate tangle of lies and deception. Clancy's novel rests heavily on this plot point, a not-entirely-solid structure that raises questions of credibility for the remainder of the tale. The story jumps forward to 2015, when a reckoning on the future of the house must be made even though the three siblings are still pulling in different directions. While matters head toward not unexpected resolutions, the immersiveness of this holiday read remains hobbled by cool characters and an implausible plot.

The uninterrupted sunshine of a beach read is clouded by its awkward structure.
Two women risk everything to leave their troubled lives behind.

THE LAST FLIGHT
Clark, Julie
Sourcebooks Landmark (320 pp.)
978-1-7282-1572-3

Two women risk everything to leave their troubled lives behind.

In just a week, Claire Cook’s husband, Rory, will announce his campaign to be a U.S. senator from New York. No surprise there, since his family is chock full of high-profile politicians. As Rory’s wife, the poised and beautiful Claire seems to lead a charmed life, but it’s getting harder to hide the bruises under a carefully cultivated veneer of elegance. Claire tried to leave him once, an attempt that ended with cracked ribs. But this time, she’s ready. She’s been squirreling away cash, she’s secured a fake ID and passport, and a trip to Detroit will provide the perfect opportunity to make her escape. However, before Claire leaves for the airport, Rory decides to send her to Puerto Rico to meet with a humanitarian group instead of going to Detroit. Even worse, Rory goes to Detroit in her place and intercepts the package containing her cash and papers. At JFK, Claire, seemingly by chance, meets Eva, a grieving woman looking to make a new start after her husband’s death. Claire suggests that Eva take her flight to Puerto Rico, and Claire will head to Eva’s home in Berkeley, where she’ll attempt to slip into Eva’s life. After touching down, Claire learns that Eva’s plane crashed and Claire is presumed dead, but she’s not out of the woods yet. Claire cleverly set up a way to keep track of Rory’s messages to his head honcho, and when evidence suggests that Eva might not have actually been on that doomed plane, Claire’s plans take on a new urgency and it’s revealed that Eva’s story masked a dark truth. Propulsive prose drives Clark’s tale of the intersecting lives of these two smart and resourceful women, and emphasis is placed on the importance of female friendship and support. Readers will surely find themselves hopelessly invested in Claire’s and Eva’s ultimate fates.

A tense and engaging woman-centric thriller.

THE END OF THE DAY
Clegg, Bill
Scout Press/Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-4767-9820-2

A web of characters are connected by long-kept secrets, a boxy briefcase, and a once-fabulous mansion in the Connecticut woods.

Dana, Jackie, Lupita, Alice, Hap. How do they all fit together? In rotating vignettes from past and present, Clegg parcels out the clues at a leisurely pace. First we meet Dana Goss, a slim, imperious aging heiress. Suffering from early-onset Alzheimer’s, she keeps forgetting why she’s had herself driven to Connecticut with a monogrammed briefcase full of papers and photos, planning to break the 50-year silence between herself and her childhood best friend. Unfortunately, Jackie, a bitter woman whose fondness for Dana has long since been replaced by fury, won’t even open the door. Next up: Lupita. Daughter of the maid at Dana’s family’s mansion, same age as Dana and Jackie, now living in Hawaii and running a taxi company. Then Alice, of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, age 73: Dana Goss’ aunt was her benefactor and lifelong friend. Alice is holding a baby for the first time in a while—her son and daughter-in-law have dumped their newborn and disappeared. Finally, Hap, the son in question. He was planning to bring his elderly father to meet the new baby, but the man fell down the stairs at his hotel just as Hap was arriving and died a few days later. Hap is about to find out that almost everything he knows about who he is is a lie. Subsequent sections rotate through the characters, uncovering the secret history that binds them together. On the way Clegg dives deep into the inner life of each, exploring the ways our traumas shape our lives. His unhurried, lyrical sentences often make connections...
between the characters’ states of mind and the natural world: “The late day light breaks through and moves in beams and panels across the sky. It dazzles and vanishes, then reappears, flares bright, goes dark again—on and on, like code, as if the sun itself is speaking to her.” This book is sad, but compared to Clegg’s highly acclaimed first novel, Did You Ever Have a Family, it’s a Fourth of July picnic, albeit one that ruins a few characters’ lives. 

A moody, atmospheric domestic drama with a mystery novel somewhere in its family tree.

Italian mysterious Dazieri concludes a trilogy of dark mayhem with a suitably gruesome close.

If Kill the Father (2017) gave us a would-be paterfamilias with whom only Hannibal Lecter would want to exchange Christmas cards and Kill the Angel (2018) introduced readers to the arcana of Indo-European mythology, this concluding volume is a study in PTSD. And for good reason: Colomba Caselli, the enterprising detective heroine, has had just about all she can stand of mass murder, decapitation, and other hallmarks of her trade, and she’s taken herself to the Italian countryside to rest. It’s quiet—too quiet, since the area is full of little towns “inhabited only by old people who rounded out their pensions by hunting

KILL THE KING
Dazieri, Sandrone
Scribner (384 pp.)
$28.00 | May 19, 2020
978-1-5011-7472-8

Returning from a nature sabbatical, a young environmentalist finds almost all of humanity transformed into blissful digital life forms in Grusky’s SF tale.

“The surreal storytelling is evocative of Philip K. Dick, and readers will keep turning the pages, wondering when this utopia will melt down.”
—Booklist

“A bright, excellently thought out, page-turning tale.”
—IndieReader

"Transcendence-seekers will sink blissfully into this fable of how technological liberation from the flesh might lead to mass enlightenment."
—Booklist Reviews

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for truffles.” Yet even there trouble has a way of finding Colomba, in this case in the form of an apparently autistic young man she finds wandering about dazed, covered in blood that is not his own. The lad, she learns, “is perfectly capable of understanding and formulating intent,” which makes him a fine candidate for imprisonment. It would be nice if Dante Torre, Colomba’s partner in crime-solving, were on hand to figure out what’s happened in the quaint confines of Montenegro, but he’s been imprisoned in a “six-story building the size of a public housing block without a single fucking window on the upper floors”—and on the outskirts of Chernobyl, no less. This is no cozy English countryside whodunit: The doings that are afoot are nasty and exceedingly lethal, with a mad truck driver, for instance, mowing down rows of priests and assorted other victims until the festivities come to an end in a huge explosion “slicing like an incandescent scythe through the crowd of running people.” That’s just a taste of the ugliness that people wage on one another throughout the book, which is decidedly not for sensitive souls.

Fans of Larsson and Nesbo will hope that Dazieri changes his mind and extends the Torre/Caselli series.

In pre–World War II Holland, a young woman struggles to understand her sexual identity.

Not long after they meet, Erica and Bea move in together. Erica, a young journalist, is impetuous, outgoing, even wild, while Bea, who narrates this novel, craves stability and security. She works as a secretary. War is overtaking much of Europe; soon, Germany will invade the Netherlands, where Bea and Erica live. A sense of threat pervades this short book that is partly attributable to the politics of the time—while Erica’s father is Jewish, her mother seems to have fascist sympathies (her parents are separated). For the most part, though, de Jong’s focus is narrower: As Bea acquires a male suitor with whom she carries on a lackluster relationship, it quickly becomes clear that there’s more between her and Erica than just friendship. It’s Bea’s inability to face, let alone name, her true sexual desires that drives this spare, elegant, and ultimately haunting novel. De Jong’s book was first published in Dutch in 1954, when it was considered radical for its choice of subject matter. Gehrman’s beautiful new translation returns the book to the spotlight where it belongs. Erica has romantic relationships with women that she is more and more open about, but Bea finds herself entangled in feelings of jealousy, obsession, anxiety, and—while she’s still dragging her boyfriend along—utter boredom. (The couple’s treatment of each other is itself a marvel as they oscillate helplessly between kindness and cruelty.) The tension between what can be said and what must remain unsaid is pulled exquisitely taut: This is a high-wire act no one but de Jong could pull off.

There’s nothing simple about this deceptively spare novel—a jewel hidden in plain sight.
28-year-old English banker—who seems aloof about everything except his job. As they fall into a quasi-relationship, Ava moves into his apartment, where Julian allows her to live rent-free. When Julian leaves for London on an extended work project, Ava meets Edith, a Hong Kong local and ambitious lawyer. With Ava still living in Julian’s apartment, she and Edith fall into a quick friendship that evolves into a relationship. Telling neither the full truth about the other, Ava finds herself falling in love with Edith. During an evening stroll, she thinks: “I didn’t need to know how other women went about being together. I could see it forever, for us: walking through cities, laughing at things that weren’t that funny.” When Julian tells her he’s returning to Hong Kong, she must navigate the precarious situation she’s inadvertently created. Ava—who has struggled throughout the novel to be vulnerable in often maddening ways—must make a decision: live comfortably or live truthfully. Politics, class, and race anxiously hover over the entire novel. After confiding that she called her college savings account her “abortion fund,” she says: “I knew some women who saved with their friends, and they all helped whoever was unlucky. But I didn’t trust anyone....

The richer I got, the harder it would be for anyone to force me to do anything.” Dolan’s preoccupation with power is often couched in humor but always expertly observed. Her elegantly simple writing allows her ideas and musings to shine.

A refreshingly wry and insightful debut.

A STAND-IN FOR DYING
BY RICK MOSKOVITZ

A man agrees to sell his body—literally—in exchange for a better life in this science fiction novel from Moskovitz, the first in a trilogy.

“The author’s commitment to deeply developing his characters—as well hitting them with more than a few twists and turns—cultivates what could merely be an interesting thought experiment into a compelling novel with some emotional heft.”

“An imaginative and soundly executed sci-fi morality tale.” —Kirkus Reviews

Look for the other 2 books in the Brink of Life Trilogy
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For information on publishing and film rights, email rick@brinkoflife.com • www.brinkoflife.com

PIZZA GIRL
Frazier, Jean Kyung
Doubleday (208 pp.)
$24.95 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-385-54572-3

A pregnant pizza delivery girl receives a late-night call from a woman desperate to find a pepperoni-and-pickle pizza, and they strike up an unlikely friendship that begins to border on obsession. In this mumblecore-esque novel, 18-year-old Jane spends her days delivering pizzas to a colorful LA...
An eloquent multigenerational story of a family’s relationships with one another, its neighbors, and a huge patch of old-growth forest in the Pacific Northwest, Michael Christie’s *Greenwood* (Hogarth/Crown, Feb. 25) is a novel with many moving parts and players. At its heart is a young woman named Jacinda—informally, Jake—Greenwood, who, in the year 2038, is a guide in one of the last stands of such ancient trees left in a world that has dried, heated, and gotten crispy around the edges. She learns one day that she’s not just an employee of a giant industrial concern, but instead that the whole of that corporate empire belongs to her, its one true heir. Tracing the path of that legacy on a now-ruined planet takes her into the history of her family—beginning with her mother, who has the nicely woody name of Willow, and stretching back decades into the past.

The novel came to him, Christie tells Kirkus, “as a series of characters orbiting each other. Like many of the characters in my stories, at first it seemed that they didn’t have much to do with each other, except that, as the story took shape in my mind, they would all have something to do with forests, and with trees, and with the human relationship with the natural world.” He couldn’t quite get a handle on just how their orbits would cross and recross until, he recalls, he needed to clear a tree from his property on an island off the coast of Vancouver, Canada.

“I hadn’t done much tree-falling in the past,” he says, “so I borrowed a chain saw, watched some YouTube videos on how to do it, and went to work. The tree came down. It wasn’t a huge tree, maybe 50 years old, but I remember looking at its stump and thinking about the story that it told.” As he did, Christie says, the structure of *Greenwood* fell into place. “I don’t really believe in epiphanies,” he says, “but this certainly seemed to be one.”

Christie had a model in mind, too. “I’m a huge fan of David Mitchell’s,” he says, “and when I read *Cloud Atlas*, I thought, No, no one can possibly do that. But he did. He told a huge, perfect story over great periods of time in different forms, voices, genres. It was dazzling. I had something much simpler in mind: I just wanted to take a family on a journey across time and look at the ways our acts echo long into the future.”

So they do. In *Greenwood*, Willow is indignant to discover that the man she has long believed to be her father (there’s a twist there, as there are many knots and whorls in the story) built a vast fortune from felling more ancient trees than “wind, woodpeckers, and God—put together,” leaving great swaths of clear-cut destruction as testimony to the rapacity of past generations who, it seems, thought that the world’s resources could never be exhausted. The forests have their own wisdom, though. So does Willow. Her daughter, too, is a person of great resourcefulness, a trait that courses
like a comet across the generations that spend one lifetime cutting down trees only to try to undo the damage they have wrought in the next.

When we suggest that Greenwood seems a little less pessimistic than so many other novels of eco-apocalypse, Christie replies, “I think the question is really how much hope we can dare to have. It’s going to be a different world, for sure, the one that’s coming. We’ve caused too much harm for it not to be. It won’t be easy. But I put my faith in small acts, and, yes, I have hope—not blind hope, but a sense of faith in the resilience of people and collective action. I think we’ll survive.” As far as his story goes, he adds, “I want whatever is hopeful in my book to be earned and not merely sentimental.”

There’s enough hope in Greenwood—and enough action, and certainly enough character development—to have drawn the interest of moviemakers, and Christie is now thinking how his story can best be brought to the screen. Then there are the other books he has swirling around in his head—three of them, he reckons, that are now competing with each other for his attention. “I have to decide which one to throw all my energy at,” he says. With luck, finding the answer won’t involve his having to cut down another tree.

Gregory McNamee is a contributing editor.

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clientele that includes Xbox-playing accountants, a crematorium worker, a man with six Chihuahuas, and a “grandma type” who tips her “a single dime.” She’s not wild about her job but grateful that it gets her out of the house, where she feels smothered by her mother’s and boyfriend’s affections. One night, Jane receives a frantic call from stay-at-home mom Jenny Hauser, whose son is upset about the family’s move and is on a hunger strike until he gets a pepperoni-and-pickles pizza just like the one he used to get in Bismarck, North Dakota. The pizza isn’t on the restaurant’s menu, but “pickles were cheap,” so Jane makes her own. This tense and tender novel follows Jane’s increasingly frequent delivery of pizzas to, and her growing fascination with, Jenny in an effort to avoid thinking about her impending motherhood and her fraught relationship with her late father, whom she both resents and resembles. One night, when Jenny tells Jane that her husband got a new job so they have to move to Bakersfield, Jane’s obsession kicks into high gear, leading her to drive to Jenny’s new house in the middle of the night with a Coke can full of whiskey—and a gun in the passenger seat.

A bittersweet bildungsroman about life’s random turns and the struggle to survive in suburban LA.

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THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING
Harrison, Jamie
Counterpoint (304 pp.)
$26.00  | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-64009-234-1

Despite various mysteries and suspicious deaths in this story about a Montana woman uncovering secrets past and present, Harrison wisely concentrates less on plot twists than on exploring the trickiness of memory where love and family are concerned.

Over the course of a week in the summer of 2002, 42-year-old Polly, a married mother of two and sometime editor who helps her husband run his restaurant in Livingston, Montana, finds herself coping with several crises at once. Since a recent bicycle accident, Polly has struggled with memory problems, remembering too much as well as too little. As she prepares for a large family reunion to celebrate her great aunt Maude’s 90th birthday, disjointed images of the past haunt her, and arguments with her mother, Jane—a highly successful historian who’s written about “the eternal nature of stories”—about whether some of Polly’s memories may be false, have exacerbated her fear of losing her mind. Meanwhile, her children’s babysitter, Ariel, is missing and presumed drowned after a kayaking mishap. The tragedy involves Polly and the tight-knit Livingston community first in a search for Ariel, then in mourning, then in uncomfortable suspicions surrounding Ariel’s kayaking companion and apparent boyfriend. Polly’s emotional turmoil is the center of the novel as she fixates not only on Ariel’s death, but also on what exactly happened in 1968, “when her world blew up.” Another layer of understanding comes in chapters in which the 1968 events, extremes of joy and tragedy, are seen through Polly’s limited 7-year-old perspective.
The result is a kaleidoscope of facts and recollections that reveal emotional as well as factual truth only in tantalizing fragments. Some mysteries remain unsolved; others Polly solves, sometimes to her dismay. Through small moments, particularly shared meals and drinks, the reader becomes intimately involved in Polly’s inner life and falls in love with a vividly portrayed Montana devoid of Western clichés.

A sharply intelligent, warmhearted embrace of human imperfection—the kind of book that invites a second reading.

**TEA BY THE SEA**
*Hemans, Donna*
Red Hen Press (256 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-97909-845-8

A young mother goes on a quest to track down the father of her child, who abducted their baby daughter shortly after her birth.

When Plum Valentine is in high school in Brooklyn, her immigrant parents plan a seemingly routine visit to their native Jamaica. Once there, however, the parents insist that Plum stay behind, leaving her at a strict boarding school to keep her from getting into trouble. As it turns out, trouble manages to find the pretty 17-year-old anyway. After Lenworth, a 25-year-old chemistry lab assistant, tutors Plum, the two end up having an illicit relationship. As the novel opens, Plum is in the hospital, recovering from having given birth to their daughter, when she discovers that Lenworth has abducted the baby. Plum realizes she has been abandoned yet again. But that pain pales in comparison to the yawning emptiness she experiences at the loss of her child. Traveling back to Brooklyn, Plum tries to set her life back on a path to normalcy. Determined to find Lenworth and stay in their idyllic small town, but she wanted to explore the world in New York—but now, she’s not so sure that was the right decision. Higgins handles difficult topics with aplomb, mining even the darkest subjects (infidelity, infertility, mortality) with a sense of humor. She resists painting her characters with broad strokes, allowing readers to see the humanity in each person. Sadie and Noah’s love story is angst-filled enough to warrant its own steamy romance novel, but the most touching relationships are the ones Barb has with her daughters and her best friend, Caro, who is Barb’s constant companion as she deals with the fallout of John’s stroke. As Barb puts it, love doesn’t “have to be romantic to encircle you in its arms.”

A masterful exploration of all kinds of love—romance, family, and friendship—that will make even a cynic cry.

**LAST TANG STANDING**
*Ho, Lauren*
Putnam (416 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-593-18781-4

A woman in her 30s contends with her family’s expectations as she navigates career and romance in Singapore.

Andrea Tang is 33 and single, much to her mother’s chagrin. Andrea knows her family expected her to be married with children by now, but she’s still reeling from a nasty breakup with her long-term boyfriend, Ivan, and is more concerned with
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For better or for worse, we’re living in a boom time for novels about the fate of our planet. Troubling news about climate change has prompted many writers to imagine the harm that’s being done to the planet—and might be done yet. But it’s also inspired them to delve more deeply into questions about what human resilience will look like in a crisis. These five novels all look at the planet and the environment from a perspective that’s critical of our past actions but not ready to give up.

**Stay and Fight** by Madeline Fitch (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019): Fitch’s powerful and offbeat 2019 debut novel is set among a group of back-to-the-landers in Appalachian Ohio, where fracking has unsettled the surrounding land, particularly the homestead of three women trying to raise a child there. Fitch understands how a disrupted environment creates toxins that are both environmental and social—the drilling impacts parenting, economics, gender, and more. As the child’s future comes into question, the novel becomes a tense pit- ted battle between survivalists and the forces of business and government that seem determined to undermine them.

**Deep River** by Karl Marlantes (Atlantic Monthly, 2019): Marlantes’ second novel is a sweeping family saga set amid Oregon’s logging industry, whose success in the early 20th century came on the backs of immigrant workers who were often underpaid and mistreated. In response to this injustice, the novel’s spitfire heroine, Finnish immigrant Aino, becomes a union organizer who’s alternately maddening and inspiring to those around her. Marlantes explores this dynamic of labor, land, and politics with close research and a page-turner’s pacing—plus an eye on contemporary populism—revealing how greed imperils the land and people alike.

**A Children’s Bible** by Lydia Millet (Norton, May 12): Eco-fiction dystopias often make our climate future outright calamities of tidal waves and massive tree die-offs. Millet, who’s researched and written on the environment in addition to being a celebrated fiction writer (she’s been a Pulitzer and NBCC finalist), knows what’s coming is likely to be more subtle, and the slow-motion collapse she imagines in her latest novel is what makes it so harrowing. Set in an enclave of wealthy adults deluding themselves that they can escape intensifying storms, the novel centers on the children who see the crisis more clearly and are forced to grow up in a hurry. In the process, Millet shows how readily we can descend into fear, tribalism, and violence.

**The Old Drift** by Namwali Serpell (Hogarth/Crown, 2019): The far-reaching, long-lasting consequences of colonialism are at the heart of Serpell’s brilliant, multifaceted debut. Starting in the late 1800s with British colonists in Zambia, the story zips across the 20th century and into the near future to cover political revolutions, institutional violence, AIDS, and ever more invasive technologies, which dehumanize everyone but most fully exploit the poorest people outside of the West. “Black people have always made great guinea pigs,” one character says, and the whole novel is a vibrant visualization of that idea and a ferocious critique of it.

**Gold Fame Citrus** by Claire Vaye Watkins (Riverhead, 2015): Watkins’ debut novel is a stark and unusual romance set in a future California that’s been ravaged by depleted water supplies. The Mad Max–ish setup has its moments of violence and desperation, but the novel mostly operates at a more intimate register, following a couple caring for an abandoned child in an ever expanding desert. As they travel, Watkins writes thoughtfully about what faith and family will look like in an environment that’s shifting to the very edge of uninhabitability.

Mark Athitakis is the author of The New Midwest and a regular contributor to Kirkus.
making partner at her law firm than getting engaged. Readers who enjoy their heroines' booze-soaked and battle-worn—especially when the battle is being waged against society's expectations of women, unfair treatment of women in the workplace, and judgmental aunts—will find hard for fierce yet flawed Andrea. While the diary entries sometimes rely too heavily on dialogue and not enough on Andrea's own thoughts, her inner monologue is the perfect combination of hilariously brash and undeniably honest. She navigates a disastrous one-night stand, her mother's outspoken disapproval of her lifestyle and relationship status, and her best friend's soap-opera dalliance with a married man with snark levels reminiscent of Bridget Jones herself. Of course, despite clocking 15-hour days at the office and eschewing Tinder, Andrea soon finds herself in a romantic entanglement or two. She unexpectedly connects with extremely eligible bachelor Eric Deng at a lavish book club meeting (complete with outlandish cocktail attire, overflowing champagne flutes, and sashimi freshly sliced by a smiling chef) hosted at his *Architectural Digest*-worthy home. Eric courts Andrea with fresh bouquets, pricey handbags, and fancy dinners, but she isn't sure whether she can truly commit to the much older, much richer businessman—especially since she still hasn't figured out why she is so drawn to her engaged work rival, Suresh Adipparan, and his popular webcomic series.

*Vintage King* is a pleasure for his many fans and not a bad place to start if you’re new to him.

**THE FAMILY CLAUSE**
Khemiri, Jonas Hassen
*Trans. by Menzies, Alice*
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-374-13432-7

A patriarch’s visit to his adult children triggers some lingering stresses and pushes everyone to a breaking point.

Khemiri’s fifth novel and third to be translated into English tracks 10 emotionally stressful days in the life of one family in Stockholm. Twice a year the “grandfather” (characters are identified solely by their familial roles) comes to the city to visit his son and daughter; but his arrival is treated like that of a coming storm. He’s casually bigoted, critical of nearly everyone he interacts with, and his visits seem less loving than strategic: His son maintains a flat for him to stay in so he can claim Swedish residency and dodge taxes in his (unnamed) home country. The son is thinking of breaking this “father clause,” but he’s long been timid and indecisive and is now ground down as a stay-at-home dad to a 4-year-old and a 1-year-old. (There are multiple attenuated scenes of him stressfully prepping the tots for the day; true to Scandinavian literary fiction standards, bowel movements are prominent.) Nearby, the daughter, who’s pregnant, is having second thoughts about her boyfriend, a know-it-all film buff stuck in a job as a PE teacher. The son has spent years uncertain about his career direction (on this tumultuous week he’s giving stand-up comedy a try), and a prominent theme in the novel is men’s need for approval from their fathers and the various ways they suffer from that need. Khemiri’s shifting perspectives across characters (including, at one point, that of a ghost) effectively conjure up a mood of dread, which intensifies as we learn more about the grandfather’s third child and the circumstances of her death. But the novel’s climactic plot turns are mild in comparison to the foreboding tone that precedes them; the concluding feeling is less of things coming to a head than a general muddling through.

*A original and psychologically rich tale in need of a bit of some drama to match.*

**IF IT BLEEDS**
King, Stephen
Scribner (448 pp.)
$30.00 | May 5, 2020
978-1-9821-3797-7

The master of supernatural disaster returns with four horror-laced novellas. The protagonist of the title story, Holly Gibney, is by King’s own admission one of his most beloved characters, a “quirky walk-on” who quickly found herself at the center of some very unpleasant goings-on in *End of Watch*, *Mr. Mercedes*, and *The Outsider*. The insect-licious proceedings of the last are revisited, most yukily, while some of King’s favorite conceits turn up. What happens if the dead are never really dead but instead show up generation after generation, occupying different bodies but most certainly exercising their same old mean-spirited voodoo? It won’t please TV journalists to know that the shape-shifting bad guys in that title story just happen to be on-the-ground reporters who turn up at very ugly disasters—and even cause them, albeit many decades apart. Think Jack Torrance in that photo at the end of *The Shining*, and you’ve got the general idea. “Only a coincidence, Holly thinks, but a chill shivers through her just the same,” King writes, “and once again she thinks of how there may be forces in this world moving people as they will, like men (and women) on a chessboard.” In the careful-what-you-wish-for department, *Rat* is one of those meta-referential things King enjoys: There are the usual hallucinatory doings, a destiny-altering rodent, and of course a writer protagonist who makes a deal with the devil for success that he thinks will outsmart the fates. No such luck, of course. Perhaps the most troubling story is the first, which may cause iPhone owners to rethink their purchases. King has gone a far piece from the killer clowns and vampires of old, with his monsters and monstrosities taking on far more quotidian forms—which makes them all the scarier.

*Vintage King* is a pleasure for his many fans and not a bad place to start if you’re new to him.
A STAR IS BORED
Lane, Byron
Henry Holt (352 pp.)
978-1-250-26649-1

In the dynamic partnership that is Hollywood icon and celebrity assistant, who needs whom more?
This debut novel, based loosely on the author’s own experiences as a celebrity assistant, quickly establishes normalcy as a fluid concept. Normal for Charlie, a news writer in LA, is defined by working the graveyard shift and regularly contemplating suicide. Open to any opportunity to hit reset on his life, he takes a lead from intolerable executive assistant Bruce, whom he met at a gay bar and now hate-follows on social media. Kathi Kannon, star of cult-favorite film Nova Quest, is looking for an assistant. Charlie soon finds himself far outside his comfort zone, buzzing the intercom of his childhood idol. His call is answered with a curt “HURRY!” and the gate opens to his new life. Kathi’s world is, in a word, chaos, and Charlie—now dubbed rather salaciously as Cockring—is tasked with establishing a routine. As in: “feed her, water her, medicate her.” Turns out, Charlie was not left with an Assistant Bible, the invaluable tool that helps new assistants navigate a life to which they could never relate. Deciphering Kathi is a 24-hour task (“KATHI: I urgently need teeth splinter barfs... ME: Toothpicks, you need toothpicks?... KATHI: Horrible twat”), and their dynamic will be as amusing for the reader as it is all-consuming for Charlie. Duality is a key theme of this relationship, as Kathi not-so-subtly becomes a second mother figure to Charlie after helping him realize the absurd tragedy of his childhood (“[Your mom] died in a fucking church?!”). At the same time, entranced by Kathi’s Hollywood shine, Charlie rationalizes the absurdity in her daily life in a way that leaves him blind to her shadows. Kathi and Charlie’s story is one of addiction—mostly to other people and what they can add to your life. Their story is also deeply human, relatable in the most unrelatable way. Bravo to Lane, who deftly navigates the complexity of inner and outer lives as well as the many facets of normal. Add this to the Assistant Bible: A famous person’s boredom is another person’s saving grace.

Larger-than-life characters drive this charming, hilarious, and memorable debut.

WHAT WE TAKE FOR TRUTH
BY DEBORAH NEDELMAN

Is there a path out of a forest of betrayal?

"...a permanent home on my bookshelf... displayed proudly and fittingly between Brian Doyle’s Mink River and Ken Kesey’s Sometimes a Great Notion."
—Heather Dumann, author of Going Feral

“An impressive environmental tale with an engaging heroine from a talented new novelist.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

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—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

For information on publishing and film rights, email djnemelman@gmail.com  |  www.DeborahNedelman.com

BROKEN PEOPLE
Lansky, Sam
Hanover Square Press (304 pp.)
$26.99  |  Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-335-01393-4

Can a weekend with a shaman help a tortured writer find inner peace?
Lansky follows The Gilded Razor (2016), a memoir of his misspent youth, with a work of autofiction that recounts the further adventures of a character named Sam with the same backstory. Neither recovery nor writing a memoir nor a move to Los Angeles has proved to be the key to mental health for Sam, who is so filled with self-doubt and self-loathing he can hardly leave the house or entertain a simple hookup. Fortunately, he somehow manages to attend a dinner party where he overhears someone say “He fixes everything that’s wrong with you in three days.” His rich friend Buck makes arrangements to take a course with the healer in question and offers to take Sam along. At first, he’s doubtful. “Is it problematic to work with a white shaman who’s like, appropriating the teachings and practices of an indigenous culture for personal gain?” Sam asks his best friend, Kat. “Definitely,” she tells him. “But life is a late-capitalist hellscape, so your mystical journey might as well be one, too.” The novel is strongest in its humorous moments. Sam’s experience on ayahuasca turns out to involve reliving in detail a series of messy relationships with men he loved in the past, which is not all that interesting, but it culminates in an intense spiritual experience which...
The end comes for Thomas Cromwell—and for the brilliant trilogy about his life.

*THE MIRROR & THE LIGHT*

Mantel, Hilary

Henry Holt (784 pp.)

$30.00 | Mar. 10, 2020

978-0-8050-9660-6

The end comes for Thomas Cromwell—and for the brilliant trilogy about his life that began with *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012).

“Once the queen’s head is severed, he walks away”: With this perfect sentence, Mantel plunges into the scene of Anne Boleyn’s execution, and there’s no need to spell out who “he” is. On the second page, the executioner, who was brought over from France, refers to him as Cremuel (“No Frenchman can ever pronounce his name”), and finally, a few paragraphs later, when the swordsman is showing off the special blade he used on the queen, “he, Cromwell, touches a finger to the metal.” And we’re off, knowing that by the end it would be more compelling if Lansky had not chosen to call this a novel. Instead, we have an imaginary person healing imaginary damage with an imaginary drug experience, which seems to be a failure of nerve. To make this type of narrative interesting and meaningful, the psychedelic healing experience should be asserted as fact, as Ayelet Waldman did in *A Really Good Day*. If it’s all made up, who cares?

This fervent testimony to the healing powers of ayahuasca would have been more powerful if published as nonfiction.
Emily St. John Mandel’s new novel, The Glass Hotel (Knopf, March 24), may dramatize large-scale financial fraud, but it’s definitely not about disgraced financier Bernie Madoff, the author cautions. Instead, a Madoff-like Ponzi scheme provides Mandel a point of departure for a much bigger—and stranger—novel about how the decisions we make affect not just our own lives, but the lives of everyone around us.

“I was fascinated by the Madoff story,” says Mandel. “What interested me about Madoff was that he had a staff who also went to prison. It takes a team to execute a massive financial crime, and I just found myself thinking, Who are these people?”

Mandel’s fictional financial adviser, Jonathan Alkaitis, also has a team of enablers on his staff. As Alkaitis’ scheme unravels and the feds close in, we hear from his staff in a haunting Greek chorus of guilt, shame, and defensiveness.

But the real heart of this novel lies with Alkaitis’ companion, Vincent, a young female bartender and filmmaker invited into Alkaitis’ “kingdom of money.” Unbeknownst to Vincent, Alkaitis’ kingdom is little more than smoke and mirrors.

Alkaitis’ fraud throws Vincent’s life—and the lives of countless others—into chaos. In prison, he is haunted by those who had the most to lose—their money, their reputations, even their lives. “Once I started writing this book, I realized that I always wanted to write a ghost story. It’s just a genre that I love,” says Mandel.

“We tend to think of ghost stories in a classical sense. You know, the hooded luminous specter looming down the hallway in the creepy Victorian mansion,” she says. “But it can be interesting to think about different ways of being haunted.

“It seems to me every point in our life is some kind of inflection point,” she continues. “You could go one way or the other. We choose A instead of B, B instead of C. But, you know, you make a different decision, and you’re in a completely different life. And I like the idea of our lives being haunted by the ghosts of the lives we didn’t live.”

The kaleidoscopic structure of The Glass Hotel offers glimpses into these ghostly alternate realities, shifting backward and forward in time, in and out of the “real” world of the novel. Major characters recede into the background, and peripheral ones step into the spotlight. Like Station Eleven, it’s not clear how all the narratives will connect until the final pages.

Despite being a relatively fast novel writer, the structural feat of The Glass Hotel took Mandel years to pull off. “With Station Eleven, I had this inherently dramatic premise,” she says. “What if a flu pandemic wipes out most of life on Earth? You plug that into the plot machine and press go. With The Glass Hotel, it took me a really long time to find the heart of the book.”

Mandel also felt pressure to deliver a strong follow-up to Station Eleven, which won the Toronto Book Award and was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner.
“This is the least sympathetic problem in the entire world,” says Mandel, her voice brimming with wry good humor as she describes an “awareness at all times of this invisible audience peering over my shoulder.” Even though Mandel knew her newfound self-consciousness was self-imposed, it slowed the prolific writer down.

“People were waiting for this book in a way that they hadn't been waiting for anything else I’d ever written,” she adds.

As publication day nears, Mandel is still unravelling the intricacies of The Glass Hotel. She’s currently writing the pilot of the TV series, which was picked up by NBCUniversal International Studios. In order to learn more about structuring her story for television, Mandel is working with veteran screenwriter Semi Chellas, who earned two Emmy nominations for her work co-writing episodes of Mad Men.

“Writing for screen, it’s just a completely different level of tension that you need to keep it interesting. Every scene has to have so much going on in it,” says Mandel.

“Another reason I wanted to write the pilot for The Glass Hotel goes back to your very first question about the pressure following Station Eleven,” she adds. “I thought it would be really nice to just be completely distracted by something else, like so distracted I couldn’t think about the book coming out. And, I gotta say, it’s working really well.”

Kristen Evans reviews fiction for Kirkus and writes about culture for BuzzFeed, the Los Angeles Times, the New Republic, NYLON, and others. The Glass Hotel received a starred review in the Dec. 15, 2019, issue.
father’s death and his mother’s refusal to leave North Carolina. She married Preston, the tobacco farmer who rescued her from the wreck. The remainder of Frank’s childhood was spent in Preston’s house, near the tracks—the house that Shelley now occupies. Lil’s notes, spanning decades, reveal Frank’s infidelity and their eventual reconciliation. Death permeates this starkly honest tale, unleavened by McCorkle’s usual humor. Frank is still obsessed with the funerary customs and afterlife mythology he once studied. Harvey is transfixed by morbidity. Shelley harbors conflicting sentiments about justifiable homicide. Lil rails against Frank’s growing fatalism.

Gathers layers like a snowball racing downhill before striking us in the heart with blunt, icy force.

**AN ELEGANT WOMAN**
McPhee, Martha
Scribner (416 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-5011-7957-0

A family’s myths become a treasured legacy.

“How is a person made?” the young Katherine Stewart asks her older sister, Tommy. “I mean a life,” she adds, “growing up, understanding who you are and what you want. How does that happen?” That is the essential, vexing question that pervades McPhee’s thoughtful, gently told novel about the ways a family’s past shapes each generation. Tommy’s granddaughter Isadora finds the stories irresistible: A writer, she bases her novels on biographies of real people, just as McPhee has done here, drawing on her own family history. Central to the novel are Tommy and Katherine, cowed by poverty, neglected by their impetuous mother, Glenna, and longing to escape a circumscribed life. Throughout their childhood, they find themselves “elaborating and embellishing” colorful family fables, handed down by Glenna, until both felt that they “had lived not only their brief lives, but also in memories that began long before they were born.” Their own lives change dramatically in 1910 when Glenna leaves her adulterous husband, taking her daughters from their home in Ohio to Montana, where she cajoles and flirts her way into being hired as a teacher—pretending to be single, soon foisting her girls on a kindhearted childless couple. She returns after 2 years, sweeping up her daughters once again to accompany her as she continually reinvents herself. As the sisters grow up, they confront the question Katherine asked as a child: how to know who you are. McPhee underscores her characters’ evolving identities by playing with names: Tommy was born Thelma; Katherine calls herself Kate and, later, Pat; and these names, too, change—sometimes confusingly—as the narrative spins out and each sister grapples, more or less successfully, with the possibility of self-creation. “Sometimes it feels good to pretend,” Tommy reflects, “to be the person you desire, to believe you can have what you please, that what you say is the truth.”

Delicately rendered characters inform a richly textured family portrait.

**MORE MIRACLE THAN BIRD**
Miller, Alice
Tin House (360 pp.)
$25.95 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-947793-76-7

An atmospheric novel conjures up Georgie Hyde-Lees, the woman whose automatic writing is credited with enabling poet W.B. Yeats’ late work, a clever, rational, sympathetic figure in her own right.
Indulged by her alcoholic father and disapproved of by her stern mother, Georgie emerges, as Miller’s debut opens, as an independent-minded, questioning young woman living in London in a pre-feminist era. It’s 1916, and, keen to help with the war effort, Georgie has taken on a menial hospital job, tending to wounded officers, that comes with the useful benefit of lodgings that liberate her from her mother’s home while also allowing her to pursue her interest in spiritualism and see friends at will. These friends include the poets Ezra Pound, who will marry Georgie’s best friend, and W.B. Yeats, an Irishman twice her age who shares her interest in mediums and séances and will introduce her to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. An unspoken moment of intensity between Yeats and Georgie leads to an assumption that they will marry, yet Yeats seems distant and is rumored to still be seeking a marriage with the woman he has pursued for decades, Maude Gonne. Miller draws an empathetic—if loosely paced—portrait of Georgie, a young woman seeking certitude and intellectual satisfaction in a confusing landscape of war, mysticism, supposed intellectuals, and affairs of the heart. The latter are complicated by the attentions of one of the wounded officers and the comments of a medium who suggests Yeats has three possible women to choose from. Meeting that third woman—Isolde Gonne, Maude’s daughter—at one of Yeats’ parties, Georgie gains clarity on several matters, including her own naivety, and flees London. But neither the spirits nor the menfolk have quite finished with her.

Subtle and low-key, Miller’s debut coolly appraises the poet while fully inhabiting the woman in his shadow.
Mitchell returns with a gritty, richly detailed fable from rock's golden age.

**UTOPIA AVENUE**

*To be published June 2, 2020*

Noted novelist Mitchell returns with a gritty, richly detailed fable from rock's golden age.

There's no time-hopping, apart from a brief epilogue set in the present, or elegant experiments in genre-busting in Mitchell's latest novel, his first since *Slade House* (2015). Oh, there are a couple of winking references to *Cloud Atlas* (2004), which here takes the form of “overlapping solos for piano, clarinet, cello, flute, oboe and violin,” and ace rock 'n' roll guitarist Jasper de Zoet is eventually revealed to descend from the eponymous hero of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010). Mostly, though, we're on realistic ground not seen since *Black Swan Green* (2006), and Mitchell digs deep in his saga of how two top-of-their-form players—de Zoet and ill-fated bassist Dean Moss—recruit an unlikely keyboardist and singer in the form of an ethereal folkie named Elf Holloway, who goes electric and joins them in a band that Jasper deems “Pavonine… Magpie-minded. Subterranean.” The usual stuff of rock dramas—the ego clashes, the drugs, the hangers-on, and record-company parasites—is all there, but Mitchell, who wasn't born when Utopia Avenue's putative first album was released, knows exactly which real-life musicians to seed into the story: There's Gene Clark of The Byrds, for example, who admires a guitar figure of Jasper’s (“So that's an F major seventh?…I call it 'F Demented'”). Janis Joplin, Leonard Cohen, Syd Barrett, Jackson Browne, and Jerry Garcia turn up (as does, decades later, the brilliant band Talk Talk, acknowledging a debt to the Utopians). There's even a highly learned if tossed-aside reference to how the Stones' album *Let It Bleed* earned its name. Bone spurs and all, it's realistic indeed and just the thing for pop music fans of a bygone era that's still very much with us.

Those whose musical tastes end in the early 1970s—and literary tastes are up to the minute—will especially enjoy Mitchell's yarn.

**TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE**

*To be published May 26, 2020*

A single mom and her 11-year-old daughter, who are trying to start over, move to a small New England town, but it's harder to leave their pasts behind than they thought.

Sherri Griffin has just moved to Newburyport, Massachusetts, with her daughter, Katie, and has somehow gotten her a spot in one of the more coveted summer surf day camps, much to the surprise of the long-term town moms. The first day of camp marks the beginning of Sherri's and Katie's individual efforts to make new friends and redefine themselves—Sherri among the Mom Squad, aka The Group, which rules the social scene among the rising sixth grade parents in their little town, and Katie among those moms' daughters. Author Moore offers a relatively standard narrative structure of rotating between a number of main characters' points of view to tell the story. In addition to Sherri and her murky past, there is Rebecca Coleman, a second grade teacher on summer break who is struggling with grief over the sudden death of her husband 18 months before, guilt over her desire to make new friends and start dating, and irritation at her old friends; and Alexa Thornhill, Rebecca's 17-year-old daughter, who is planning for her post-high school future on her terms and not those of her mother. Refreshingly, however, Moore also employs a breezy style to share the gossipy feel of the groupthink of the Mom Squad as an additional point of view. This is a book that tiptoes between genres. Is it a mystery? A thriller? A teen coming-of-age exegesis? A beach
read that leans into a potential romantic fairy-tale ending? Surprisingly, the story elements that successfully create narrative tension and draw the reader through the volume are discarded at the close. Instead, the reader is given an ending that is as capricious as life itself.

A crackling narrative that starts strong and ends abruptly.

THE CITY OF TEARS
Mosse, Kate
Minotaur (560 pp.)
$27.99 | May 26, 2020
978-1-250-20218-5

In this follow-up to The Burning Chambers, (2019) Mosse’s characters endure the horrors of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre, in which the Huguenots—members of the French Protestant minority—were attacked by Catholics.

Minou Reydon, the Huguenot protagonist of Chambers, and her husband, Piet, are now, in 1572, the nobility in residence at Château de Puivert in Languedoc after having wrested it from a usurper. Minou’s entire extended family lives in the castle, including her brother, Aimeric, sister, Alis, and her Aunt Salvadora. Minou and Piet have two children, precocious 7-year-old Marta and toddler Jean-Jacques. The family’s idyll is about to be interrupted, though. Piet’s former friend Vidal, now a Catholic cardinal, is scheming to carry out grudges against both Minou and Piet, one long-standing and one very recent: Vidal has suspicions about Piet’s lineage that he is determined to both confirm and conceal. The Reydons’ troubles begin when they leave Puivert to attend a royal wedding in Paris. Marguerite, the Catholic daughter of Catherine de’ Medici, is to marry Henri, the Huguenot king of Navarre, who will one day accede to the throne of France. Many hope that the match will signal a truce in the religious strife that has rocked France for decades. However, certain renegade Catholics, led by the Duke of Guise and abetted by Vidal, plan a limited strike on key Huguenots in town for the wedding. But the violence spreads until a mob has murdered
Doctor, writer, restless traveler: Anton Chekhov packed a lot of living into his 44 years. Among other things, he was a keen observer of the people with whom he came into contact, whether tubercular patients, convicts in the deep forests of Siberia, or bon vivants in the seaside resort of Yalta, where he lived. He wrote dozens of short stories, asserting to a friend, “What makes literature art is precisely its depiction of life as it really is. Its charge is the unconditional and honest truth.”

Chekhov’s stories are among the best work in the entire world corpus of short fiction. The new anthology Fifty-Two Stories (Knopf, April 16), selected and translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, represents the Russian writer at his greatest, and it highlights his various approaches to storytelling, from matter-of-fact to satirical and downright comic.

Pevear and Volokhonsky have been working at the art and craft of translation since the 1970s. As Pevear tells Kirkus from the couple’s home in Paris, “I more or less married into Russian when I married Larissa. Russian was always being spoken among friends in our house. Our children grew up speaking Russian as well as English. So I acquired an almost native feeling for the language.”

Their collaboration as translators began, Pevear adds, when he was reading a new translation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s Brothers Karamazov. Volokhonsky began reading a Russian edition in parallel, came across a thorny passage, and asked him, “How did they translate this?” She looked at the English and said, “Ah, I see—they didn’t!”

That omission set them on a new course of translating the Russian classics, including Leo Tolstoy’s novel Anna Karenina—indisputably one of the greatest books in any language—and smaller but still challenging works such as the short stories of Nikolai Leskov, which turn on proverbs, folk wisdom, old fairy tales and, as Pevear says, “are deeply embedded in Russian language, in Russian speech, in play on words and voicing.”

A native Russian, Volokhonsky begins the process of translation by making a literal, word-by-word trot through the entire text, annotating any ambiguitiies or particularities of style or word choice. Pevear then makes a complete second version from the first, one that is “literary” to the extent that the original is. Volokhonsky edits that translation, comparing it again to the original Russian text, and returns it to Pevear with additional changes. “The result is a ‘final’ version,” says Pevear, “that goes to the publisher and then comes back to us two or three times in the form of editors’ queries and page proofs.” Adds Volokhonsky, “At the final stage, too, Richard reads it aloud and I follow with the original. It is important to hear how it sounds.”

What is also important, Pevear remarks, is to produce a text that brings Russian and English into conversation, allowing the English to be influenced as much as possible by the Russian, as with a tale in
Fifty-Two Stories that begins, “The woodturner Grigori Petrov, long known as an excellent craftsman and at the same time as the most good-for-nothing peasant in the whole Galchinsky district, is taking his sick old wife to the local hospital.” It’s not quite idiomatic American English; instead, you can hear the Russian underneath it, which is precisely the effect that the translators want to convey. Says Pevear, “Translation should enrich the language of arrival.”

There are difficulties in getting to just the right words, too. As Volokhonsky notes, Russian speech is full of endearments and curses that have no precise equivalent in English. So worldly a writer as Chekhov presents further difficulties with the specialized language of “hunting, card playing, horses’ harnesses, qualities of dog breeds, and so on.” One thing seems true, she adds, and that’s to mistrust what seems superficially easy: “Usually simplicity turns out to be very complex,” she says.

What does it take to be a translator? The two enumerate some desired qualities, including skill at reading and writing—and, adds Volokhonsky, “extensive experience in reading all sorts of books from different periods and styles.” Maturity and life experience help, too.

Pevear and Volokhonsky select the books they wish to translate and shop them around, with a few exceptions, such as their translation of Boris Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago, which Pantheon commissioned. Next on their list is another book of Chekhov’s, a collection of his one-act plays. It’s a challenge, says Pevear, adding, “That’s the trouble with perfection.”

Nesser’s novel follows its young narrator through a series of traumatic events over the course of one summer. When a book begins with the line “I’m going to tell you about a tragic and terrible event that marked my life,” it sets up some high expectations. Nesser balances a good sense of place with a feeling of impending doom, turning nostalgia on its head. Teenage narrator Erik, his friend Edmund, and Erik's 22-year-old brother, Henry—who's working on an “unexpected and eerie” novel—spend their summer near an idyllic lake in rural Sweden. The year is 1962, and Erik and Henry's mother is slowly dying of cancer back in their hometown. Before their departure, in the waning days of the school year, they encountered new substitute teacher Ewa, who looks like the actress Kim Novak and is engaged to Berra, a prominent athlete with a violent streak. Not long after the boys arrive for their summer vacation by the lake, they discover that Henry and Ewa are having an affair. Erik’s warning of terrible things to come and the presence in the narrative of numerous Agatha Christie novels all act as blatant foreshadowing. When Berra turns up dead, that event dramatically shifts the mood of the book. There are a few idioms which, in Vogel's translation, feel decidedly American in this very Swedish novel, including the phrase “It is what it is,” which Erik ponders. As Nesser burrows further into this fictional world, though, as when Erik declares himself part of a clique known as “the anti-soccer crowd,” the novel's idiosyncrasies become more charming.

While its pacing is uneven, Nesser’s novel gains in power as it raises difficult questions about memory and morality.
NIGHT. SLEEP. DEATH. THE STARS.
Oates, Joyce Carol
Ecco/HarperCollins (800 pp.)
$29.99 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-06-279758-2

An already frayed family disintegrates in the wake of a tragedy.

Oates doesn’t always write long, but when she does, as in *The Accursed* (2013), the story enfolds a wealth of detail. Whether all of it is necessary is debatable. In this instance, John Earle McLaren, a respected elder in a small New York town, formerly its mayor, stops to admonish two cops who are rousting a “dark-skinned” motorist. Tased to the ground, McLaren spends what’s left of his life in the hospital, though it takes a few signatures for Oates to finish him off. The event draws together his very different children, who had always “contended for the father’s attention.” It wasn’t that Whitey, as he was widely known, was a cold fish so much as he was committed to the notion of being self-sufficient—and secretive, too, as the hidden bank accounts that turn up after his passing demonstrate. Meanwhile, daughter Beverly in particular is incensed that the siblings she regards as unworthy receive equal shares of the inheritance while Jessalyn, their mother, is set for life. Death pulls brothers and sisters together and apart. The most likable (and completely realized) character is son Virgil, who disconsolately flirts with death himself—“He’d drowned, but not died. Died, but was still here.” Daughter Lorene, too, a high school principal, undergoes a transformation that makes her at once more vulnerable and more human. Oates’ storyline would be the stuff of comedy in other hands—think of the recent movie *Knives Out*, for instance—but she makes of it a brooding, thoughtful study of how people respond to stress and loss, which is not always well and not always nicely. Yet, somehow, everyone endures, some experience unexpected happiness, and the story ends on a note that finds hope amid sorrow and division.

Long and diffuse, but, as with all Oates, well worth reading.

THE VOTER FILE
Pepper, David
Putnam (432 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-593-08393-2

Nefarious forces try to rig American elections in this highly plausible political thriller.

In Wisconsin, investigative reporter Jack Sharpe loses his job reporting for Republic News on TV. Saddled with a noncompete agreement, he freelances for newspapers and really needs a big story. Luckily, Tori Justice wants to tell him hers. She was the voter file manager for a local judge who won a special election even though “there’s no conceivable way” he could have won. Voter files are even “better than polling,” because they contain a huge amount of personal data on every voter collected by state and national parties, from voting records to magazine subscriptions to the ads people click on. Perhaps someone has hacked the voter files and rigged the election, but who? How? Why? Readers soon learn that this is a test case for a scheme that’s “a lot bigger than Wisconsin,” involving “at least one Albanian mobster” and other foreign criminals who intend to rig a presidential election. Their methods will be undetectable, so losing campaigns will be written off as having been run by incompetents. But when Justice exports the Wisconsin data for Sharpe, the European perps are still monitoring the computer, so they know someone could be on to them. Sharpe is sharp, so he knows that whoever is behind this is dangerous. Indeed, there are enough murders, tension, and fast pacing to check this story off as a thriller. Readers likely won’t find many surprises, though, as the plot follows a predictable path. And while Sharpe isn’t dull, he’s no superstar either. He’s just a good guy who gets the job done.

Enjoyable, timely, and realistic.
FRESH WATER FOR FLOWERS
Perrin, Valérie
Trans. by Serle, Hildegardé
Europa Editions (400 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-60945-595-8

French bestseller Perrin makes her English-language debut in an atmospheric novel rife with adulterous romances, bad marriages, mysterious deaths, and lots of burials.

The frequent burials are because narrator Violette Toussaint is a cemetery keeper at the Brancion-en-Chalon cemetery in Burgundy. She arrived there some 20 years ago with no-good husband Philippe, a philanderer and spoiled mama's boy who did her a favor by disappearing shortly after they took up the post. Except Philippe turns out to be living 100 kilometers away with another woman, she learns from Julien Seul, a handsome detective who came to the cemetery because his recently deceased mother, Irène, had inexplicably decreed that her ashes be placed on the grave of a man buried there who was, needless to say, not her husband. At first, Perrin unspools her plot in a leisurely manner, intertwining Violette's recollections of her trying marriage, the records she keeps of what was done and said at individual gravesides (touching testimonies to the infinite varieties of loss and grief), and amusing portraits of the eccentric cemetery staff. Once Julien enters to disrupt Violette's neatly ordered world, the author augments an already busy narrative with plot strands concerning Irène's decades-long affair, the growing attraction between her son and the cemetery keeper, the tragic story of the Toussaints' daughter, and a chorus of new voices that soften our view of the not-quite-as-rotten-as-he-seemed Philippe. It's a lot for one book, and the novel does sometimes falter under its own weight, but Perrin's eye is so compassionate, her characters so many-faceted, and the various mysteries she poses so intriguing that most readers will happily go along for the long ride toward a pleasingly romantic conclusion tempered by one last funeral.

Overstuffed, at times rambling, but colorful and highly enjoyable and pulled together by an engaging narrator.

AUBREY MCKEE
Pugsley, Alex
Biblioasis (400 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-77196-311-4

A sensitive young man shares his memories of growing up in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Though it wouldn't rank high on any list of well-known literary destinations, Halifax provides a fertile field for Pugsley's collection of 14 linked stories about his eponymous narrator's life there from childhood through his early 20s in the mid-1980s. Evoking comparisons in both style and substance to the work of John Irving and Robertson Davies in its assemblage of perceptive, richly detailed character studies, Pugsley's book succeeds in the task the author sets for his narrator—"to give expression to the lives I encountered, and to make sense of some of the mysteries that seemed to me the city's truths." Among the most affecting entries are "Karin," the story of a young woman with "a knack for making a man feel most alive in her company," and "Tempest," the dramatic account of a December hurricane and its tragic consequences in the lives of two of Aubrey McKee's closest friends. In "Fudge," Aubrey focuses on an unsparing lens on his own life, describing his youthful excursions into his hometown's outlaw fringe, including drug dealing under the tutelage of the terrifying older teenager Howard Fudge, who served as his "ferryman into these underworld ports of call." One of McKee's preoccupations is his friend Cyrus Mair—"whiz kid, recluse, and weirdo"—the scion of a once prominent Halifax family whose spectacular descent into shame and ruin he recounts in the story "Death by Drowning." It's
too early to tell whether Pugsley will be able to mine sufficient narrative gold from Aubrey McKee’s life for a projected five volumes of autobiographical fiction, but on the evidence of this first entry, there’s good reason to hope there will be more engaging stories like these in the offing.

The life of a Canadian city is revealed with verve and insight through the colorful stories of some of its inhabitants.

**SUPER HOST**
*Kate Russo*
Putnam (368 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-593-18770-8

In Russo’s charming and poignant debut, a washed-up painter renting out his West London home discovers his guests may hold the key to resolving his midlife crisis.

With his career and marriage at dead ends, 50ish Bennett Driscoll’s life has come to a standstill. Once a Turner Prize–nominated rising star, he can no longer call himself a full-time artist; his paintings haven’t sold in two years, his gallery dropped him in favor of dead clients, and Eliza, his ex-wife (and primary breadwinner), left him for a hedge fund manager in New York. To make ends meet, Bennett has moved into the studio in his back garden and, much to his 19-year-old daughter Mia’s mortification, now rents his Chiswick house on the popular vacation-rental site AirBed. Instead of reading critiques of his art, he eagerly pours over his AirBed reviews as a “Super Host.” But encounters with three different tenants may set the isolated Bennett back on the path to getting unstuck as an artist and as a man. Twentysomething New Yorker Alicia arrives alone, after her friends back out of the trip, hoping to reconnect with old London acquaintances. Artist Emma is also American, but her British husband has left her alone while he tries to get his brother into rehab. Diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, Emma struggles to work on her drawings despite her conviction that Bennett is spying on her. Russo’s lively narrative alternates between Bennett’s and the women’s perspectives, but it’s a bit of a disappointment when Alicia and Emma check out with their stories left unresolved. Likewise, the self-absorbed hero’s indecisiveness becomes a bit wearying. Still, the author writes with warm sympathy and humor.

**USELESS MIRACLE**
*Barry Schechter*
Melville House (336 pp.)
978-1-61219-791-3

When a congenial college professor discovers he has the ability to fly, kind of, it wreaks havoc on his association of odd friends and colleagues.

This is Schechter’s follow-up to his conspiracy comedy *The Blindfold Test* (2009), and it features an equally quirky and multifarious cast, a bit of magical realism, and a heavy dose of suspension of disbelief. The novel presents as a memoir by family man George Entmenn, an English professor at Northwestern University whose specialty is hermeneutics, an academic discipline that looks for the meaning in texts. More importantly, George learns by accident that he can fly, albeit at a height of no more than 4 inches above the ground. This could lend itself to a wild ride, plotwise, as a friend advises George: “Choose your narrative. Otherwise the press will hand you one. Do you want to be a paranormal guy, a saint, a superhero...?” Instead, the story emerges as a farce bent mostly on skewering the academic world with a few minor pings at popular culture. Besides George’s levelheaded wife, Rebecca, the most interesting character is his friend Harvey, a turban-wearing charlatan posing as a guru but also the one person who...
truly believes in this newfound miracle. George's superpower also riles up his social circle, which includes an implausible number of wannabe magicians. Most urgently, there's George's rival, Nelson Baim, a preposterously inept teacher who imagines himself a professional debunker, and worse, Baim's wife, Wendy, a wealthy, maniacal heiress who can't decide if she wants to seduce George or destroy him. A few dramatic set pieces and a surprising number of deaths and disappearances are both disconcerting and entertaining, but despite the sardonic humor, Schechter doesn't quite stick the landing with his deus ex machina denouement.

A comedy of errors about the foibles of fame with a few preposterous jolts sandwiched between soliloquies.

AN OCEAN WITHOUT A SHORE
Spencer, Scott
Ecco/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-0-06-285162-8

The romantic obsession hidden beneath the surface of his closest male friendship warps the life of a seemingly straight, supremely successful financier.

Spencer continues to mine the dramatic possibilities of his fictional Hudson Valley town of Leyden; the current book is a sequel to River Under the Road (2017), including most of the characters. Back in the 1970s, Kip Woods was Thaddeus Kaufman and Grace Cornell's druggie New York friend with a job at EF Hutton. He's still in finance, making really big bucks at a high-end investment firm; his persona is now more The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit than Bright Lights, Big City. However, Grace's suspicion, never officially confirmed, that he was "queer" turns out to be on the money. Kip has been secretly in love with Thaddeus since their college days in Ann Arbor, so when Thaddeus calls for help early one morning in 1997, Kip is there in a heartbeat. Back when Thaddeus' screenwriting career was flying high in the early '80s, he bought an estate in Leyden called Orkney. But "houses like that are like dope habits—they only get more and more expensive," and meanwhile, Thaddeus' career has tanked completely. How can Kip help his friend? The first suggestion is that he buy a little piece of Orkney and hold it until Thaddeus can raise the scratch to buy it back. After that fails to fix everything, a much more problematic idea is vaunted. A character who understands the true dynamic of the friendship tells Kip flat-out in Chapter 3, "He will destroy you." Dum-dum-dum. While it's not hard to imagine Kip hiding his crush on Thaddeus for decades, it's a struggle to accept his completely closeted, self-hating persona—he seems to be from a slightly earlier era. But you'll stick around for gems like these: "The spurned lover has only been rejected by one, maybe two people. The spurned artist has been rejected by the world." "Infidelity is an avenue to adventure available to all, rich and poor...anyone who feels crushed by the dailiness of settled life, anyone who needs a window in a life that suddenly seems all walls." "I can only tell you what you already know: ego is the sworn enemy of happiness."

Spencer's writing is always a pleasure.

WRETCHEDNESS
Tichý, Andrzej
Trans. by Smalley, Nichola
And Other Stories (200 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-911508-76-2

A musician takes stock of his sordid life in this seedy, stream-of-consciousness confessional set in the streets, basements, and other hives of Sweden.

Tichý's sort-of-novel was shortlisted for Sweden's most prestigious literary prize, but whether this ranting, breathless confessional makes more sense in the original language is anyone's guess. Even if it had more form and a
less nonsensical style, at best it would keep company with the likes of Kerouac and the form-shattering Beats or maybe with the junkie lit that takes a meandering path from Burroughs to Irvine Welsh and on to Tony O'Neil's desperate memoirs or, more recently, Nico Walker's *Cherry*. Yes, there are chapter breaks, but the novel itself is not so much crafted as unloaded in one rarely broken, sporadically punctuated block of first-person soliloquy by the protagonist, a freelance musician named Cody. As they say, music is his life, and he spends much of the novel pontificating on genres and specific bands ranging from John Cage to Nirvana in *High Fidelity*-like fashion, although his specific obsession seems to be with the surrealistic Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi. The book is also something of a contemplation on mortality, as punctuated by the musician's brief introductory interlude with a half-beaten addict on a bridge that comes back around as a surrealistic echo late in the game. The setting is raw, largely taking place in ugly hidey-holes that could just as easily be found in the council blocks of London or Edinburgh or Chicago's public housing projects as in the gritty housing estates dotting the city of Malmö, Sweden. A mostly forgettable supporting cast doesn't distract much from Cody's self-lacerating monologues, which can run pages at a time with only the occasional comma to break his caustic train of thought: "...I don't know, Cody, I don't know why I'm going over this again, over and over again, this mess, over and over again, this miserable shit, this murderously boring dirge..." and so on and on and on.

An inventive, linguistically adept experiment that appears to have been made painful to read on purpose.

**THE LAST GREAT ROAD BUM**

*Tobar, Héctor*

MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
(416 pp.)  
$28.00 | Jun. 2, 2020  
978-0-374-18342-4

A white Midwestern boy's wanderlust sends him on an unlikely path around the world and deep into the Salvadoran revolution.

Tobar’s third novel is based on the true story of Joe Sanderson, who was, among other things, a failed writer; his overheated prose, appearing in letters home and rejected novels, is quoted often. But his copious journals and letters also provide a narrative throughline for this shaggy dog epic. Tobar stumbled upon Sanderson's diary in El Salvador in 2008, and the author is plainly charmed by the story of an all-American gringo who gave up a comfortable upbringing to see the world. Born and raised in Urbana, Illinois, Joe caught the blue bus early, exploring nontourist pockets of Jamaica as a teen on a family vacation. After brief college and Army stints, he bummed rides through Central and South America, the Middle East, and Asia, witnessing the escalating Vietnam War and the famine in Biafra. Tobar renders Joe as naïve and dispassionate early on, a young man eagerly gathering fodder for his bad novels but not gaining much empathy. And though Tobar is a gifted storyteller in both fiction (*The Barbarian Nurseries*, 2011) and nonfiction (*Deep Down Dark*, 2014), his hero’s lack of emotional growth makes much of the heart of the novel druggy and listless. (Joe occasionally interrupts the narrative via footnotes in which he speaks directly to the reader, mentioning that Tobar’s editor and agent recommended he “trim the shit out of” the novel. True or not, it’s not bad advice.) The novel gains thrust and becomes more affecting in its final third, when Joe joins the anti-government revolutionaries in El Salvador in the late 1970s and early ’80s; Tobar’s depiction of the 1981 El Mozote massacre is chilling and imagines a genuine shift in Joe’s character.

Though the protagonist will test your patience with his road stories, he has some great ones.

**BATTLE BORN**

*Lapis Lazuli*  
Uriarte, Maximilian  
Illus. by the author  
Little, Brown (352 pp.)  
$28.00 | May 12, 2020  
978-0-316-44896-3

Iraq War veteran Uriarte delivers a graphic novel about conflict and honor as the unstoppable Sergeant King confronts a ruthless enemy; entrenched bigotry, and inflexible protocols in the mountains of war-torn Afghanistan.

The villagers of the Sar-i Sang valley have mined the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli for generations. But when the Taliban finds value in the stone, they descend upon the peaceful villagers and force them into service. On the heels of the brutal organization is the U.S. Marine Corps, with plans to win the hearts and minds of the local population and restore U.S.-sanctioned order to the region. We follow the efforts of one platoon, specifically their sergeant, a massive man named King from the “Battle Born” state of Nevada, so named because it achieved statehood during the Civil War. The use of a touchstone as quintessential as the Civil War nods to the story’s interest in painting with a broad brush; between scenes of gorgeously illustrated and often graphic action, characters muse on how the guise of “civilization” has excused the most savage of acts and appeals to a morality higher than the rule of law. The archetypal nature of some characters can ring a bit hollow or familiar: King, an African American man, comes from a broken home; his white lieutenant with British parents has refined manners but no street smarts; the Southern white soldier is a Confederate flag–waving racist (there is liberal use of the n-word). Uriarte’s illustrations are lush and vivid, with an appealing manga-tinted realism. The panels are often large, with frequent splash pages and some two-page spreads, showing the details of characters’ expressions or slowing the action to amplify drama. The effect is sumptuously cinematic with the depth of an action movie.

War is hell but beautiful.
**A DECENT FAMILY**  
**Ventrella, Rosa**  
*Trans. by Goldstein, Ann*  
AmazonCrossing (272 pp.)  
$24.95 | Jun. 1, 2020  
978-1-5420-0443-5

In the 1980s, a malacarne, or “bad seed,” grows up in a gritty neighborhood in the Italian city of Bari, on the Adriatic Coast, and seeks escape from the violence and mortifications she witnesses and endures there.

Maria De Santis, the spirited daughter of the mercurial Antonio and his browbeaten wife, Teresa, lives up to the “bad seed” designation bestowed upon her by her fisherman father, a Tony Curtis look-alike with a violent temper. Life in the poorest quarter of Bari provides Mari with few opportunities to indulge in wanderlust or satisfy her yearning for escape and recognition. A childhood alliance with the overweight and shunned Michele—another outsider with considerable family burdens of his own—provides Mari with a confidant and much-needed companion in adventure. Long-standing family rivalries and animosities (some based in reality, some in superstition) determine the course of Mari and Michele’s relationship in ways which are tragic, operatic, and soap operatic all at once. Mari’s violent family life mirrors the brutal reality of everyday life in the Bari underclass, but her struggle to escape her home, family, and city resembles the experiences of other young heroines as well. Ventrella’s narrative examines themes of class and gender expectations, accompanied by enough nostalgic detail to make the “old country” more appealing in memory than it was in reality. Inevitable comparisons of Ventrella’s work with that of Elena Ferrante—who also dissects the emotional experiences of young Italian women—will be propelled by Goldstein’s fluid translation of this novel in the wake of her work on Ferrante’s juggernaut. Ventrella’s ambitious attempt to convey Mari’s struggle echoes Ferrante’s epic approach to chronicling women’s lives, but, here, the action is played out on a smaller scale, over a shorter time, with fewer characters. Simmering violence and misogyny percolate beneath the surface of Mari’s story, but, really, everyone seems miserable and trapped in the net of poverty and deprivation Ventrella wraps around her characters.

Ventrella reveals the many ways in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons—and the daughters.

**BIG SUMMER**  
**Weiner, Jennifer**  
Atria (352 pp.)  
$28.00 | May 19, 2020  
978-1-5011-3351-0

A plus-size Instagram influencer stumbles into a murder mystery when called to serve as a bridesmaid for her fabulous former best friend.

Weiner’s 14th novel, and her second with a murder plot, is also a short course in social media lingo and best practices. At its center is Daphne Berg, a classic Weiner heroine—a young New Yorker who supports herself by working 20 hours a week as a nanny by selling crafts in her Etsy store, and through sponsorships of Instagram posts for both her (yoga mats, makeup, plus-size fashion) and her pooch (organic dog treats). Her career began accidentally in her sophomore year of college, when her No. 1 frenemy, an exquisitely lovely heiress named Drue Lathrop Cavanaugh, lured her into a humiliating setup in a bar, the last of a long series of mean tricks that began in high school. When her date called her a “fat bitch” and Daphne responded with fury—“I am fat. But that doesn’t mean you get to treat me like garbage”—and video of the incident went viral, she chose to embrace the moment. She has since become a beloved internet avatar of body acceptance #sorrynotsorry #justasIam. Drue has been out of her life for seven years when she bursts back in to beg Daphne to be her bridesmaid at a spectacular, made-for-social media Cape Cod wedding. Against her better instincts, Daphne agrees, and before long she is handmaiden at #drueandstu2020, a beachfront extravaganza Weiner really outdoes herself in describing. Things are going a lot better than Daphne ever could have dreamed—hot sex scene alert!—when the plot takes a turn for the Agatha Christie. But no matter what mayhem transpires, you can always count on Weiner for delicious food. “I squeezed lemon onto my first oyster, added a dollop of cocktail sauce, tipped it into my mouth and gulped it down, humming in pleasure at its sweet, briny taste.” “My mother hugged me hard, and my father mixed up a pitcher of Sidecars and served us his cioppino, with toasted wedges of garlicky toasted baguette.” “Get the malasadas, if they’re fresh.” Turns out they are, and so is this novel.

If you love Jennifer Weiner, you’ll love this one. And if you’re a newbie, start here.
KATHERYN HOWARD, THE SCANDALOUS QUEEN  
Weir, Alison  
Ballantine (464 pp.)  
$28.99 | May 12, 2020  
978-1-101-96660-0  

A lusty teenager caught the roving eye of Henry VIII.  
Continuing a fictional chronicle of the Six Tudor Queens, Weir brings thorough research and spirited storytelling to her portrayal of Katheryn Howard, Henry VIII’s fifth wife. Katheryn was 19 when her manipulative, ambitious uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, and her stepgrandmother, the Dowager Duchess of Norfolk, summoned her with a proposal: Henry VIII had tired of his German wife, Anne of Cleves, and, rumor had it, had not yet consummated their marriage. He sought an annulment; soon he would need a new wife. The Howards saw Katheryn, one of Anne’s many maids of honor, as a means to elevate their position and wealth as well as to bring a Catholic into the court. Of course, Katheryn had to be—or pretend to be—a virgin. “Chastity is to be prized,” Katheryn knew. “But what was wrong with taking your pleasure where you found it?” She easily and ardently fell in love: with her music teacher; with a distant cousin, a rakish courtier who “rode her like a stallion, gasping and moaning” and insisted they were married; and with the handsome Tom Culpeper, whom she had known as a child. Now a good-looking man “with a strong jaw and high cheekbones,” he was an esteemed member of the king’s Privy Chamber. Weir sees Katheryn as an impetuous, superficial young woman—far less sympathetic than Jane Seymour or Katherine of Aragon—dazzled by wealth and glamour. As maid of honor, she exulted, “she would live in palaces, have beautiful gowns, dance and make merry.” To her great delight, seducing Henry involved many luxurious new vestments and jewels. After their marriage, “dizzy with elation,” she exclaimed to herself, “She really was queen!” But not for long: Betrayals, plots, subterfuge, and her unbridled passion caused “the whole glittering edifice” of her life to implode.  

A vivid re-creation of a Tudor tragedy.

THE CHOCOLATE COBWEB  
Armstrong, Charlotte  
Penzler Publishers (288 pp.)  
$25.95 | May 5, 2020  
978-1-61316-166-1  

In this reprint originally published in 1948, Armstrong (1905-1969) deftly inserts a young woman into a family she’s just met in hopes of thwarting a murder. Amanda Garth and Tobias Thone Garrison were briefly switched in the hospital at birth. In fact, they may have been switched twice, so that the parents both babies were restored to—in Thone’s case, noted California painter Tobias Garrison and Belle Garrison—may not have been their birth parents at all. Raised by Kate Garth and her late husband, Mandy’s never known about the mix-up until a visiting aunt spills the beans on her way out the door. Intrigued, Mandy, an art student who hopes to become a fabric designer, pays a visit to the painter’s family, now including Ione Garrison, the wife who preceded and followed Belle, and accidentally witnesses what she’s convinced is a murder attempt, especially in view of the suspicious circumstances aging actress Fanny Austin describes surrounding Belle’s death six years ago. When her attempts to warn the intended victim fall on deaf ears, she can think of only one thing to do: wangle herself a longer-term invitation as a houseguest, offer herself up as a new and improved victim, and pray she can catch the killer in the act before the curtain falls on her own life. A.J. Finn, in her perceptive introduction, praises Armstrong’s decision to limit her cast and dole out revelations in a steady drip. Readers will also appreciate her skill in delicately intensifying the suspense as the characters maintain coolly decorous facades.  

Reason enough, if any were needed, for an Armstrong revival.

THE CLUTTER CORPSE  
Brett, Simon  
Severn House (192 pp.)  
$28.99 | Jun. 2, 2020  
978-1-78029-124-6  

Brett, long a prolific and sharp-eyed observer of the British middle class’s crimes and misdemeanors, launches a new series whose heroine wants to declutter your life.  

Despite some misgivings about the aeronautical implications of the name, Ellen Curtis is content that SpaceWoman aptly communicates her vocation: to give her clients more room to grow in all sorts of ways by helping them clean out their domiciles. Her matter-of-fact approach to both
A bone-chilling metaphysical mystery larded with historical detail.

THE INDIGO GHOSTS

BLOOD RIVER
Cavanaugh, Tony
Hachette Australia (416 pp.)
$22.99 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-7336-4074-2

In 1999, everyone in Brisbane is on edge because a serial killer is on the loose. But when a teenage girl is arrested and found guilty, two cops are uneasy—could a young girl be capable of such savagery?

Fast-forward 20 years. Jan White, the teen who was found guilty, has finally been granted parole, but she isn’t finding life outside prison easy or welcoming. The two cops who investigated her case have changed, too. Once-young Detective Constable Lara Ocean is now a Police Commissioner; her gruff, street-wise older partner, Billy Waterson, has retired. When new events force them to reanalyze the case, they have no idea where the trail will lead. Cavanaugh tells the story from various viewpoints, but he changes voices with such frequency and muddled clarity that the reader is often confused. Even those details that are compelling—the history of Detective Constable Ocean’s early life, for example—are dragged out in too many sketches. Further dampening the reading pleasure is the author’s overuse of weather description and overly cute chapter headings, including “It Bit Me Back” and “It’s Not Like We Meant It.”

There’s a good story here, but it’s buried by flashy prose and a meandering plot.

THE HOUR OF THE FOX
Clark, Cassandra
Severn House (256 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-7278-8958-4

The evil machinations in 1399 England are worthy of a particularly harrowing Game of Thrones episode.

Taking advantage of the absence of his cousin King Richard, who’s off in Ireland, Henry of Bolingbroke returns with his allies from exile in France in an attempt to seize the crown for himself. Brother Rodric Chandler, known to look out for Bolingbroke’s interests, is often called upon to question people being tortured in the Tower of London; he’s ambivalent about his role and cynical about his lack of faith. One line of questioning leads to French wine importer Sire de Chienne, who flees the country with his family and the help of their neighbor Master Chaucer and their servant girl, Mattie, who fears Chandler yet is fascinated by...
him and is eventually drawn into his circle. Meanwhile, Sir Arnold Archer, Chandler’s friend and city coroner, asks his help with the murder of a novice from the house at All Hol- lows whose nude body has been found with its throat slit, float- ing in the river. The nuns who claim she was running off with a lover are obviously hiding something. Chandler reluctantly continues his chores for Bolingbroke’s faction as the house of Lancaster uses both force of arms and vicious trickery to win the throne back from the house of York. Although his search for the killer leads him into danger, Chandler’s conscience will not let him ignore it.

The mystery is a slender thread woven through rich histor- ical detail in this intriguing introduction to a conflicted hero.

WHAT YOU DON’T SEE
Clark, Tracy
Kensington (304 pp.)
$26.00 | May 26, 2020
978-1-4967-1493-0

A routine stint as a bodyguard becomes a nightmare for a Chicago cop–turned–private eye and her ex-partner.

Vonda Allen’s magazine, Strive, is widely popular among black readers, but Vonda herself is a manipulative prima donna, so it’s no surprise she’s been getting threats. Cass Raines agrees to help her former partner and best friend, Ben Mickerson, guard Vonda, who’s been ignoring the threats and destroying all the expletive-filled letters, save one held back by Kaye Chandler, her worried assistant, who slipped it to Ben. Meanwhile, the murder of a cop brings back bad memories for Cass, who quit the force after she was shot while paired with the same ambitious cop who’s now gotten his new partner killed. In addition to putting up with Vonda’s snotty attitude, Cass must deal with the reappearance of the father who deserted her as a child. Soon after one of Vonda’s employees is killed, Ben is knifed at a book signing, forcing Cass to dig deep into Vonda’s past. As Ben clings to life and Vonda refuses to give the cops the slightest assistance, Cass forges a tenuous alliance with one of the detectives on the case as she hunts for clues. Both Vonda and Kaye are hiding behind bogus histories, and they’ll go a long way to hide a string of dead bodies in their pasts.

A gripping relationship-based procedural that drags you in and spits you out wan but satisfied.

THE GOODBYE MAN
Deaver, Jeffery
Putnam (432 pp.)
$28.00 | May 12, 2020
978-0-525-53597-3

Colter Shaw, the freelance bounty hunter who debuted in The Never Game (2019), infiltrates a cult masquerading as a grief support group.

Despite the usual hard-nosed com- petition from his rival, Dalton Crowe, Shaw has no trouble locating suspected neo-Nazis Adam Harper and Erick Young, sought for burning a cross on the grounds of a church, and turning them over to the police. That’s when everything goes sideways, for the law in this case is so lawless that Adam would rather kill himself than be arrested, and Erick narrowly escapes with his life. Troubled enough to look into the fugitives’ histories, Shaw is led to the Osiris Foundation, a for-profit enclave in the mountains of Washington, which had clearly changed Adam’s life. Turning the hefty reward the Western Washington Ecumenical Council had offered for their apprehension over to Erick’s parents, Shaw goes under- ground as Carter Skye, enrolling in the Process™ developed by Osiris founder and director Master Eli, ne David Ellis. He quickly finds himself mired in an isolated cult in which para- military bodyguards support a leader who has every flaw you’d expect from his role. The thrills that follow are authentic, but the attempt to weave this plot together with Shaw’s continu- ing quest for the truth about his survivalist father’s last months is surprisingly awkward, and the use of four separate scenes in which characters you thought were dead spring back to life sug- gests that the boundlessly inventive Deaver may be running low on new tricks.

Not the best Deaver to offer friends you are hoping to get as firmly hooked as you are.

ROLLING THUNDER
Devlin, A.J.
NeWest Press (272 pp.)
$15.95 paper | May 15, 2020
978-1-988732-86-2

A pro wrestler–turned-sleuth finds a whole new world of crazy when he tries to track down a missing roller derby coach.

After solving the mystery of the missing python in Cobra Clutch (2018), former pro wrestler “Hammerhead” Jed Ounstead is feeling his detective oats and anxious to log enough hours for a private investigator’s license. So it’s the perfect time for him to hear from his old wrestling pal Stormy Daze, reborn as roller derby team captain Amazombie. She and teammate Jabba the Slut are concerned that, as they head into the league playoffs, their coach, Lawrence Kunstlinger, rumored to be...
Historic Beaufort, North Carolina, is the beautiful backdrop for an ugly murder.

BOOKED FOR DEATH

Gilbert, Victoria

Crooked Lane (320 pp.)

$26.99 | Jun. 9, 2020

978-1-64385-307-9

Historic Beaufort, North Carolina, is the beautiful backdrop for an ugly murder.

High school teacher Charlotte Reed has inherited Chapters, a big, literary-themed B&B, from her great-aunt Isabella just in time to get a fresh start after the tragic death of her husband. She’s planned a special week for her guests featuring the work of British mystery writer Josephine Tey, so she’s deeply disturbed when one of those guests, the obnoxious book dealer Lincoln Delamont, hints that Isabella got the money to buy Chapters by nefarious means. When Delamont is found stabbed to death in Chapters’ carriage house, leaving behind many suspects, Charlotte decides she’d better look into Isabella’s past. Charlotte’s friend Julie had mentioned a secret boyfriend who, much to Charlotte’s dismay, turned out to be Delamont, whose wife had endured years of his bad behavior. Then Delamont’s teenage daughter accuses Charlotte of killing him because of what he knew about Isabella. After Charlotte finds a diary written in code among her aunt’s belongings in the attic, she approaches her neighbor Ellen Montgomery, a friend of Isabella’s who’s reluctant to say much about her history. Even if the answer to the mystery lies buried in the past, it may not be the past Charlotte’s exploring.

A mystifying debut featuring a clever, sympathetic heroine and oodles of local color.

THE BIG MAN’S DAUGHTER

Fitzstephen, Owen

Seventh Street Books (184 pp.)

$15.95 paper | May 10, 2020

978-1-64506-019-2

Dashell Hammett’s The Dain Curse is only the first in a hall of playfully refracting mirrors that also reworks motifs from The Maltese Falcon and The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.

Left alone by the death of her rackteer father, Cletus Gaspereaux (Fitzstephen’s version of Casper Gutman, repurposed here, like most of the cast, from The Maltese Falcon), and the demise or imprisonment of his unsavory associates, Rita Gaspereaux (Rhea Gutman) has to survive on her own. When her attempt to bury her father quietly in San Francisco backfires in a spectacular way, she’s left with no money and no consolation outside the pages of Dorothy G., Kansas, a novel that follows 18-year-old Dorothy Gale, Rita’s model and alter ego, around Paris, where her job as a waitress brings her up against private eye Paul Darnell. Desperate, Rita agrees to join forces with Evie LeFabre (Effie Perine), the secretary to Pinkerton operatives Sam Hammett (Sam Spade) and Mike Arnette (Miles Archer), who’s plotting to recover the real Maltese Falcon for which the Russian Count Keransky (General Kemidov) substituted the fake at the center of the action in Hammett’s novel and Fitzstephen’s earlier spinoff, Hammett Unwritten (2013). Although Rita plans to run off with the bankroll Evie’s raised to finance her search, Evie and professor Ted Bowman, her cousin and partner, aren’t nearly as naive as they seem, and the triple partnership swiftly devolves into a battle of wits.

An ebullient mashup/revision/sequel perfect for knowing readers who don’t mind (spoiler) missing the Falcon yet again.
An Ontario private eye is given a week to find his path to redemption before the gates of hell close on him.

**RUNNING FROM THE DEAD**

An Ontario private eye is given a week to find his path to redemption before the gates of hell close on him.

For six years, Sam Jones filled every spare hour hunting for Adam Verne, who'd disappeared from his mother's home years before she hired Sam, demanding in return only a monthly update. When their latest meeting is only a week away, Sam's search ends in a basement he flees, leaving behind two corpses, one virtually mummified, the other brand-new. Since he made inquiries of the neighbors before descending into the death chamber, he knows it won't be long before Homicide Detective Scopes knows it won't be long before Homicide Detective Scopes throws a lasso over him, but, certain that "knowing is worse than hope," he still can't bear to tell Ruth Verne what he's found until he has no choice. As the hours tick down, a graffito in a coffee-shop washroom—"He's going to kill me, and I think I

**DEADLY PRIMROSE**

Hill, Suzette A.
Severn House (224 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-7278-9041-2

In 1958, an amateur sleuth solves some murders as she conceals others.

Ever since she took in her late brother Francis' clever cat, Maurice, and his cheerfully bumbling dog, Bouncer, Primrose Oughterard has worked hard to cover up his many misdeeds, including murder. Although he died a hero's death in The Primrose Pursuit (2016), she constantly worries that his past will come back to haunt her. Primrose, who's an artist as well as an amateur detective, often relies on the underworld expertise of Nicholas Ingaza, a shifty gallery owner who knew all her brother's secrets. Despite his warning, she decides to investigate the odd demise of wealthy Elspeth Travers, who drowned even though she hated swimming and wouldn't have been caught dead in the froufrou bathing cap she was wearing. Elspeth's twin sister, Alice Markham, is strangely unmoved by her death. So is Elspeth's languidly insolent son, Aston. A pistol-packing Alice visits to warn Primrose off Councilman Reginald Bewley, whom she covets for herself; continues on a rant about her ex-husband, who had a raft of mistresses, including her own sister; and then blithely describes how she and a friend murdered her sister before roaring down the drive, hitting a gatepost, and getting shot to death herself. Luckily, Maurice and Bouncer, who have their own narratives and viewpoints, are on hand to rescue Primrose from the misadventures and tricky situations that follow as she stumbles on.

The pets are the stars of this twisty, sardonically humorous adventure.

**OFF SCRIPT**

Hurley, Graham
Severn House (256 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-7278-8979-9

In her third appearance, actress Enora Andressen leads the search for the boy who broke into a woman's flat and threatened her with death before he vanished.

Since an accident left the blind Pavel Sieger, her favorite scriptwriter, paralyzed, Enora's dedicated herself to making sure he's well cared for. Now one of his dedicated medical minders, nurse Carrie Tollman, has been the victim of an encounter so harrowing Enora has to drag the details out of her. She awoke to find a teenager bending over her. The intruder stared at her, assured her that he can get through any locked door, attempted to masturbate, and then, when she laughed at him and ordered him to leave, told her that if she shared her story with anyone else, "he'd come back and kill me. Just like he'd killed the others." Sure enough, soon after Enora unearths enough information to allow the Exmouth police to arrest a boy they then have to release for lack of evidence, she returns to Carrie's place to find her slashed to death. Even when an oddly literal clue allows Enora to put a name to the presumed culprit, he's nowhere to be found. Enora's only solace is the distractions of an unwelcome visit from her teenage son, Malo, and a much more welcome romance with builder/sailor/"chancer" Deko, a relationship that despite some exhilarating adventures turns out to have disturbing complications of its own.

Not so much mysterious as creepy and just plain sad.

**RUNNING FROM THE DEAD**

Knowles, Mike
ECW Press (360 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-77041-519-5

An Ontario private eye is given a week to find his path to redemption before the gates of hell close on him.

For six years, Sam Jones filled every spare hour hunting for Adam Verne, who'd disappeared from his mother's home years before she hired Sam, demanding in return only a monthly update. When their latest meeting is only a week away, Sam's search ends in a basement he flees, leaving behind two corpses, one virtually mummified, the other brand-new. Since he made inquiries of the neighbors before descending into the death chamber, he knows it won't be long before Homicide Detective Scopes throws a lasso over him, but, certain that "knowing is worse than hope," he still can't bear to tell Ruth Verne what he's found until he has no choice. As the hours tick down, a graffito in a coffee-shop washroom—"He's going to kill me, and I think I
want him too” [sic]—seems to offer his best shot at offsetting the crushing weight of his guilt. He resolves to find the young woman who left the message and do a better job rescuing her than he did rescuing Adam Verne. Against all odds, he does track down the lost soul with the help of barista Sheena and 80-year-old bank robber Willy Greene only to discover that she’s even more lost than he’d thought.

The noir world evoked by Knowles’ brutally clipped prose is so dark that the smallest victories seem like miracles.

THE LIFELINE
Mayhew, Margaret
Severn House (176 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-7278-9042-9

Murder disrupts a gardening group.
Ever since the murder of her imperious mother, Lady Swynford, Ruth Harvey has tried to make Frog End Manor a more welcoming place to the locals. She expands the annual summer fête with a host of child-friendly activities and opens her greenhouse to the public, selling indigenous plants to all comers at a modest price. And when her physician husband, Tom, recognizes that sometimes hard work and socialization can be more therapeutic than pills, Ruth even invites some of his needier patients to volunteer in her garden, potting seedlings, deadheading roses, and, most importantly, getting out of their empty houses to spend time with others. The bond she forged with Jacob, her reclusive landscaper, has given Ruth experience dealing with the mentally fragile. Now her kindness and persistence, along with the exercise of pruning, help Lawrence Deacon recover from a stroke. Widowed Anya Carberry finds the world a less lonely place when she can help customers select plants. Even Johnny Turner, paralyzed as a teenager in a motorcycle crash, is a little less surly toward his mum when he learns to keep Ruth’s seedlings healthy and well watered. But the discovery of a body in the greenhouse threatens to undo all the gains her amateur gardeners have made. Worse yet, Inspector Squibb has decided that Jacob must be the killer. In desperation, Ruth turns to the Colonel, Frog End’s unofficial sleuth. With the help of his drinking buddy Naomi Grimshaw, ever vigilant Freda Butler, and Freda’s swastika-embellished war-souvenir binoculars, the Colonel cracks the case.

Crime and clues enhance this village charmer.

BELLE ISLE
Owen, Howard
Permanent Press (242 pp.)
$29.95 | May 31, 2020
978-1-57962-595-5

Richmond crime reporter Willie Black’s dying daily is granted at least a few more weeks of life by a grisly discovery well off the beaten path.

A pair of teens who assure the police that they were just enjoying the view of the James River from Belle Isle stumble over a severed leg still wearing a pricey athletic shoe. The shock of their discovery is magnified when the rest of the body, bashed to death, turns out to be that of Teddy “T-Bone” Delmonico, a local college football star from 50 years ago. Teddy never made much of a splash in the NFL, and his main claim to fame in recent years has been serving as the figurehead for DellFarr, an investment firm that bilked its investors out of some serious coin. No sooner has Mills Farrington, the brains behind DellFarr, emerged as a prime suspect than he removes himself from suspicion by getting fatally shot. That leaves mostly Teddy’s family—heir first wife, Kathy Simmons, a realtor who’s moved on; his second wife, Felicia Delmonico, who’s busy running for Congress; and his truculent son, Brady, whose older brother died of a football injury years and years ago—to fill the void. The mystery, as Willie would be the first to admit, is an unholy mess. But Owen shines bright as ever in tracing the remorseless pressures on his journalist hero, who’s so hard-pressed in his quest to uncover the big picture by the rush to meet his daily deadlines for updates that he’s constantly in danger of missing the forest for the trees.

The big story here: the surprising kinship between the journalistic whodunit and the police procedural.

HOLD YOUR BREATH, CHINA
Qiu Xiaolong
Severn House (240 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-7278-9043-6

A veteran Shanghai inspector monitors a potentially dangerous group of environmental activists while his sidekick matches wits with a serial killer.

Though lately out of favor with the Communist Party, Chief Inspector Chen Cao is still the man to call when a serial killer is baffling Shanghai police. New victims are appearing every week. Chen is intrigued enough to take the case even though he’s been assigned a much more complex task, one suited to his poetic soul. With the air pollution worsening in Shanghai, the government is worried about the increasing power of an attractive activist named Yuan Jing and particularly about the documentary film she is preparing. Comrade Secretary Zhao wants Chen to collect as much damaging information on her as he can. When Chen shares

[Image: kirkus.com]
these new assignments with his partner, Detective Yu Guangming, they agree to split the two cases, Yu handling the murder probe and Chen digging into Yuan’s world. Though forensic evidence indeed points to a serial killer, Yu can’t figure out the common denominator among the victims or the motive for the murders. Chen’s investigation prompts him to compose poetry with an environmental theme. As Yu aggressively assembles the evidence explaining the murders, he shares his progress with Chu, who succeeds in infiltrating Yuan Jing’s group but has a hard time squaring his ethics with Zhao’s desires.

Inspector Chen’s 10th mystery effectively uses the genre to explore China’s current pollution crisis.

**THE RED, RED SNOW**

*Ramsay, Caro*

Severn House (256 pp.)

Several odd murders test the skills of a pair of seasoned detectives.

A family man is stabbed in a burger joint for no apparent reason, and a body is found in an isolated holiday cottage. DI Costello, who’s returned to her duties with Police Scotland following a leave of absence, reunites with her longtime partner, DCI Colin Anderson, with whom she has a complicated relationship, to investigate the crimes. Anderson is happy to escape his own tense family situation and is forced by the weather to assemble an unorthodox crime-scene team which includes DC Morna Taverner, who never noticed that her husband was a drug-dealing rapist. While part of Costello’s team follows up on the burger joint murder in Glasgow, he and the rest of the team battle a road-closing blizzard to reach the remote and starkly beautiful Highland town of Glen Riske, where Charlie Priestly, a police officer’s son, has been a murder suspect ever since he returned home incoherent and covered in blood. When enigmatic PC James McIver takes Costello and company to the rental cottage in Riske Wood where Charlie found a body, they see that it’s on the far side of the River Riske from the town and that the bridge has a gate that can be unlocked by the owner by remote control. When the gate is locked, the only way across the river is by the “coffin bridge”: “It’s a suspended coffin that you lie in and then propel yourself across the river by a pulley and a rope,” McIver explains. With only Charlie’s tracks visible in the snow, the detectives find a dead German man who was renting the house for the Christmas holiday; and then they find his wife, equally dead, in the garden. The cottage was supposed to have been occupied by a much disliked family, but the occupants were switched at the last minute. Could it have been a case of mistaken identity? Dogged police work, computer skills, and an ability to mine both the past and present for clues to complex relationships help the isolated team as they struggle to make sense of widely separated crimes that may be related.

An attention-grabbing procedural with unsettling surprises inside every snowbank.

**BOMBSHELL**

*Woods, Stuart with Hall, Parnell*

Putnam (320 pp.)  
$28.00 | Jun. 2, 2020 978-0-593-08325-3

Think the competition among Oscar nominees is a blood sport? You have no idea.

*Desperation at Dawn* has snared Academy Award nominations for writer/director Peter Barrington; his wife, composer Hattie Barrington; lead actress Tessa Tweed; supporting actor Mark Weldon; and Tessa’s husband, Ben Bacchetti, who, as head of Centurion Studios, would bask in the award for best picture. Tessa’s nomination is nice for her, but it grates on Viveca Rothschild, the blonde bombshell who, determined that her own third nomination will be the charm, resolves to do whatever it takes to undermine Tessa, beginning with getting hired on *Trial by Fire*, Tessa’s aptly named new film, and planting snippy items about her in gossip columns. But that’s far from the biggest problem lurking beneath the tinsel. Viveca’s boyfriend, Iraq War vet Bruce, has PTSD and a much less nuanced approach than his girlfriend to stopping Tessa in her tracks. Even worse, crime boss Gino Patelli, suspecting that his uncle and predecessor Carlo Gigante, was offed by Centurion producer Billy Barnett, hires a series of variously hapless underlings to find and kill him. As Billy tells his attorney, Peter’s father Stone Barrington, when he’s arrested for a rare murder he didn’t commit, “It seems to be open season on Billy Barnett.” But the predators’ job is considerably complicated by the fact that Billy, like Mark Weldon, is an alter ego of former CIA operative Teddy Fay, who effortlessly spots every Patelli employee early on, switches identities in a flash to escape them, and shoots them when he can’t. So the suspense in this enjoyably weightless tale is focused on the climactic Academy Award ceremonies. Who wants to bet that Tessa or Teddy will get killed or that *Desperation at Dawn* won’t sweep the categories in which it’s nominated?

The perfect bonbon to pick up for distraction during those long production numbers at the actual Oscars.
DEAL WITH THE DEVIL
Rocha, Kit
Tor (336 pp.)
$17.99 paper | May 12, 2020
978-1-250-20936-8

Enhanced supersoldiers, hot romance, and a dangerous rescue mission make this SF series opener a post-apocalyptic roller-coaster ride.

In the near future, a wave of solar flares has rendered the world’s power grids useless. People have found a way to survive, though: by supporting a mysterious scientific conglomerate, by selling important information, or by acting as hired muscle. Despite his biomedical enhancements, Capt. Garrett Knox of the Silver Devils, a squad of supersoldiers, is in a race against time to rescue one of his team members. The ransom: a mercenary librarian named Nina. After doing some reconnaissance, Knox suspects that Nina is not a typical human, and his team’s plan to snatch her off the street is quickly ruled out. Instead, Knox hopes to lure Nina and her squad of information brokers into a trap. Knox insists he knows the location of the rumored Rogue Library of Congress, a motherlode of confidential documents and records that were saved by federal employees when the original Library of Congress was shut down. Nina can’t resist a score like that and agrees to assist Knox in locating the RLOC bunkers hidden across a decimated America. Nina and Knox feel a lot like superheroes with their enhanced abilities and altruistic feelings toward ending corruption through the freedom of information. Readers may be craving an action-packed good-triumphs-over-evil story right now, and this book delivers a hopeful ending in the midst of a bleak setting. Rocha’s trademark trope of found family is very much present, and the chemistry and tension between the romantic leads has never been better plotted or paced. The primary shortcoming is the constant repetition of background information, which creates frequent hiccups in an otherwise thrilling page-turner.

A risky and frisky adventure.

TO CATCH AN EARL
Bateman, Kate
St. Martin’s (336 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Jun. 30, 2020
978-1-250-30611-1

In 1812, an infamous jewel thief falls in love with the man who’s supposed to be catching her.

Emmy Danvers and her brother, Luc, were proud of their father even though he was a notorious jewel thief known as Nightjar. He didn’t steal just for money; instead, his patriotic goal was to recover the crown jewels of France from locations all across Europe and return them to his home country when the Bourbon monarchy regained its throne. But when their father died, Emmy and Luc intended to let the legend of Nightjar die with him. However, after Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, the siblings are contacted by a man named Emile Danton, who knows they’re still in possession of the missing jewels, which he wants for himself along with three final stones Nightjar hadn’t collected yet. Emmy has no choice but to respond to the blackmail by stealing the stones herself since Luc was wounded at Trafalgar. The thefts put her squarely at odds with Alexander Harland, Earl of Melton. Years earlier, Emmy and Alex shared an incendiary kiss at a masquerade ball, and now he’s on her trail as an investigator with the Bow Street Runners. Alex and Emmy are pitted against each other as rivals on opposite sides of the law, and sharp-eyed readers will recognize and enjoy Bateman’s homage to the 1955 film To Catch a Thief. Although the novel has a high-energy premise, there is little tension in the execution of the plot or the romance. Due to some off-page detective work from other Bow Street Runners, Alex quickly and effortlessly deduces that Emmy must be Nightjar; but his early discovery of her identity saps all the excitement out of the promised duel of wits. Scenes of Emmy’s heists are pedestrian rather than heart-pounding. Even the romance develops without much drama, for neither Alex nor Emmy can deny their mutual attraction and they desperately want to be together.

A competent but unremarkable romance.
**Tackle It,** to help destigmatize mental illness and teach coping skills to young athletes. He has a major crush on workaholic, hyper-rational Ph.D. student Danika Brown, who teaches in his building, but Zaf is pretty sure she’s gay. They become a social media sensation thanks to a viral video of Zaf carrying pink-haired Dani to safety after an elevator mishap. Zafir asks Dani to pretend they’re a couple to gain exposure for his charity, and the temporary arrangement is perfect for Dani, who is bi and only does “situationships” anyway. While bantering hilariously and having sex whenever possible, they both catch feelings, but Danika buries hers. As for Zaf, “his feelings for Dani were like sunlight: they’d always find a crack to slip through, a way to light things up.” Zafir treads carefully, introducing balance to Danika’s life with home-cooked meals and insanely hot sex. Dani’s support helps Zaf reclaim his minor celebrity as a Muslim former pro rugby player (a rarity in Britain) and share publicly the personal tragedy that led him to found Tackle It. With Danika, Hibbert playfully subverts expectations, elevating the “too busy for romance” trope by giving her challenging personality traits that won’t disappear with a good shag and a few “I love you’s. She also wisely gives Zafir more to do than love Dani unconditionally, as deliciously swoonworthy as that is: He has to embrace his tragic past, as it’s part of the man he is today.

Funny, deep, and romantic as hell. Will leave you smiling for days.

**THE VIRGIN AND THE ROGUE**
Jordan, Sophie
Avon/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-06-288544-9

The sixth in the Rogue Files series is a lusty reversal of the rake-and-the-wallflower trope.

In Regency-era England, Charlotte Langley, a self-described “dull bird,” is about to marry boring Billy Pembroke. Just before an agonizing dinner with her in-laws, who barely tolerate her, she’s plagued with menstrual cramps. (Just a splash of realism before the story takes a magical turn.) When her sister mixes her a home remedy, Charlotte is overcome with passion—and quickly turns it on the wrong man. The effects of the elixir are equal parts hot and hilarious. Though he was once a lady’s man, Kingston, the bastard brother of the Pembroke clan, has been celibate ever since his mother fell gravely ill. But he can’t say no to Charlotte. Is she drunk on a love potion or drunk on love itself? If you ask Charlotte, she couldn’t possibly betray Billy, whose best quality is that he’s letting her choose where they live. If you ask Kingston, she’s engaged to the wrong man.

A refreshing dose of fun—and the best in the series.
When the rake is a woman instead of a man, society may not permit a happy ending.

THE RAKESS
Peckham, Scarlett
Avon/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-0-06-293561-8

When the rake is a woman instead of a man, society may not permit a happy ending.

Seraphina Arden is loved by her friends but feared by polite society. She’s a “rather unpopular figure in most circles,” thanks to her writing about women’s rights and the rumors about her numerous affairs—all completely true and unacceptable in the 1790s. She’s so notorious, in fact, that she’s had to return home to Kestrel Bay in Cornwall to work quietly on her most explosive book yet. It’s here that she meets Adam Anderson, a Scottish widower who is anxious to grow his practice as an architect so that he can provide for his two young children. She’s instantly attracted to him, proposing a no-strings-attached fling, but he resists temptation—until he doesn’t. Their attraction grows quickly, but the closer they get, the more painful memories surface for both of them; anonymous town residents keep trying to drive Seraphina away, and she abuses alcohol to cope with her past and current trauma. Adam, scared to abandon his tame but stable life, tries to let Seraphina go. When he succeeds, she is heartbroken. When she finally releases her memoir and all her secrets become public, Adam realizes he can no longer justify his choice—but it may be too late for their love to survive. This is the first book in Peckham’s new Society of Sirens series, and like its heroine, it is thrillingly complex and suspenseful. Peckham’s previously established talent for creating strong-willed heroines and heroes who respect them shines here along with her knack for creatively spicy scenes of intimacy. Given how well each member of the Society of Sirens is developed in this volume, readers will be anxious to read the next installment.

A compelling historical romance from one of the genre’s rising stars.

THE HIGHLANDER’S ENGLISH BRIDE
Kelly, Vanessa
Zebra/Kensington (448 pp.)
$7.99 paper | May 26, 2020
978-1-4201-4705-6

Nae fortune hunters, thieves, or kidnappers: Nothing stands in the way of love between a Highlander and his lady.

Headstrong Sabrina Bell knows she can fend for herself, yet Graeme Kendrick keeps rescuing her time and again. Graeme is frustrated that the Englishwoman refuses to heed his warnings and keeps attracting trouble. She’s also attracting him, but he’s too busy working for England’s chief spymaster to have time for romance. When Graeme is sent home to Scotland to keep a watchful eye during the king’s visit, he’s determined to forget Sabrina. Except when the king arrives, Sabrina is in tow and is sent to stay with Graeme’s jovial family. Not only do Sabrina’s feelings for Graeme grow, but she also adores his clan. When she travels to her family’s ancestral holdings, Graeme accompanies her, but danger continues to surround them. They’ll both have to take risks and rescue each other if they want a future together. The buildup of their romance is excruciatingly slow, as the focus is more on their external struggles. The overstuffed plot is unfocused as the pair encounter one dilemma after another, although the exploration of naiveté versus courage is thoughtful. While fans of the author’s oeuvre may enjoy seeing familiar faces from prior works, there is an overabundance of unnecessary characters. There are splendid moments of wit, chemistry, action, and heartwarming family dynamics, but they’re enveloped in an overwrought story.

Too much plot, too many characters, too many pages.

THE LAST PLACE YOU LOOK
Rey, Aurora
Bold Strokes Books (314 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Apr. 14, 2020
978-1-63555-574-5

A woman returns to her hometown in upstate New York after being unceremoniously dumped by her wife.

Julia Pierce moved to New York City after a whirlwind courtship and marriage in her early 20s. Eight years later, she has no choice but to return home after her wife leaves her for a personal trainer. Although Julia worked on and off throughout her marriage, she now realizes how eagerly she sacrificed her own goals and dreams to make her wife happy. Once back in town, Julia meets up with old classmate Taylor Winslow, not realizing Taylor had a crush on her in high school. Taylor lives simply, woodworking and making custom furniture that she sells throughout New England. Julia and Taylor have different relationship goals, so they ignore their chemistry and strike up a tentative friendship. Julia is determined to get back into the dating game and enjoy a few casual flings; Taylor is more interested in a committed, long-term relationship. Rey carefully develops a believable and poignant story arc for Julia. She realizes that even though her divorce was painful and humiliating, the real tragedy was losing her sense of her own identity and ambition. After Taylor asks Julia to help photograph a local wedding, Julia realizes she has a talent for photography. Taylor’s arc is more subtle but is still deftly handled. She is confident in her work and place in the world, but as her friendship with Julia slowly evolves into love, she’s afraid to fully reveal her feelings. The romance is satisfying and full-bodied, with each character learning how to achieve her own goals and still be part of a couple.

A heartwarming story of two lovers learning to move past their fears and commit to a shared future.
After becoming the star of a viral video, a software engineer swears off dating. Samiah Brooks is horrified to discover her new boyfriend was cheating on her with not just one, but two other women. After her very public breakup with him goes viral, she’s surprised to find herself developing a close friendship with the other two girlfriends. The three women vow to work on achieving their individual goals rather than hunting for better boyfriends. Samiah, a talented and successful software engineer, decides to finally develop an app that would help people find platonic friends through shared interests. However, Samiah’s vow to swear off men is challenged by a new colleague at her high-powered Austin tech firm. Daniel Collins is a hardworking and handsome new member of her team. Instead of laughing at her viral breakup video, he is genuinely worried about her wellbeing. They strike up a tentative friendship, but Samiah doesn’t realize Daniel has his own reasons for fighting his growing attraction: He’s working undercover for the Department of the Treasury, investigating a possible connection between their firm and a money laundering ring. Rochon is a romance master who adeptly writes interesting and dynamic characters. Samiah’s work ethic and need for control are rooted in childhood adversity, but she still craves friendship and love. After her public humiliation, she’s relieved that Daniel seems so trustworthy and kind; meanwhile, he’s tortured by the fact that lying to her is a requirement of his real job. The conflict is nonexistent since the will-they-won’t-they hand-wringing never feels serious enough to keep Noah and Andie truly apart. It’s a surefire happy ending without any major stakes. The large Sinclair family is consistently involved in setting the main characters up; this will delight fans of Scott’s Accidental Billionaires series, though it may feel overwhelming to new readers.

A richly layered conflict adds depth and complexity to this charming workplace romance.

ENCHANTED
Scott, J.S.
Montlake Romance (251 pp.)
$12.95 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-5420-1890-6

Beneath the Cancun sun, a free-spirited travel writer must teach a workaholic, blue-collar billionaire the art of relaxation.

Nearly two decades ago, 18-year-old Noah Sinclair was put in charge of his younger siblings by his mother’s dying wish. Now his siblings are all adults, forging their own lives and finding love, and Noah’s brother Owen is determined to stage an intervention to get Noah to take some time off. To do so, he’s enlisted the help of family friend Andie Lawrence. It’s Andie’s job to spend two weeks in Cancun writing a travel story for her blog while also covertly coaxing Noah to stop checking his email and enjoy the vacation his siblings bought him for Christmas. Complications arise as Andie realizes her childhood crush on Noah isn’t exactly gone and Noah still can’t seem to remember her name. Though this is certainly a romance, with Andie playing the role of the off-limits best friend of Noah’s little brother, the writing about Cancun is intense in its aspirational, lifestyles-of-the-rich-and-famous level of detail. There are private jets, picturesque resorts, and bejeweled bracelets. It’s a fantasy that Andie and Noah give in to at the slightest nudge, quickly embarking on a vacation fling, but the reality is that both are masking grief: Noah with his demanding work schedule and Andie with her carefree, untouchable attitude. The conflict is nonexistent despite the will-they-won’t-they hand-wringing never feels serious enough to keep Noah and Andie truly apart. It’s a surefire happy ending without any major stakes. The large Sinclair family is consistently involved in setting the main characters up; this will delight fans of Scott’s Accidental Billionaires series, though it may feel overwhelming to new readers.

A tepid romance in an indulgent setting.

NIGHT OF THE BILLIONAIRE WOLF
Spear, Terry
Sourcebooks Casablanca (352 pp.)
$7.99 paper | May 26, 2020
978-1-4926-9778-7

A search for a mysterious message in the forest leads two gray wolf shifters to battle multiple dangers together and eventually find love.

Lupus garou Lexi Summerfield is on a mission to find a time-sensitive message her father—who is in the witness protection program for testifying against a crime boss—has hidden in Redwood National Park. While there, she doesn’t expect to run into a sexy bodyguard and fellow wolf shifter. Lexi, who built a wildly popular cosmetics company, reluctantly accepts help from the vacationing Ryder Gallagher while rescuing trapped bear cubs during a sudden storm. Ryder is immediately attracted to the confident Lexi and refuses to leave her to face an escalating series of dangers, but Lexi is aloof; she’s weary of men who are only after her money and struggling to deal with the recent loss of her mother to a ferry accident as well as her father’s going into hiding. Lexi warms up to Ryder at a glacial pace as she shoots a promotional video while evading mobsters sent to find her father, deals with a pesky paparazzo, and fends off a rival trying to wreck her company—all while racing to find the life-changing information her father needs to get to her.

The characters are very likable, but their romance develops too slowly and lacks chemistry, weighed down by a convoluted plot.
The remarkable athletic feats of one woman from the late 1800s to the early 1900s.

When Charlotte “Lottie” Dod (1871-1960) was only 15, she appeared at Wimbledon in the traditional garb for women in those days: “an ankle-length white dress, the sleeves down to her wrists, the body of the dress up to the middle of her neck, with a corset underneath, her legs covered in thick black stockings, her feet clad in the sort of clunky black leather shoes worn by washerwomen, [and] her head protected from the sun by a delicate white cricket cap.” Despite her restrictive dress, she won the tournament—and proceeded to win four more Wimbledon titles. From there, she turned her attention to other sports: ice skating; mountain climbing some of the most dangerous peaks in Norway and Switzerland; field hockey; cycling; and archery, a sport in which she won a silver medal in the 1908 Olympics. In this comprehensive and highly detailed account of Dod’s life, freelance journalist Abramsky chronicles her interests and winnings in each of the sports to which she devoted her attention. The author explores the difficulties Dod faced because she was a woman but also shares how she overcame the obstacles of a micromanaging mother and a repressive society to freely pursue her career in sports. To provide valuable context, Abramsky includes major events that occurred during Dod’s lifetime, including the two world wars and Queen Victoria’s reign and death. Even though Dod was a phenom in her day, she was largely forgotten without TV, movies, or social media to carry her name forward. Fortunately for sports fans and students of women’s studies, Dod won’t be overlooked thanks to Abramsky’s thorough biography. The author’s historical portrait helps readers appreciate Dod’s amazing feats long before Title IX was ever conceived.

A welcome resurrection of a true pioneer. (full-color photo insert, bibliography, endnotes)
On April 22, we will celebrate Earth Day, an event that, in the face of climate change and environmental degradation, grows in significance with each passing year. In this Earth Issue, you will find plenty of interesting food for thought regarding our planet and the necessity of nourishing and protecting it. Later in this section, Mary Ann Gwinn provides a list of five contemporary classics of environmental literature, including Kirkus Prize winner The Gulf by Jack E. Davis. To complement that list, here are five good choices for Earth Day reading.

Magdalena by Wade Davis (Knopf, April 14): In "an elegant narrative masterfully combining fine reporting and a moving personal journey," Davis delivers another excellent book that includes elements of memoir, adventure, anthropology, and investigative reporting. The author, a winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize and former explorer-in-residence at the National Geographic Society, chronicles the history and current state of the so-called Mississippi River of Colombia. Davis moves from the early Natives all the way to the present, demonstrating the profound impact of the river on the people of Colombia—and vice versa.

The Incredible Journey of Plants by Stefano Mancuso (Other Press, March 17): Mancuso follows up The Revolutionary Genius of Plants with this engaging, illuminating, and surprisingly lively study of plant life," a narrative that "smoothly balances expansive historical exploration with recent scientific research through stories of how various plant species are capable of migrating to locations throughout the world by means of air, water, and even via animals." The professor of plant science is especially insightful regarding the vast interconnectedness of nature and the absolute necessity of plant migration. Though the illustrations leave much to be desired, this is an "authoritative, engaging study of plant life, accessible to younger readers as well as adults."

Reef Life by Callum Roberts (Pegasus, March 3): A perfect choice for scuba divers, snorkelers, and eager armchair adventurers, Roberts’ exploration of the ecology of the world’s reefs is a page-turner. The author, who has won both the Rachel Carson Award and the Mountbatten Award, has been studying marine biology for more than 40 years, and it shows. Not just a primer on reefs and the animals and plants that inhabit them, this book, "a charming, well-written introduction to coral-reef ecology and the scientists who uncover its mysteries," serves as a call to action as reefs around the world continue to bleach and die.

Rivers of Power by Laurence C. Smith (Little Brown Spark, April 21): Like Wade Davis, Smith, an environmental scientist, is fascinated by rivers. In his latest book, the author takes a wide view to demonstrate the importance of these watery arteries, especially pertinent in a time when we continue to clog them with pollution. It’s a "valuable, well-observed work of history and geography" in which Smith "examines historical precedents along the Nile, Yangtze, and other rivers to project how these drivers of history, 'supercharged fuel lines' of planetary energy, will affect the future."

Becoming Wild by Carl Safina (Henry Holt, April 14): A new book from Safina is always cause for celebration. As one of our most significant nature writers, the author has delivered such top-notch books as Beyond Words and The View From Lazy Point. Here, Safina turns his sharp eye to the "culture" of animals and how three species—sperm whales, scarlet macaws, and chimpanzees—demonstrate behavior, especially within social groups, that is remarkably similar to that of humans. It’s yet another triumph for Safina, an "enthralling account of three animals that lead complex social lives and deserve to continue living."

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
SWAY
Unravelling Unconscious Bias

Agarwal, Pragya
Bloomsbury Sigma (448 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-4729-7135-7

A serious exploration of the neuroscience and psychology of bias.

Reaching back into prehistory, she identifies tribalism as a precursor. Early man had no doubt that his tribe was superior to all others, and this had a Darwinian survival value because it was undoubtedly safer to assume a stranger was dangerous than not. The author divides biases into conscious and unconscious but emphasizes the second, which seems innate and is thus often called “instinct.” However, writes Agarwal, “when it comes to making important decisions about people or situations, we cannot always rely on instinct. Darwin defined instinct as independent of experience, but more recent research has shown that it is fluid and malleable.” Indeed, many biases are formed throughout life. By age 6 or 7, humans begin stereotyping according to race and gender. The author turns up a genetic disorder, Williams Syndrome, that produces children who are extremely friendly because they lack a fear of strangers; a study showed that they were also much less biased about racial issues. In the first half of the book, Agarwal reviews studies on bias and the debates over their findings; these sections will be a tough slog for general readers. Matters improve when the author, a British citizen born in India and no stranger to gender and racial bias, describes her own experiences as well as the specific biases of gender, race, beauty and age, and speech, along with many dismal statistics—e.g., 14% of whites have been wrongly accused of shoplifting compared with 38% of ethnic minorities. Although Agarwal has been a TED speaker, her writing lacks a similar charismatic appeal, but 400 pages of academic prose, dense with footnotes, reveal important insights.

Solid, definitely-not-dumbed-down popular science.

BROTHER ROBERT
Growing Up With Robert Johnson

Anderson, Annye C. with Lauterbach, Preston
Da Capo (224 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-306-84526-0

Robert Johnson’s nonagenarian stepsister shows sides of him that few have seen.

Part of the aura of Johnson’s eminence atop the blues world has been the mystery surrounding him. Much of his public presence has been established through a single photograph and some 29 recorded songs, which were cheaply recorded and weren’t widely distributed until decades after his death (also shrouded in mystery). Adding to that aura was the legend that he had come to his blues mastery by selling his soul to the devil down at the “Crossroads”—the title of the song that would become much better known as performed by Eric Clapton. If the Johnson of myth and legend is somewhat bare-boned, this memoir, co-authored by Lauterbach, adds flesh and blood. Anderson was only 12 when the older stepbrother she knew as “Brother Robert” died, but her memory remains vivid and detailed. The bluesman she knew was no unschooled primitive but rather a crowd-pleasing showman who could mimic country favorites such as Gene Autry and Jimmie Rodgers. As Anderson recalls, “In addition to yodeling, [he] had other talents. He could play with both hands” and “could play spoons, too.” The first part of the memoir recalls the brother she knew that others didn’t while the second part details “how my family lost Brother Robert again,” as exploiters took advantage of the family’s photos and memories and turned Johnson into a popular commodity without sharing more than
A welcome update of classic works on California’s arid backcountry
by Mary Austin, Marc Reisner, and Reyner Banham.

MIRACLE COUNTRY

A sharp, eye-opening assessment of urgent architectural needs being fulfilled.

scrapes with the family. The genealogy is occasionally confusing, and the late appearance of an unacknowledged son complicates the legal claim, but this memoir represents a valiant attempt to set the record straight and give Johnson’s family their due.

An illuminating portrait of an artist lost in the mists of history and mystery. (photos)

THE GREAT INDOORS
The Surprising Science of How Buildings Shape Our Behavior, Health, and Happiness
Anthes, Emily
Scientific American/Farrar, Straus and Giroux (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 23, 2020
978-0-374-16663-2

How architects and scientists are fashioning remarkable environments from the inside out. Science journalist Anthes follows up on her award-winning Frankenstein’s Cat, about animal biotechnology, with an exploration of how “good architecture” in our indoor environment “can help us lead healthier, happier, more productive lives; create mote just, humane societies; and increase our odds of survival in a precarious world.” The author begins with the “burgeoning field of indoor ecology” and “invisible menagerie of organisms that inhabit our houses.” Among the useful lessons she imparts: Keep houses dry, clean shower heads, and avoid cleaning materials that contain added antimicrobials. Hospitals, writes Anthes, are providing more private rooms to reduce infections and adding windows with relaxing, outdoor landscapes and “circadian lighting” to speed up recovery time. Furthermore, better designed, patient-centered operating rooms are creating more efficient, safer space. Architects are embracing the “power of stairs” in housing structures to encourage exercise while “cutting-edge, eco-friendly schools” offer more open spaces to encourage student interaction. As the author shows, environmental changes to office spaces can increase productivity and provide workers with more personal empowerment. “Accessible design” has given way to “universal design,” with architects and engineers incorporating changes for the disabled, including “autism-friendly places.” Climate change has spurred the development of “amphibious architecture” and floating houses. Anthes inspects Iranian architect Nader Khalili’s amazing SuperAdobe “earthbag” houses, which can be built quickly for disaster-relief shelter, and she chronicles her travel to Norway, where she toured a maximum security prison that “is designed to look, and function, like a small village.” As she writes, “the goal isn’t to coddle the inmates but to nurture and rehabilitate them.” Though some readers may be overwhelmed by the amount of information presented, the majority of it is fascinating and well worth pondering.

A welcome update of classic works on California’s arid backcountry by Mary Austin, Marc Reisner, and Reyner Banham.

MIRACLE COUNTRY
A Memoir
Atleework, Kendra
Algonquin (368 pp.)
$27.95 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-1-61620-998-8

A sensitive, thoughtful portrait of a part of California that few people see—or want to.

The area around Bishop, California, was robbed of its water decades ago to fuel the growth of greater Los Angeles. That is the central fact of Atleework’s celebration of a place swept by vast dust storms and economic dislocation, its neighboring mountains prone to burst into flames at a moment’s notice. Another central fact is a family that is indisputably eccentric but perfectly suited to the place. “Every family cultivates a culture and lives by its own strangeness until the strangeness turns normal and the rest of the world looks a little off,” she writes, and the aperçu is exactly right. Her mother labored for years under the death sentence of a little-understood cancer while her father sold maps he made and explored the surrounding country with the inquisitive intensity of a 19th-century surveyor. All deserts are places of absence, but the desert of the Eastern Sierra is more lacking than most. As Atleework writes, “In my first five years of life, less than twelve inches of precipitation fell.” And yet, as one environmentalist remarks, the fact that LA takes away such little water as the place can deliver means that growth is something for other places to experience. The locals like it that way just fine, by Atleework’s sometimes repetitive account. One who traveled to LA for medical treatment returned appalled by the smog and traffic, even more so by plans to desalinate ocean water to sustain still more growth. “Imagine this state with unlimited water,” he told the author. “Just because you can do something doesn’t mean you should.” It makes a fine motto for a region that Atleework clearly loves.

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THE ECONOMIC CASE FOR LGBT EQUALITY
Why Fair and Equal Treatment Benefits Us All
Badgett, M.V. Lee
Beacon (240 pp.)
$26.95 | May 19, 2020
978-0-8070-3560-3

A treatise on how restricting LGBT rights negatively impacts global economies.

In the latest entry in the publisher’s Queer Action/Queer Ideas series, economics professor Badgett presents a persuasive case for LGBT rights within financial arenas and how those
promote broader liberties. Drawing from a wealth of research studies, the author scrutinizes the tangible losses from unfair discriminatory practices. Her argument centers around the conviction that LGBT inclusion and unilateral equality are critical to the long-term prosperity of businesses and the economy. While LGBT discrimination erodes community morale incrementally over time, the same is true “from an economic perspective”—eventually, “it adds up.” Examining education, employment, and health care, for example, Badgett clearly outlines the tremendous humanitarian benefits of workplace equality, anti-bullying school regulations, and other initiatives that pave the way to greater economic growth, improved employee retention and productivity, diversified workforces, and a healthier populace. She describes how these ideas are already gaining momentum around the world, with global brands proudly aligning with their LGBT employees with respect to fairness practices and tolerance regulations. The author is at her analytical best in her discussions of the toll inequality takes on commerce. She shows how exclusionary practices rob businesses of vital personnel and damage reputations, citing World Bank studies, interviews, and personal anecdotes from local sources alongside countries like Canada, India, South Africa, and the Philippines. In the final chapter, Badgett offers logical action items for business leaders and prospective activists as well as for readers already involved in social reform advocacy. Though the opinions and language of economists and human rights advocates may differ, the base-line goals are inclusion and equality for the LGBT community. The author’s concise, sound arguments demonstrate why it is necessary to “expand freedom and equality” across the globe.

Both a convincing discussion and a call to reformatory action for LGBT equality across economic sectors of the world.
An illuminating contribution to the literature of race and racism in America.

**LIFE OF A KLANSMAN**

The National Book Award winner continues his investigation of his Southern roots.

Where *Slaves in the Family* (1998) and *The Sweet Hell Inside* (2001) explored the author’s ancestors’ relations with the people they enslaved, his latest potent exploration of the past is a study of an even more willful evil. The man whom Ball refers to as “our Klansman” had a “pretty name,” or so his mother said: Polycarp Constant Lecorgne. The author, a consummate historical excavator, has known this “family story” since childhood, but it took a long while to face; it’s a story that “begins with a woman making notes and talking about family and ends with a lot of people dead in a ditch.” Lecorgne was a product of his time, to be sure, but worse than most, drummed out of the Confederate Army for his part in a drunken riot, “allowed to flee, rather than face prison.” That shame did not keep him from becoming a committed member of white supremacist groups including the KKK, in which he committed heinous crimes, participating in the murders of freed black citizens and even a siege of a local police station—though, thanks to a government report noted, “in the habit of shooting at blacks” and even a siege of a local police station—though, thanks to a government report noted, “in the habit of shooting at blacks” and even a siege of a local police station—though, thanks to a government report noted, “in the habit of shooting at blacks” and even a siege of a local police station—though, thanks to a government report noted, “in the habit of shooting at blacks” and even a siege of a local police station—though, thanks to a government report noted, “in the habit of shooting at blacks” and even a siege of a local police station—though, thanks to a government report noted, “in the habit of shooting at blacks”

**BASELESS**

The versatile author of fiction and nonfiction chronicles his “not entirely successful efforts to squeeze germs of truth from the sanitized documentary record of the U.S. government.”

In his latest, Baker, a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, among others, writes about his work from March 9, 2019 through May 19, 2019. During those months, he intensively explored mountains of documents to determine whether the government deployed illegal biological weapons during the Korean War. To search for truth about the biological weapons, Baker sent Freedom of Information Act requests to numerous government agencies, and he received radio silence. The daily diary pings between the flaws in the FIA—a 1966 law meant to encourage transparency by federal agencies—and the substance of what the author gleaned about biological warfare. To lighten a relentlessly downbeat narrative, Baker, ever articulate and witty, also introduces readers to his Maine home, which he shares with his wife and dogs, as well as the local weather, walks in the nearby wilderness, and other elements of his daily life. For readers who care about government openness, the narrative will be simultaneously illuminating and profoundly depressing. Because Congress failed to include enforcement mechanisms other than the possibility of time-consuming, expensive lawsuits, government agencies subject to the FIA violate it with impunity and suffer no penalties as a result. The custodians of the records often treat the documents as personal property rather than information financed, and thus owned, by taxpayers. The leading villains in Baker’s saga, which he aptly describes as “a sort of case study, or diary, or daily meditation, on the pathology of government secrecy,” are the Air Force, Army, and CIA, and his disclosures are rarely banal but rather consistently provocative and disturbing. Using both direct and circumstantial evidence, the author suggests that illegal weapons have been used against North Korea and perhaps against so-called enemy forces in other nations.

Readers should be impressed by Baker’s persistence, and most will end up charmed, however obliquely, by his obsessions.

**PELOSI**

A cradle-to-today portrait of a master politician who “shattered the ‘marble ceiling’ and blazed a new trail for women.”

Born in 1940 into an avidly political family, Nancy D’Alesandro absorbed a great deal about electoral politics from her father—a five-term Congressman and, later, three-term mayor of Baltimore—and from her mother, who supported her
husband's campaigning in addition to raising seven children (tragically, one died at age 3). TIME national political correspondent and CNN political analyst Ball uses numerous memorable anecdotes to portray Pelosi's childhood, adolescence, early married life, and mothering of five children. Establishing a family base in San Francisco because of her husband's career in finance, Pelosi had no initial plans to enter politics. Ball explains clearly how that opinion evolved, with Pelosi entering the U.S. House of Representatives in 1987. In large portions of the narrative, the author focuses on Pelosi's remarkable ability to overcome myriad stereotypes and outright misogyny to achieve even more powerful positions in the House. Ball delves into Pelosi's leadership on a variety of controversial issues—e.g., the Iraq War (“to Pelosi and, by that point, most Americans, it seemed devastatingly obvious that the war had been a tragic misadventure”) and the 2008 financial meltdown—while also offering intriguing information about her professional relationships with Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and dozens of other recognizable names. It is no surprise that Pelosi is a relentless workaholic, and Ball provides plenty of instructive examples.

Other personal details—"she never drank alcohol, rarely had caffeine that wasn't from her beloved dark chocolate and didn't need more than a few hours' sleep per night"—add human touches to a subject who is intensely private and never "indulges in public introspection." Ultimately, this is a portrait of a persistent, fearless leader undaunted in the face of relentless opposition. Ball obviously admires Pelosi, but this is not a hagiography.

A top-notch political biography. (photo insert)
Considering her youthfulness, Barnett has accomplished more reform than most individuals could accomplish in two lifetimes.

A KNOCK AT MIDNIGHT
A Story of Hope, Justice, and Freedom
Barnett, Brittany K.
Crown (336 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-1-9848-2578-0

A welcome new addition to the groaning shelves of books about the critically flawed U.S. legal system.

For the first 90 pages, Barnett, born in 1984, focuses on her youth as a black female in rural East Texas whose drug-addicted mother ended up in prison. In the remainder of the book, the author mixes straightforward memoir with inspiring accounts of her crusades for social justice. Determined to avoid her mother's fate, Barnett worked diligently to graduate from college, after which she found work at a top accounting firm and then earned a law degree. The author is painfully aware of the racism built into the criminal justice system, including the absurd prison terms handed down to black drug users and dealers—the most egregious being "the 100-to-1 crack-to-powder-cocaine sentencing ratio." Though corporate law was her initial goal, while studying for a criminal law course, Barnett learned about Sharanda Jones, who had received a life sentence for a first-time drug offense. The author poignantly writes about how she was able to identify with families torn apart by such heavy-handed sentences. After obtaining a job in the finance and banking group of a corporate law firm in 2011, Barnett devoted her spare time to advocacy. She hoped to win the release of Jones and others in similar situations through reversals in the appellate courts. When that avenue failed, the author decided that seeking clemency from the president was the only option, no matter the long odds—especially given Barack Obama's general reluctance to grant pardons. Eventually, however, Obama granted clemency to Jones and other pro bono clients of Barnett's. In 2016, the author left her corporate career to follow her passion for representing "all those suffering under draconian drug-sentencing laws." Among her impressive not-for-profit initiatives are the Buried Alive Project and the Girls Embracing Mothers project.

Considering her youthfulness, Barnett has accomplished more reform than most individuals could accomplish in two lifetimes.

THE HOUR OF FATE
Theodore Roosevelt, J. P. Morgan, and the Battle to Transform American Capitalism
Berfield, Susan
Bloomsbury (400 pp.)
$30.00 | May 5, 2020
978-1-63557-249-0

A focused history of the turn-of-the-century series of events during which President Theodore Roosevelt and railroad magnate J. P. Morgan clashed over power and boundaries, paving the way for a progressive moment in America.

In her well-paced debut, Bloomberg Businessweek investigative reporter Berfield ambitiously juggles several historic threads from a turbulent time in America: soaring immigration, labor unrest in the face of low wages and dangerous conditions, the seemingly untrammeled ambitions of big business, and the clamor for public accountability and oversight. Following the assassination of William McKinley, Roosevelt assumed the presidency as a young, untested hero of the Spanish-American War. At the time, he was greatly feared by the Wall Street monopoly for his progressivism. Morgan had created the behemoth U.S. Steel, and he maintained firm control over the "coal roads" in Pennsylvania, the railroads, and Wall Street finance. In 1901, along with a few other titans, he formed the Northern Securities railroad trust; a year later, Roosevelt asked his attorney general to prosecute the corporation for violating the Sherman Antitrust Act, which had been passed into law in 1890.
At this crucial historic intersection, writes the author in a particularly engaging section, “tens of thousands of miners were also demanding that the nation honor its commitment to justice even as the coal barons denied it. Their fight would become one of the greatest labor actions in American history, and would redefine Roosevelt’s presidency in the months ahead.” In October 1902, Morgan “committed a surprising act of diplomacy,” bringing the coal barons together with labor leader John Mitchell, and the strike was settled. On March 14, 1904, the Supreme Court handed Morgan a stunning defeat, forcing Northern Securities to dissolve within 30 days. The decision, notes Berfield, cemented Roosevelt’s popularity; he “had tipped the scales back toward ordinary Americans, and many were devoted to him.”

An engaging historical work involving truly larger-than-life American characters. (b/w images)

THE EDUCATION OF JOHN ADAMS
Bernstein, R.B.

John Adams (1735-1826) does not lack biographers, but this book by a fellow lawyer delivers provocative insights and makes clear why he remains our least charismatic Founding Father.

Lacking Washington’s gravitas or Jefferson’s or Madison’s political acumen, Adams excelled as a prosecutor—pointing out British offenses against American rights in the 1774-1777 Continental Congress—and as a constitutional scholar. Bernstein agrees with historians that his major contribution to the republic was the American system of government. Unlike Jefferson and Paine, who claimed that whatever government the common people chose would be perfect, Adams insisted that humans were selfish, competitive, and envious. His solution was our present balance-of-power structure of executive-legislative-judiciary. His career may have peaked during the Continental Congress, where he led the fight for independence. Jefferson later called Adams “our Colossus on the floor.” Sent to France in 1778, it irritated its government by pushing American interests more aggressively than the far more agreeable Benjamin Franklin. They didn’t get along; indeed, it seems that not getting along with people was an Adams specialty. He spent an unhappy eight years as vice president, an unexpectedly powerless office, and “narrowly” won the 1796 presidential election. Entering office in 1797, Adams kept Washington’s cabinet almost intact. A mediocre group, they preferred Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton to the new president. On some issues, they publicly disagreed with Adams and worked against his policies. Equally disloyal, Vice President Jefferson spent his term campaigning for the 1800 election. Adams left office bitter and unpopular. It is only in the last 50 years that scholars have agreed that his political ideas reveal more insights into the real world than competing Founding Fathers. David McCullough’s bestselling 2001 biography smooths out many rough edges that Bernstein does not ignore in this more balanced rehabilitation.

A thoughtful account of John Adams’ ideas and life, warts and all.
THE JAKARTA METHOD
Washington’s Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program That Shaped Our World
Bevins, Vincent
PublicAffairs (320 pp.)
$28.00 | May 19, 2020
978-1-5417-4240-6

A veteran international correspondent uncovers the highly disturbing history of a mid-1960s “apocalyptic slaughter” in Indonesia, Latin America, and beyond, undertaken as part of America’s aggressively anti-communist foreign policy.

As Bevins, who covered Southeast Asia for the Washington Post, describes, this particular era of U.S. foreign policy began to take shape after World War II, eventually leading to the Cold War standoff between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The main thrust of the author’s certain-to-be-controversial thesis revolves around U.S. government intervention in Indonesia. In the 1960s, after shrugging off the yoke of Dutch colonizers, the island nation “was home to the world’s largest Communist Party outside the Soviet Union and China.” Adding to the threat, according to anxious American political and military leaders at the time, Indonesia, with the sixth-largest population in the world, was also “the world’s largest Muslim-majority country.” After the U.S. played a significant role in ousting Indonesia’s communist leaders during the early part of the 1960s, the new, virulently anti-communist leaders initiated a frighteningly widespread murderous cleansing. “In total,” writes the author, “it is estimated that between five hundred thousand and one million people were slaughtered, and one million more were herded into concentration camps.”

As Bevins continued his research beyond Indonesia, he identified nearly 20 other nations targeted by the U.S. for mass murders of alleged communists and ancillary troublemakers seen as anti-capitalists. Other than Indonesia, the focus is most heavily on Brazil, but he at least touches on the other countries affected by American actions, creating a shocking portrait that few readers will forget. Bevins is convinced that most Americans today are aware of this particularly bloody era of U.S. foreign policy, and he’s likely right. Although his conclusions will be treated as unbelievable or exaggerated by some, his research is solid and his conclusions convincing.

A well-delineated excavation of yet another dark corner of American history.

UNION
A Democrat, a Republican, and a Search for Common Ground
Blashek, Jordan & Haugh, Christopher
Little, Brown (304 pp.)
$28.00 | May 5, 2020
978-0-316-42379-3

On road trips across the country, two friends confront their deeply held beliefs.

Making their book debut, former Marine Blashek, now an investor in New York City, and Haugh, a journalist who was an intern in the Obama White House and served on the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, recount the evolution of their friendship, and their views about America, as they traveled to 44 states over the course of three years. The authors met at Yale Law School, and though they thought one another interesting and sympathetic, they found themselves frustratingly enmeshed in “suffocating ideological debates, politics, and the drawing of lines.” Blashek, a Republican, was quick to defend Donald Trump from attacks, suspicious of Haugh’s liberal stance. Haugh, raised by an activist single mother in Berkeley, “had grown up among protests.” While Blashek believed that Trump’s policy on immigration stemmed from a commitment to protect Americans from criminals, Haugh insisted that Trump was racist and, moreover, stoked racism among his followers. “Disagreements lingered,”
the authors write, growing “deeper and more painful” as their arguments intensified. In 2017, with their plans for the future in flux, they decided to set off in search of the nation they felt they hardly knew. Their travels took them to a Trump rally in Phoenix, one week after the Charlottesville incident, where, to their surprise, Trump delivered “a script of unity and hope.” Despite protestors and heavily armed militiamen, they witnessed people engaged in passionate—but respectful—argument, unlike the conflicts reported by the media. “They were actually listening to one another,” the authors note. As they traveled, discovering communities bound by “a deep reservoir of social capital,” they learned that “finding common ground wasn’t about getting to agreement. It was about getting to the point where disagreement didn’t matter as much.” Both men, genial guides, ended their travels with a sense of hope about “how [things] could be if we act together to make it so.”

An insightful look at contemporary America.

The story of Hitler’s 1943 effort to assassinate the three world leaders at their conference in Tehran.

The plot was announced by the notoriously paranoid Stalin, who urged Franklin Roosevelt to move to the well-bugged Soviet Embassy. After a review of Nazi intelligence leaders and their well-documented, generally disastrous, covert operations, journalist Blum introduces his hero, Secret Service agent Mike Reilly, who was obsessively concerned about protecting FDR and accompanied him and worried intensely as the plot unfolded. The author concentrates on events in Iran, a neutral
Hope Jahren decamped from the United States for Norway in 2016, the same year Knopf published her brilliant, quirky, bestselling memoir, Lab Girl. The Wilson Professor and Researcher at the Centre for Earth Evolution and Dynamics at the University of Oslo resumed her biochemical analyses. Last September, she turned 50.

That half-century interval plays a starring role in her new book, The Story of More: How We Got to Climate Change and Where To Go From Here (Vintage, March 3). Much of the book calculates from 50 years ago.

On a recent evening, Jahren jumped onto a Zoom call from her home study. Seated at her desk and framed by bookshelves, she twirled a glass of cabernet and took questions, her Minnesota accent carrying across an ocean.

This is a much longer title for your second book, no?

It came to me in the middle. This book was years and years of plowing through these big data sets: from governments, historical records, censuses, farm yields, Norwegian fishermen's newsletters. And a pattern kept repeating itself that I could sum up in one word: more. The pattern had a bottomless quality to it: more, I mean MORE [Jahren elongates the word and stretches the M].

I really wanted the reader to immerse themselves in the breadth and depth of the MORE. And it sounds good in the mouth—one word wraps around what you do every day. Since 1969, the total amount of energy that people use every day has tripled. The total amount of electricity that people use every day has quadrupled. Global fossil fuel use has nearly tripled. The production of plastics has increased tenfold.

In the opening pages, you write, “Most of the trees you see out your window were barely seeds in 1969.” What are you hoping to evoke?

I wanted this book to read like a story. I teach that way—let me tell you the story of when you let go of this ball and it falls to the ground, the physics of that. It’s the best way to have a story stick. Climate change isn’t this thing that big, bad corporations did; it’s the story of our lives, it’s the story of the meal I once ate with my dad as opposed to the one I just ate with my son....Learning is the most beautiful thing we do as people. I want the reader to walk away from this book a little different than when she walked in.
You appear to enjoy recapping various authorities crying doom around overpopulation through the centuries.

People were wringing their hands about overpopulation since forever. It seems sacrilegious to write a book about climate change that tries to be funny. But science is as beautiful and as flawed as any other human endeavor. And I write from a female perspective. I point out that mother pigs are working harder than they ever have. I talk about running a sewing machine. I use women’s symbols and experiences. A huge number of my readers are women. I love that. Science took me out of the world of women, but books brought me back.

Your tone is at odds with the one that many environmental writers take.

There is a big difference between teaching and preaching. I try to approach the reader with respect. I believe people can learn because I can learn. My job is to learn using integrity and care and then communicate this as honestly and clearly as I can. That’s where my job ends. I have to trust that people will come up with their own judgment. These are the principles that guide my life, that are so missing in the way we talk about climate change and its impacts.

Do you mean these conversations are dismissive, disrespectful, and politicized?

[Jahren laughs.] People have calcified into their positions—including scientists, and that’s really too bad. A lot of the dialogue about climate change is based on fear, and people don’t make good decisions when they are afraid. Making someone afraid is not the same as informing them. What comes of fear is often paralysis. And propaganda is an abuse of my profession. Why should someone write another book on climate change? Good grief, does Hope Jahren really need to write another one on climate change? I wanted to perhaps inspire courage instead of fear. That’s what I owe the people who educated me and took care of me all these years. [She pauses, draws a deep breath.] I’m getting very emotional here.

Your son is 16 now. Do you and he talk about Greta Thunberg?

Greta is an exceptional person; she is going to have an exceptional life. She is skilled beyond her years. But I find putting the impetus to deal with the biggest challenge of our generation on the heads of our children outrageously unfair. I am excited to hear what she has to say after she, say, graduates college. She is addressing this tremendously heavy burden that we have no right to lay on her.

Who do you hope reads this book?

I hope it gets to young people. I purposely left out the naughty language, which I was told was a problem with Lab Girl. I hope they read the book and read the world differently. Does it feel different when you drive your car or when you buy your plane tickets? I gave what I could [with this book], and I want to see what people give back.

I had people tell me I was naïve, but I was always taught love is a gift and hope is a duty and we can’t give up on the world we compromised. Every generation has to wrestle with the specter of its demise, and this is ours. In the end, we work with only four resources: Earth, sky, ocean, and each other. If we can refrain from overestimating the likelihood of failure, then we must not underestimate our capacity for success.

Karen R. Long manages the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards for the Cleveland Foundation. The Story of More was reviewed in the Feb. 1, 2020, issue.
Boyle illustrates his points with many specific cases and generally avoids the jargon that bogs down military history, and his global perspective is likely to make the text more useful in the long run.

during World War II. In the early fall of 1941, two months after Germany attacked Russia, Britain and Russia invaded, ostensibly to fend off Nazi influence but in reality to ensure Britain’s access to Iranian oil and protect the Trans-Iranian Railway, a major route of supplies to the Soviet army. According to Blum (and a 2003 Russian history loudly promoted by that country’s intelligence service), Operation Long Jump, a Nazi operation to assassinate the three leaders, was already in the works when news that they would meet in Tehran pushed it into high gear. Most of the book concerns the operation in which several heavily armed Nazi teams parachuted into Iran with plans to meet up with agents, infiltrate the embassy through an unguarded water tunnel, overwhelm the guards, and murder the leaders. But Soviet spies gave plenty of advance warning, allowing Stalin’s forces to deal with them. Few survived. The existence of Long Jump remains controversial among historians, except those in Russia. Blum acknowledges this, emphasizing that he “wanted to write a suspenseful, character-driven story of men, heroes and villains, caught up in a tense, desperate time who needed to find the courage and cunning to do their duty for their countries and to fulfill their own sense of honor.” The result is a breathless drama in novelistic form with insight into the characters’ conversations, thoughts, and emotions.

Lowbrow history but an entertaining story of skulduggery in a WWII backwater. (8-page b/w photo insert)

THE DRONE AGE
How Drone Technology Will Change War and Peace
Boyle, Michael J.
Oxford Univ. (384 pp.)
$29.95 | Jun. 1, 2020
978-0-19-063586-2

Drones have become nearly ubiquitous over the last two decades. Here’s a detailed look at how they developed and what they may become.

Boyle, a professor of political science and senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, begins with an incident that epitomizes the image many readers have of drones: the 2011 assassination of Yemeni American imam Anwar al-Awlaki by an American drone. After looking at the legal and strategic concerns that weighed on that action, the author then steps back to survey the types of drones and their capabilities. “Targeted killings” have become the most familiar military use of drones, but they have an even more significant role in gathering intelligence, both by the military and by domestic agencies including law enforcement. However, their low cost increasingly puts them within the reach of rebel, criminal, and terrorist groups. Drones also have great potential for peaceful uses, such as disaster relief and delivery of medicine to remote areas by humanitarian organizations and by private enterprise—though most of these projects are still in the “proof of concept stage.” Some of the roles are still emerging as legal and technical issues are sorted out in response to the new technology. The author concludes with an examination of the nations—primarily the U.S., Israel, and China—for whom drone manufacture and export is becoming an important business as well as a look at future trends such as miniaturization (“nano drones no bigger than birds or insects”) and the potential of artificial intelligence–controlled autonomous drones, the proliferation of which heightens concerns about “accidental war.” Boyle illustrates his points with many specific cases and generally avoids the jargon that bogs down military history, and his global perspective is likely to make the text more useful in the long run.

A highly informative treatment of the current role and future potential of drones. (b/w photos)
“There is a persistent myth that by their very nature, humans are selfish, aggressive, and quick to panic.” British historian and journalist Bregman disagrees, making a convincing case that we’re not so bad.

In *Lord of the Flies*, a group of boys stranded on an island descend into savagery. The author turns up a real-life version that turned out much better: In 1965, six teenagers were marooned on a tiny, waterless islet, and they cooperated until their rescue 15 months later, when they were alive and healthy. Bregman’s fascinating examination of pro-depravity evidence reveals an alarming amount of error. Readers may remember the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese; newspapers reported that 38 bystanders heard her screams and did nothing. Journalistic incompetence, writes the author; multiple neighbors came to her aid. Iconic scientific studies reveal crippling flaws. In a 1971 prison study at Stanford, researchers divided students into “prisoners” and “guards.” Within days, the guards became abusive. Bregman reveals that it was a “hoax”; researchers instructed the guards to behave badly. At the peak of human depravity lies Nazi administrator Adolph Eichmann. At his 1961 trial, he portrayed himself as a desk-bound bureaucrat carrying out his boss’s orders. The phrase “the banality of evil” entered the lexicon. Subsequent research in Nazi archives revealed Eichmann as a psychopath. After cogently laying out the problem, the author turns to solutions. For example, 20% of those discharged from Norway’s cushy prisons return in two years, the world’s lowest recidivism rate and a big money-saver; in the U.S., it’s 60%. Experts agree that oppressive prisons increase crime, but reform efforts invariably fizzle; “coddling” criminals outrages most Americans. Bregman describes businesses without bosses, schools in which teachers assume that students want to learn, and local governments in which citizens exert genuine power wisely. Readers may wonder why these are not spreading like wildfire. Since good studies show that deeply held false beliefs remain immune to evidence, human depravity must qualify.

A powerful argument in favor of human virtue that will probably not catch on. (b/w illustrations)
The Gulf: The Making of An American Sea by Jack E. Davis (Liveright/Norton, 2017). This Kirkus Prize– and Pulitzer Prize–winner tells the story of the Gulf of Mexico, from its birth in prehistory to its struggle to survive the age of petrochemicals. Davis, professor of history at the University of Florida, brings the history of the Gulf to life and examines the daunting challenges faced by those fighting to preserve an ocean that has become both a dumping ground for pesticides and industrial waste and an easy mark for developers. The New York Times called Gulf “a beautiful homage to a neglected sea.”

The Sixth Extinction by Elizabeth Kolbert (Henry Holt, 2014): This winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize chronicles the Earth’s cycles of species extinction, from the first five mass die-offs of plants and animals to the current human-induced catastrophe as development, technology, and population increases wreak havoc on the natural world. Kolbert is a superb reporter and writer with a one-two punch. First, she enthralls you with stories of the Earth’s natural wonders (the Panamanian golden frog, the great auk, the Sumatran rhino). Then she lets the bad news rip: Humanity’s will to explore and exploit has driven these creatures to the abyss, and the pace of mass die-offs will accelerate as the Earth warms. Drawing on the work of researchers from many different countries, this is an essential book for understanding the stakes in the struggle to contain the worst excesses of human progress.

Underland: A Deep Time Journey by Robert Macfarlane (Norton, 2019): Macfarlane’s latest examines the health of the Earth by going deep beneath its surface. He tells stories of caves and catacombs and subterranean rivers, the creatures at home underground, and the white-knuckle adventures of humans who penetrate the world’s deepest caves. Not even the underground is safe from human despoliation; the author visits a “tomb” for radioactive nuclear waste in southwest Finland and documents how global warming is changing Greenland’s underground, as things long buried in the frozen Earth (such as toxic waste from an American Cold War missile base) return to the surface. Underland is a plangent testament to some of the world’s seldom seen wonders.

The Seabird’s Cry: The Lives and Loves of the Planet’s Great Ocean Voyagers by Adam Nicolson (Henry Holt, 2018): This book is a bittersweet work of natural history, the story of 10 different species of seabirds. Infused with a sense of wonder and a sturdy grasp of science, Nicolson writes of puffins and albatrosses, fulmars and gulls, guillemots and gannets, documenting their bloodthirsty competitiveness, their astounding feats of survival, and their magnificent powers of flight. These once-abundant seabirds are now threatened by human plundering of their nesting and fishing grounds and by the impact of climate change on their migratory routes. If this book doesn’t move you toward a sense of urgency about global warming, I’m not sure what will.

The World Without Us by Alan Weisman (Dunne/St. Martin’s, 2007): Weisman pulls off an amazing feat of intellectual topsyturvydom—he demonstrates humanity’s impact on the Earth by imagining it in our absence. What would happen if we vanished tomorrow? Weisman explores everything from the dark fate of Manhattan (the subways would flood and skyscrapers would topple, for starters) to the weird flourishing of wildlife in the world’s demilitarized zones—when humans vacate a place, other creatures quickly reassert themselves. Though its premise is apocalyptic, The World Without Us shows how nature, liberated from our presence, would bounce back. Critic Lev Grossman called Weisman’s book “brilliant, morbid, richly informative, and grandly entertaining.”
Heartfelt and wrenching, a significant addition to the literature of disability.

PLACES I'VE TAKEN MY BODY

Essays
Brown, Molly McCully
Persea Books (224 pp.)
$24.95  |  Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-89255-513-0

A disabled woman’s memoir, “so storybook that if I hadn’t lived it I would swear I made it up.”

In her first collection of prose, Brown, a poet and writing instructor at Kenyon College, eloquently, often wittily describes a mostly wheelchair-bound life lived with pain and the places, emotional and physical, to which she has traveled. The author’s mother had premature identical twins. Frances died less than two days later, and Brown was stricken with cerebral palsy. As she writes, she “came into the world blue and tiny and sparring for my place in it. Two pounds, with my fists up.” Memories of her dead sister haunt every page of this powerful book, as does the ominous ticking of her lifetime survival-rate clock. During childhood, Brown could walk some, haltingly, even jump a bit. There were early years of physical therapy, and her tendons were often lengthened. She had “stints in plaster casts and full-length braces that locked my legs in place with a huge metal hinge” that would cause her legs to chafe and bleed. As the author grew into her “perplexing and unstable body,” she also had to overcome neurological damage that affected her “ability to process numbers, space and patterns.” In 2017, she wrote an award-winning book of poetry about women who were confined to a hospital for epileptics and the “feebleminded” in her home state of Virginia. The author chronicles how in Bologna, Italy, she had difficulty exploring the city, as many places were wheelchair inaccessible, and she visited the Anatomical Theater of the Archiginnasio, a place where she felt there was “some filament—fine and strong as fishing line—stretched from a hook in [my] cheek all the way to [the] ground.” In one essay, the author honestly discusses sex as “a woman who can stumble, hurt, and want, and—yes—he wanted.” Brown is a writer to watch.

Heartfelt and wrenching, a significant addition to the literature of disability. (first printing of 7,500 copies)
A debut memoir painstakingly recreates a history of disordered eating. As a young woman, This American Life editor Burton alternated between anorexia (“the world responds to thinness, and the girl subsists on its compliments”) and binge-eating disorder. She convincingly traces her body issues back several generations: As a nonagenarian on her deathbed, her grandmother wished that she could weigh herself. Burton is also haunted by her mother’s self-assessment: “I knew nobody would ever love me for my body. They would have to love me for my mind.” The author’s extremely finicky childhood eating was a sign that she “perceived food as a threat.” A traumatic upbringing—her parents’ divorce, a move from Michigan to Colorado, her mother’s alcoholism—meant she couldn’t be like the carefree teens she saw in Seventeen. Not eating, she writes, gave a pleasurable “feeling of less inside—light, relieved, unburdened.” But in November 1989, “the weekend I lost power,” she started binge-eating. Burton recounts how she would gorge herself on carbs and sweets until her belly was distended. By the time she was a freshman in college, she’d gained 50% of her body weight. The author has been a vigilant personal archivist and chooses pertinent anecdotes to exemplify her mental and physical states. For instance, after eating most of a pan of brownies, she lost control of her bowels while out running: “a moment of total abasement.” However, the surfeit of information on her high school years—friends, acting, a summer job, boyfriends, and so on—distracts from the bigger picture. The level of detail is evidence of Burton’s original aim of writing a history of teenage girlhood. While the book is a valuable addition to the literature on eating disorders—which Burton likens to heroin in their addictiveness—the focus slips, making the middle third a slog. A powerful picture of anorexia and binge-eating disorder that would benefit from being shorter and more targeted.

New York City’s “premier beekeeper” has some stories to tell. Coté structures his book around the beekeeping calendar, one chapter per month, weaving seasonally relevant facts about bees around stories that occurred during that month. In March, for instance, the author informs readers of the “cleansing flight,” made when the weather is finally warm enough for pent-up bees to leave their hives and defecate, and the life cycle of the worker bee, as the hive ramps up its population in anticipation of spring blooms. He also documents the March 2010 debate on legalizing beekeeping in New York City and a mishap involving the relocation of several hives from western Pennsylvania to Brooklyn. This latter anecdote begins with a sneering and entirely gratuitous description of the trailer home and dilapidated equipment of the retiring Appalachian beekeeper, whom he snidely calls “the feller,” from whom he purchased some 100 hives. It concludes with his mocking account of the efforts of the inept beekeepers he sold them to. Alas, it’s scenes like this, in which Coté freely expresses his superiority to so many of the other “beeks” he encounters both in NYC and around the world, that render him a less-than-charming companion. One or two such anecdotes might be funny; 12 months’ worth grow old. So, too, do the author’s frequent references to his appearances in the media. The freely dropped celebrity names also grate (10 within three paragraphs in the prologue.
Part memoir, part social history, and sure to become the definitive book on the politics, culture, and economics of black hair.

**TWISTED**

A historical and personal exploration of why black hair isn’t “just hair.”

From white plantation mistresses shaving enslaved women’s heads as punishment to present-day federal court rulings declaring it legal to fire black employees for wearing natural hairstyles, black hair is political. In her study of black hair cultures, BBC race correspondent Dabiri observes how, across continents and centuries, people of African descent have been subjected to “scrutiny, fetishization, or censure, and sometimes all three, because of our hair.” Black hair, writes the author, has been deemed inferior and “difficult to control” and used as a justification for discrimination. Dabiri blends thorough research with incisive commentary and artful memoir. “My own hair has been disappointing people since my birth,” she writes. Growing up Irish Nigerian in Ireland in the 1980s and ‘90s, her hair was a constant source of shame and trauma. Today, in Ireland and elsewhere, black hair is still, in many cases, considered taboo. Meanwhile, the Kardashian-Jenners make millions appropriating black hair and aesthetics. Though peppered throughout with engaging pop-culture references, the book is also a deft geopolitical and economic meditation. What might Africa and her descendants have become if not for the horrors of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism? Given the abiding influence of racism and colonialism, how do we liberate and decolonize black hair? Dabiri explores the current natural hair movement and looks back at the complex successes and legacies of the first black female millionaires: early black hair care entrepreneurs Madam C.J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone. Compelling and engrossing, this book will satisfy readers familiar with the sizzle of the straightening comb as well as those who aren’t.

Part memoir, part social history, and sure to become the definitive book on the politics, culture, and economics of black hair. (b/w illustrations)
The words have never drifted far from Bettye Kearse’s mind. She heard them over and over from her mother and grandfather. They evoke strength and hope, an unwavering pride in family and resilience. They will forever be a part of who she is: “Always remember—you’re a Madison. You come from African slaves and a president.”

Now, in her new book, *The Other Madisons: The Lost History of a President’s Black Family* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, March 24), Kearse examines her place in the story as the family griotte, a traditional oral storyteller who passes her family’s history on to the next generation.

*The Other Madisons* is a unique blend of history, mystery, fiction, and memoir, following Kearse as she travels the world to connect with her ancestors and seeks DNA proof of a connection to James Madison Jr., the fourth president of the United States.

But that relationship, so revered by her elders, resonates differently to a pediatrician with a Ph.D. in biology who came of age during the civil rights movement. Previous generations focused on pride. Kearse refuses to look away from the fact that a future president fathering a child with a slave inevitably meant rape.

“My mother never questioned anything that had been passed down to her,” Kearse says by phone from her home in New Mexico. “She was just very happy to be able to say she was a descendant of a president. She never thought what that meant…She probably expected me to continue to emphasize the pride woven into the creed and not go out there and start talking about negative things.”

Kearse, who has a brother, never expected to become the griotte until 1990, when her mother passed along the family’s precious box of photographs, letters, deeds, birth certificates, and other papers. Her first emotional connection to the story was Mandy, a young African girl stolen into slavery and sold to the Madison plantation in Virginia.

Mandy grew so large in Kearse’s imagination that she has included fictional passages from Mandy’s point of view in *The Other Madisons*, an unusual choice for a work of nonfiction.

“Those are my favorite parts of the book,” she says. “It allows my ancestors to come alive.”

Kearse follows the trail of the African slave trade to Nigeria, Ghana, and the Madison plantation. There, walking the path Mandy’s daughter Coreen walked, she felt an undeniable connection.

“It was just an incredible experience to walk in an ancestor’s footsteps, to literally walk where she had walked,” Kearse says. “Going to the slaves’ cemetery was also nearly overwhelming, in a good way. I just knew that’s where Mandy was. It was such a strong feeling. I can’t even really explain it. It reassured me about all the stories I had heard about Mandy and some of my other enslaved ancestors. They were real people who contributed toward making me who I am.”
Unlike the descendants of Sally Hemings, who proved that President Thomas Jefferson was part of their family tree via DNA, Kearse was unable to genetically link James Madison to her family. A Madison descendant refused a DNA test, leaving Kearse with a dilemma: Was there a book if there was no genetic proof?

“As a writer, it was disappointing,” she admits. “I was well aware if I had proof of DNA, publishers would be tracking me down, and the public would’ve been enthralled. But as someone who came to believe so much in these slaves, who are part of who I am and part of what this country became, the DNA didn’t come to matter as much…. The most important things are the values my ancestors passed down.”

Kearse’s mother told her she shouldn’t think badly of the Madisons, but after her years of research, Kearse can’t keep that promise.

“Yes, it was part of the culture of the time, but they knew slavery was wrong,” she says. “Especially James Madison Jr. The president wrote that it was wrong, yet he never freed a single slave.”

Still, confronting the horrors her ancestors survived has left Kearse with a sense of gratitude. “I came to terms with it by really looking at the strength these enslaved people had,” Kearse says. “Not only did they have inner strength, they had a sense of hope that enables them to recognize themselves as being more than property. They were people with many gifts. They gave me values and love of family, but I think probably the most important thing they passed down is hope.”

Connie Ogle is a writer in Florida. The Other Madisons received a starred review online on March 2, 2020.
read about the damaging consequences of superconcentrated markets. Economists know how to fight it, as Dayen clearly explains, but getting people to recognize how they’re being used is exceedingly difficult. It’s a striking social and economic dilemma that the author thankfully exposes, just as he did with the foreclosure crisis in Chain of Title (2016).

A powerful, necessary call to arms to strengthen the anti-trust movement and fight a system whose goal is complete control.

**THE CUBANS**

**Ordinary Lives in Extraordinary Times**
DePalma, Anthony
Viking (368 pp.)
$28.00 | May 26, 2020
978-0-525-52444-7

An intimate history of a “social paradise” that has sorely failed its people.

In his latest, DePalma, a former Latin America correspondent for the New York Times and author of The Man Who Invented Fidel (2006), delivers engaging alternating narratives delineating the lives of regular people during two decades of strife and deprivation. The author shares frankly his bias in this work of revelatory personal histories—his Cuban-born wife was spirited away to America in 1960—and through familial testimony and his own observations, he reveals a country in dire economic distress, its original revolutionary mythology in shambles. DePalma maintains a laser focus on a few ordinary Cubans, including Cary, who was born to a Jamaican migrant and went on to study economic engineering in Ukraine in the 1970s. She returned to a series of promotions in the Cuban workforce and started a family in Guanabacoa, a gritty warehouse neighborhood just across the harbor from Old Havana. Cary’s devotion to Fidel Castro’s revolution was unshaken throughout her life, and she was amply rewarded by the government with housing and health care. Yet by 1994, when the Soviet Union’s aid had dissolved and Cuba was undergoing intense economic hardship, street protests, and reckless attempts to flee the island, Cary recognized that “the classless society Fidel promised was a mirage.” Outside of Cary’s family, DePalma tracks Arturo Montoto, an artist who studied in Moscow and elsewhere, returning to Cuba deeply disillusioned and intent on skirting the system his own way; and several survivors of an ill-fated tugboat that was likely rammed by the Cuban coast guard in July 1994, killing more than 40 people (the Cuban government denied responsibility). DePalma’s fictionlike narrative moves thematically (Realization, Reconciliation, etc.), and the author is especially good at revealing the stunning adaptability of a people thwarted at seemingly every turn.

An obvious labor of love, years in the making, featuring meticulous research and an elegant narrative style. (maps)

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**A FURIOUS SKY**

The Five-Hundred-Year History of America’s Hurricanes
Dolin, Eric Jay
Liveright/Norton (384 pp.)
$29.95 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-63149-527-4

How hurricanes have indelibly shaped America’s land and society.

Drawing on abundant sources, including material from the National Hurricane Center, National Weather Service, and Hurricane Research Division, and with an academic background in environmental policy, Dolin, who has a doctorate in environmental policy, offers an authoritative and lively history of hurricanes, beginning with 15th-century storms and ending with major hurricanes of 2017 and a brief account of Hurricane Dorian of last year. Besides chronicling the tense period leading up to landfall, the violent impact, the immediate responses, and the long-term recoveries, the author offers a fascinating history of weather forecasting, which was revolutionized by the telegraph in the mid-19th century. The Smithsonian Institution became the first repository of meteorological information when telegraph operators were instructed to send a message each morning describing the weather: cloudy, fair, or rainy. Soon, they added readings from meteorological instruments, making their forecasts more useful. In 1870, the U.S. Army Signal Corps took over weather forecasting, creating maps that could “predict the progression of weather over time.”

But accuracy eluded forecasters until airplanes, satellites, radar, and computers came into play—and even then, controversy sometimes erupted about the intensity and course of a storm. Dolin traces many major events: “a storm surge of biblical proportions” in Galveston, Texas, in 1900; the Great Miami Hurricane of 1926; the Labor Day Hurricane that swept through the Florida Keys in 1935; the “sudden, jarring, widespread, and devastating” Great Hurricane of 1938; Hurricane Andrew in 1992, Katrina in 2005, and Sandy, which besieged New York City in 2012. Efforts to control hurricanes, such as seeding clouds with dry ice or silver iodide, failed. Other proposals, such as towing icebergs from the Arctic to cool the ocean and diminish a storm’s energy, were “outlandish and totally impractical.”

Dolin underscores the threat of global warming to worsen hurricanes and urges society to act quickly and boldly “to counter this threat in any way we can.”

A sweeping, absorbing history of nature’s power. (118 illustrations)
Admiring account of upstart Emmanuel Macron’s surprising presidential run and the hurdles he must overcome to transform the European Union in the face of American disdain.

Drozdiak, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and former Washington Post senior editor and foreign correspondent, cleanly delineates the young, charismatic French leader’s sweeping aims since his accession to the presidency in 2017: to keep Europe united and vigorous in the wake of right-wing national incursions and American indifference under Donald Trump.

First, Macron had to surmount internal revolt to his economic and education reforms and tackle the antiquated labor laws in France, allaying the fears of the so-called Yellow Vest movement. That group rose up in street protests, arguing the Macron was out of touch with rank-and-file workers, who were suffering the effects of “the highest tax burden...of any developed nation.”

Macron, new to politics and more of an intellectual than a worker, was broadsided by the many interrelated issues involved in the rich-vs.-poor divide, yet his hasty, earnest implementation of grand national conversations mostly quelled the violence and stoked a valuable debate. “Macron’s grand strategy for his presidency,” writes the author, “was conceived with three goals in mind: to modernize France, to relaunch the drive toward a more unified continent, and to establish Europe as a major power in a multipolar world.”

In the wake of anti-immigrant and nationalist violence, Macron hopes that France, and Europe, can “inspire the world by serving as the contemporary incarnation of the Enlightenment and its ideals.” Moreover, notes Drozdiak, Macron is actively serving (whether he likes it or not) as the “Donald whisperer” in defusing American hostility toward European demands.
A heart-gladdening memoir of a rare triumph over poverty.

THE GROWING SEASON

Sarah Frey

Ballantine (272 pp.)

$27.00 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-593-12939-5

The story of a hardscrabble childhood that, through dint of hard work, blossomed into a multimillion-dollar fruit business.

Frey details her life growing up poor on a southeastern Illinois farm, where they had no indoor plumbing and burned
The author and her brothers learned to be tough at a young age, but she doesn’t relate her circumstances in anything less than a matter-of-fact, frequently enthusiastic voice, making the narrative move along in a highly engrossing manner. Though life was demanding, the family was tight. Frey’s father might have taught her independence, but he had no head for business and got by on his wits. Her mother would do what she could to help—e.g., running a melon route where she would pick up local watermelons and cantaloupes and sell them to regional markets. It was backbreaking work, but it put cash in their hands to pay the mortgage. “I loved meeting people, making deals, and I also knew that this was something that could be scaled up exponentially,” writes Frey, who, at 14, learned the fundamental elements of commerce. At 15, she had her own melon route; at 17, she bought the family farm when the bank came to foreclose. “Without this land, I thought, where will we be? More importantly, who will we be?...If I walked away,” she writes, “my brothers and I would never have anything to come home to.” Throughout, Frey makes clear her belief that family sticks together. “Blood is blood,” she writes. “Alone in the world we would be broken. Together we could withstand anything. Right?” And they did, with endless determination and a lot of learning on the fly. With earnest, effective storytelling, Frey demonstrates her character: “impatient, driven, restless, and at time obsessive”—and highly successful.

A heart-gladdening memoir of a rare triumph over poverty.

TRUMPOCALYPSE
Restoring American Democracy
Frum, David
Harper/HarperCollins (272 pp.)
$28.99 | May 5, 2020
978-0-06-297841-7

Following up Trumpocracy (2018), Frum looks at the Trump administration’s effect on the country and the possible consequences of the 2020 election.

In his previous book, the author, a speechwriter and special assistant to George W. Bush and now a staff writer for the Atlantic, showed how the Trump campaign and administration had already seriously damaged American institutions during his first year in office. Here, Frum uses his powers of analysis—and his outrage—to flesh out the myriad examples of what he considers to be a toxic combination of perfidy and stupidity. This includes Trump’s relentless bullying of individuals, groups, and countries; his poorly conceived foreign policy via Twitter; his threats to unleash his rabid followers on a supposedly disloyal electorate; and, above all, his harm to American judicial and security agencies. Still, the author has hopes for a brighter, Trump-free future. Examining elements of social reform, health care, and climate change, Frum lays out potential solutions that are surprisingly progressive, especially for a self-styled conservative. His political swing from loyal Republican to independent thinker is, he asserts, shared by others. “Former allies find themselves at dagger’s point, former adversaries find more in common,” he writes. “It’s much more likely that George W. Bush and Barack Obama will vote for the same candidate in 2020 than it is that George W. Bush and Donald Trump will vote for the same candidate.” This is a thoughtful analysis of current troubles and future opportunities, but it will interest only those who aren’t sated by the constant analysis offered by newspapers and cable TV. While Frum is more eloquent than many, he covers much of the same ground, and his suggested policy points, though interesting, are a relatively small part of the book.

A must-read for political junkies but not compelling enough for the large, but exhausted, population of never-Trumpers.
Gessen is a Suetonius for our time, documenting the death of the old America while holding out slim hope for its restoration.

**SURVIVING AUTOCRACY**  
Gessen, Masha  
Riverhead (240 pp.)  
$26.00 | Jun. 2, 2020  
978-0-593-18893-4

The National Book Award winner delivers a handbook for an age in which egomania is morphing into autocracy at warp speed.

*New Yorker* contributor Gessen, an immigrant from what was then the Soviet Union, understands totalitarian systems, especially the ways in which, under totalitarian rule, language is degraded into meaninglessness. Today, writes the author, we are “using the language of political disagreement, judicial procedure, or partisan discussion to describe something that was crushing the system that such terminology was invented to describe.” Against that, Gessen suggests, we now have an administration for which words hold no reality, advancing the idea that “alternative facts” are fine but professing dismay when one calls them lies. The step-by-step degradation of democratic institutions that follows is a modern-day rejoinder to the fact that more than half a dozen years separated the Reichstag fire from World War II. That’s a big buffer of time in which to admit all manner of corruption, and all manner of corruption is what we’ve been seeing. Gessen reminds us about Mick Mulvaney’s accepting handsome gifts from the payday-loan industry he was supposed to regulate and Ben Carson’s attempt to stock his office with a $31,000 dining room set. Yet corruption’s not the right word, writes the author, since Trump and company are quite open and even boastful about what used to be a matter of shame and duplicity. The real tragedy, it seems, is that they have been so successful in creating what the author calls a “new, smaller American society,” one that willfully excludes the Other. Many writers have chronicled the Trump administration’s missteps and crimes, but few as concisely as Gessen, and her book belongs on the shelf alongside Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny* and Amy Siskind’s *The List* as a record of how far we have fallen.

Gessen is a Suetonius for our time, documenting the death of the old America while holding out slim hope for its restoration.

**14 MILES**  
Gibson, DW  
Simon & Schuster (352 pp.)  
$28.00 | Jun. 2, 2020  
978-1-5011-8341-6

A two-year on-the-ground investigation of “The Wall” and how it is affecting lives on both sides of the border. From 2017 to 2019, Gibson spent his days documenting the planning and construction of the 14-mile portion of the wall along the border between San Diego County and Tijuana. Though there is plenty of information about the numerous prototypes for the physical wall—as well as the tangled bureaucracy involved in choosing one and starting the work—the page-turning, often tense narrative covers much more. The author chronicles his time with men and women on both sides of the 1,954-mile border. In addition to telling Gibson about the tangible effects of the physical wall, many illuminate what the idea of a wall means to them. The author’s range of reporting is impressive. He had discussions with Roque De La Fuente, the land speculator who used to own or still owns property that the U.S. government would need to acquire to complete Donald Trump’s obsessive vision, as well as other entrepreneurs profiting—or not—from its construction. The law enforcement agents who appear in the narrative represent various bureaucracies and points of view; each of them mind-expanding, many antithetical to concepts of civil liberty. These include officers from the Border Patrol, local police departments, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and other units equipped with drug-sniffing dogs. In addition, Gibson examines the plights of Mexicans barely surviving economically within a few hundred yards of the barriers erected by the U.S. government. While the American ranchers and citizen vigilantes portrayed by the author consider themselves well-meaning patriots, the heritage of the Ku Klux Klan in San Diego County does not bode well for desperate asylum seekers from Mexico and points south. Throughout the book, Gibson portrays the varied humanity on both sides with journalistic integrity and readable prose that often includes subtle yet biting social commentary.

An important current affairs book that deserves a wide audience before the 2020 election.

**GREAT DEMON KINGS**  
Giorno, John  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (368 pp.)  
$28.00 | Jun. 2, 2020  
978-0-374-16630-4

The ultimate scenester of midcentury Manhattan, lover to a who’s who of gay artists and writers, tells all in a posthumous memoir.

Giorno (1936-2019) made his first major appearance on the American cultural landscape in Andy Warhol’s 320-minute movie of Giorno’s slumbering face, *Sleep* (1964). This memoir is also overlong, but the author has plenty of interesting stories to tell. He quickly dispenses with his privileged childhood, though we do hear about his first poem, written during his sophomore year in high school: “I was like a baby Olympic athlete going over the high bar for the first time.” Giorno graduated from Columbia in 1958, bursting with self-confidence. “I was young and beautiful and that got me what I wanted and all I wanted was sex,” he writes, and proceeds to share an abundance of...
graphic detail. Andy Warhol never really enjoyed it, and his wig got in the way at key points, but Giorno found his toe-sucking “deeply moving.” A multyear affair with Robert Rauschenberg was filled with bliss and joy and mind-blowing sex. (Rauschenberg was not looking forward to being memorialized by Giorno, but his threat to sue expired with his death.) Jasper Johns was the author’s lover during the exciting period when his Dial-A-Poem project was the hottest thing in New York City. William Burroughs was Giorno’s next great passion despite Burroughs’ small penis and his instigating a threesome with Giorno’s “nemesis,” Allen Ginsberg—and Ginsberg was everywhere. Even when the author went to India to seek enlightenment, there he was, “fat and full of ego, an embarrassing uncool dad.” After Ginsberg’s death, the author admits the two of them “did not do such a good job in this life…we will, sure as hell, continue in future lives.” If reincarnation exists, Giorno will surely document it for us.

Upbeat, funny, unsparing, and way over the top...probably a lot like the man himself.

**SOVIET JUDGMENT AT NUREMBERG**

**A New History of the International Military Tribunal After World War II**

Hirsch, Francine

Oxford Univ. (432 pp.)

$34.95 | Jun. 1, 2020

978-0-19-937793-0

The untold story of the Soviet Union’s central role in the Nuremberg trials of Nazi leaders for war crimes.

In this masterly account based on thousands of documents in recently opened Soviet archives, history professor Hirsch describes how “Stalin’s Soviet Union fundamentally shaped the [Nuremberg trials] and was key to its success.” Her painstaking, highly readable history of the trials—in which prosecutors from the victorious Allies (the U.S., Britain, France, and the Soviets) cross-examined 24 “largely unrepentant” Nazi leaders, including Hermann Goering, Albert Speer, and Rudolf Hess—reveals participants’ sharply contrasting understandings of the meaning of justice. The Soviets, who lost 27 million civilians during the war, first suggested the trials. They had suffered the brunt of German war-making, assumed “the Nazi leaders were guilty and deserved to be hanged,” and hoped to establish a legal claim for reparations. The Western powers, which had favored “summary execution” of the defendants, wanted to show the world a fair trial. The tribunal was “filled with political intrigue, back-room negotiations, double-dealing, and compromises.” The four powers’ initial “tenuous” cooperation gave way to “bitterness and suspicion,” with the U.S. determined to “shut the Soviets out”—an early sign of the coming Cold War. Drawing nicely on the observations of such individuals as filmmaker Roman Karmen and political cartoonist Boris Efimov—both Soviets—Hirsch re-creates the trials vividly (“evidence by day and private parties at night”) and illuminates Soviet motives and actions. The vengeance-bent Moscow leadership worked hard to make Nuremberg resemble the infamous show trials of the 1930s. Ironically, themselves guilty of war crimes, they succeeded in creating the ideals of the Nuremberg principles (“crimes against humanity” and “genocide”) that have shaped subsequent movements for human rights.

Richly detailed and well-written, this important new vantage point on Nuremberg will appeal strongly to history buffs and specialists. (b/w illustrations, maps)

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**SHOW THEM YOU’RE GOOD**

*A Portrait of Boys in the City of Angels the Year Before College*

Hobbs, Jeff

Scribner (336 pp.)

$28.00 | Jun. 16, 2020

978-1-9821-1633-0

The ups and downs of male college-bound high school seniors during the 2016-2017 school year in Los Angeles.

In his first book, the much-praised *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* (2014), Hobbs, a Yale graduate, focused on a black male Yale graduate who was murdered after returning to his hometown of Newark. In the author’s second work of nonfiction, the clear hero is Carlos, an undocumented Mexican immigrant also headed to Yale. Here, however, the music is polyphonic: Hobbs follows nine young men of varied races and ethnicities—four main and five lesser figures—cutting back and forth among their splintered accounts of college applications, taking AP classes, playing video games, pursuing after-school activities, and despairing over the 2016 election. Two key players attended the Ánimo Pat Brown charter school: the academic star Carlos, who applied to both Ivy League colleges and for protection from deportation under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program; and Tío, a student leader rightly worried that his grades, though high, would not get him into top California colleges. The two other linchpins of the story attended Beverly Hills High School: Owen knew he was well off, but his mother was bedridden with a chronic illness; Sam’s mother, who was born in China, grilled him about his homework. These are only a few of the many entrances into the characters in this book. The story lacks the strong, cohesive narrative of his earlier work. Nonetheless, Hobbs offers a rare group portrait of well-rounded, hardworking male teenagers focused on college and securing a bright future. It’s sure to cheer school librarians looking for true stories of male high school students known for something besides their athletic talents or troubles with the law.

A unique slice of male high school life with strong cross-over appeal for YA readers.
THE SCOURGE OF WAR
The Life of William Tecumseh Sherman
Holden Reid, Brian
Oxford Univ. (632 pp.)
$34.95 | Jun. 1, 2020
978-0-19-539273-9

A thoroughgoing biography of William Tecumseh Sherman (1820–1891), the steely, intellectually gifted Civil War general.

Did Sherman really say “War is hell”? His son said that his father’s true statement, made to the mayor of a devastated Atlanta in 1864, was “War is cruelty and you cannot refine it.” Either way, Sherman knew whereof he spoke. Graduating from West Point near the top of his class academically but knocked down by demerits—“He dressed carelessly,” writes noted Civil War historian Reid, “saluted slovenly or not at all, and used his disregard of the rules as a means of winning laddish approbation from his peers”—Sherman entered the service as an artilleryman but was pushed into the commissary corps. There he learned to dig deep into every logistical consideration of how a war should be executed: what supplies were needed and where, how many wagons it would take to get them there, how many bullets would be fired, and so forth. That mastery served him well as an officer who suffered several depressing defeats during the Civil War, including a near disaster in the siege of Vicksburg. Nonetheless, he became one of Ulysses S. Grant’s favored officers, succeeding him after the war as chief general of the U.S. Army. Reid looks closely at Sherman’s analytical skills while taking issue with certain popular depictions of him. For example, Sherman has been accounted a heartlessly cruel avenger in Southern depictions of his March to the Sea, where in truth “the absence of violence…needs to be underlined,” at least as far as civilians were concerned. Reid also acquits his subject of the razing of South Carolina’s capital, which he holds was the result of an accidental fire that “overwhelmed Columbia’s small firefighting capacity.” Despite occasionally dry prose, the author’s capable blending of biographical facts with larger issues makes his study particularly valuable.

The most complete and wide-ranging of recent biographies of Sherman, of interest to all students of the Civil War.

THE PRESIDENTS VS. THE PRESS
The Endless Battle Between the White House and the Media—From the Founding Fathers to Fake News
Holzer, Harold
Dutton (476 pp.)
$29.00 | May 12, 2020
978-1-5247-4526-4

Conflict between presidents and the press has erupted throughout America’s history.

National Humanities Medal winner Holzer, a noted authority on Lincoln and the Civil War and director of the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College, offers a lively, impressively well-grounded view of the relationships of 19 presidents with the journalists who covered them. As the author portrays them, presidents often felt threatened by the press but could not resist following the news. More or less, they sought to manipulate their own narratives; when they failed, they lashed out in anger. Caught “in the crosshairs of the press,” Washington did not stoop to respond while Jefferson, “buffeted by violent newspaper criticism throughout his presidency,” raged in “anti-press fury.” Manipulating the press during war obsessed some presidents: Lincoln became a harsh censor of news in order to control coverage of Civil War casualties. Similarly, when America entered war in 1917, Wilson “entirely shut himself off from the press corps, limiting its access to news of the war’s horrors, stifling criticism of American participation,” and “flooding the press and public with government propaganda.” Some naturally gregarious presidents treated journalists like friends. Teddy Roosevelt, for example, won reporters’ admiration “through the sheer force of his ebullient personality and his unrelentable eagerness to share news, gossip, and sometimes even secrets.” Franklin Roosevelt invited reporters to garden parties. Holzer notes a profound change in reporters’ attitudes toward outing personal information—e.g., an “unwritten rule” prevented them from mentioning FDR’s disability. But after Nixon’s scandals, reporters became convinced “that only relentless press oversight could keep leaders honest and the republic safe.” Holzer astutely examines how several presidents made use of new technologies to disseminate their messages: FDR on radio, JFK on television, Obama on social media—and, of course, Trump on Twitter. Trump’s successor, Holzer asserts, will face a press emboldened to reassert its power.

A shrewd history of the fight to convey and repress objective truth.

KATRINA
A History, 1915–2015
Horowitz, Andy
Harvard Univ. (304 pp.)
$35.00 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-0-674-97171-4

A New Orleans–focused history that demonstrates the complex political and social factors involved in natural disasters and their aftermaths.

In an incisive book debut, historian Horowitz argues persuasively that the destruction incurred by Hurricane Katrina was not merely a meteorological event, but part of a long process of political, environmental, economic, and cultural decisions. “Disasters,” he writes, “are less discrete events than they are contingent processes.” Although disasters may “seem acute...their causes are long in the making and their effects last a very long time” because vulnerability is socially constructed, with roots in poverty, racism, and inequality. Horowitz focuses on New Orleans history from 1927, when
a struggle to control Louisiana's oil resources erupted in a conflict among “competing political, economic, and social visions.” Instead of managing public lands responsibly, wealthy partisans prevailed, exploiting oil-rich areas for their own advantage. Bolstered by the construction of canals and levees, oil production transformed Louisiana, increasing its population and access to jobs in the oil industry. Only when the federal government regulated off-shore drilling in the early 1950s did environmental concerns rise to the forefront. Destruction caused by Hurricane Betsy in 1965 underscored the connection between natural and political forces. In the largely African American Lower Ninth Ward, more than 6,000 houses flooded and 50 people drowned. Occurring in the midst of the civil rights era, the hurricane's devastation raised questions about why the Lower Ninth was a particularly vulnerable area and what responsibility the state and federal government had to offer restitution for the people harmed. “Many,” Horowitz writes, “understood the debates about Betsy's causes and consequences as a struggle over what American citizenship was, or ought to be, worth.” As he convincingly demonstrates, Hurricane Katrina, and the response to destruction, highlighted the complex forces that led to disaster: “canal building, coastal erosion, climate change, metropolitan subsidence, failed levees, mandatory evacuation, and decades of local, state, and federal housing policy.”

An eye-opening environmental history. (28 photos; 2 maps)

POULENC
The Life in the Songs
Johnson, Graham
Liveright/Norton (672 pp.)
$49.95 | Jun. 23, 2020
978-1-63149-523-6

An incredibly detailed account of the work of the French composer.

Johnson, a pianist and professor of accompaniment who has published about other composers—Franz Schubert and Benjamin Britten among them—returns with a biography of—and paean to—Francis Poulenc (1899-1963). In nearly 500 pages, the author rarely utters a discouraging word, either about his subject's character or his work. He calls one song “sumptuous” and another “a real jewel.” Mild negative criticisms appear only rarely—e.g., Poulenc “disliked sharing the limelight, even with much less gifted composers.” Johnson displays several recurring organizational features, generally divided by decade: a detailed chronology of Poulenc's life, work, and historical events; and a composition-by-composition description and assessment, including lyrics in the original French accompanied by their English translations. The author often employs diction that only musicians and musical aficionados will appreciate—e.g., “the boldness of the fortissimo ninth chord (B-flat major with a clashing C-natural) in the treble clef shelters a much more timid echo in the bass.” Johnson provides background on the poets whose work supplied the settings for Poulenc's songs (principally Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Eluard) and comments on Poulenc's sexuality (he was gay but kept it extraordinarily private). Though this is not a work one would read like a traditional biography—the text is thick, demanding close attention—there are numerous gems scattered throughout: Poulenc's admiration for singer Maurice Chevalier, his friendship with Christian Dior, his love of art and artists, and his work with Jean Cocteau. What principally emerges, however, is Poulenc's undeniable brilliance as a pianist and composer as well as his work ethic and strength (he continually traveled throughout Europe and the U.S. for performances). Following his account of Poulenc's death, Johnson includes some brief final sections about his friends, colleagues, and publishers. Astonishing research and devotion will make this an enduring work of musical history and biography. (66 b/w illustrations)

THE SIRENS OF MARS
Searching for Life on Another World
Johnson, Sarah Stewart
Crown (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-1-01-90-9481-7

A planetary scientist details the remarkable history of humankind's efforts to find signs of life on Mars.

Speculation on the nature of Mars, and whether it could harbor life, goes back to the early days of astronomy, when thinkers such as Galileo and Newton peered into the night sky using primitive technologies to examine Mars' surface. For centuries, theories of what existed there ran rampant. “The idea that Mars was like our planet only drove the quest to see it better,” writes Johnson, who teaches at Georgetown. Then, in November 1964, NASA launched the spacecraft Mariner 4 and obtained the first close-up images of Mars. This success presaged many Mars missions, three of which the author worked on as a planetary scientist. In accessible and sometimes captivating language, Johnson tells the stories of the people and technologies driving these pioneering quests to study the red planet's biochemical and geographical makeup. She also deftly unpacks the existential stakes that underlie scientists' aspirations to demonstrate that humans are not alone in the universe. Blending professional and personal narratives in her discussions of major discoveries—e.g., Mars' surface once held water; Martian rock samples contain the elements required for life—she provides a lucid portrait of the countless challenges and breakthroughs of planetary science. The author also demonstrates how the field of extremophile biology—“investigating the crooks and crevices of our planet to better understand the limits of life”—is a key component in the Mars efforts. These recurring themes of optimism, persistence, and survival anchor the book and infuse Johnson's writing with philosophical weight. Finding life on Mars, she writes, "would be a shimmering hope that life might not be an ephemeral thing, even if we are."

A vivid, poetic account that leaves readers eager to see what's next in the quest to find extraterrestrial life.
WHITE TOO LONG
The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity
Jones, Robert P.
Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 23, 2020
978-1-9821-2286-7

A scholar and commentator raised in the Southern Baptist Church clearly demonstrates “how intractably white supremacy has become embedded in the DNA of American Christianity.”

Growing up amid a religious tradition that believed “chattel slavery could flourish alongside the gospel of Jesus Christ,” Jones approaches his subject matter from both a personal and historical perspective. His book—a concise yet comprehensive combination of deeply documented religious history, social science research about contemporary religion, and heartfelt memoir—traces a path that began in the narrow world of Macon, Georgia, and other Jim Crow–infested Southern towns. He received a master of divinity degree from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, but it wasn’t until he entered the doctorate program at Emory University that he understood “the brutal violence that white Christians deployed to resist black enfranchisement after the Civil War.” As Jones points out, those Christians were not limited to the Baptist faith. The author located race hatred embedded in the doctrines of other Christian churches, including Methodist, Episcopalian, Catholic, and countless other heavily white congregations. Even though he was shocked and disgusted by his discoveries, Jones held back from sharing those disturbing realizations widely, first conducting studies through his work at the organization he founded, the Public Religion Research Institute. Those consistently illuminating studies, mentioned throughout the book, paint a damning portrait. One example: “For all white Christian subgroups,” writes the author, “there is a positive relationship between holding racist attitudes and white Christian identity among both frequent (weekly or more) and infrequent church attenders.” The most hopeful case study focuses on his hometown of Macon, where there are efforts between white and black Baptist churches to pull together. As Jones has sought various paths out of the morass, he has often turned to the writings of James Baldwin about “the white problem” in U.S. society.

An indispensable study of Christianity in America. (b/w images)

EVERYTHING IS AN EMERGENCY
An OCD Story in Words & Pictures
Katzenstein, Jason Adam
Illus. by the author
Perennial/HarperCollins (256 pp.)
$19.99 | Jun. 30, 2020
978-0-06-295007-9

A cartoonist’s graphic memoir of OCD.

Though he had previously dealt with obsessive routines, Katzenstein traces his full-blown OCD to his parents’ divorce, when “cracks form[ed] in my world, little gaps between what should be and what [w]as. The cracks ma[de] me furious. Every-thing ma[de] me furious.” From that childhood explanation, the author spins a narrative of being trapped within a personal hell, one that makes it difficult to connect with other people, leaves him hiding, and occasionally renders him unable to get out of bed. As a germophobe, he can never shower or wash his hands enough. As an adolescent, he realized that he had “a diagnosed mental illness,” he writes, “and even as I begin to understand my strange behaviors as compulsions, I keep behaving compulsively.” Yet life continued. Katzenstein went to college, fell in love, and found solace in “a steady diet of partying, drinking too much, reveling in an insane myopia.” The author continued to draw and was ecstatic when, after much rejection, one of his cartoons was accepted by the New Yorker. It “was the single coolest moment of my career,” one that felt so good that he initially expected all of his problems to go away. They didn’t, of course. Katzenstein tried a variety of therapies (cognitive et al.), and he improved in fits and starts. But he has always worried that his creativity and OCD are inextricably linked. Interspersed throughout are illustrations of Sisyphus pushing the bolder up the hill, occasionally in danger of being crushed by it. There are also some astonishing drawings of how it feels to have his brain blowing apart from within, which contrast with others showing his attempts to keep things under control. As he notes, he is “an anxious cartoonist,” and this is his story.

Enlightening words and drawings show how it can feel inside when outside life appears to be just fine.

BROWN ALBUM
Essays on Exile and Identity
Khakpour, Porochista
Vintage (304 pp.)
$16.00 paper | May 19, 2020
978-0-525-56471-3

A collection of incisive essays about hyphenated identity.

These essays, writes Khakpour, “are a testament to the greatest and worst experience of my life: being a spokesperson for my people, a role I never dreamed of and never asked for. This is my pigeonhole,
and this is my legacy….These pieces are my bridge, and they are my cave.” The author, who has also published two novels and a memoir about her battle with Lyme disease and chronic misdiagnosis, is clearly—and understandably—uncomfortable with the mantle of “Miss Literary Iranian America,” as she sarcastically refers to it. In the penultimate essay, “How To Write Iranian America, or The Last Essay,” she traces the arc of her career, from fledgling writer who initially refused to focus on identity to New York Times contributor whose prolific output depends on her ability to “write an essay on absolutely anything for these people, provided that it’s about Iranian America—which it will be.” Consequently, in the Times and elsewhere, Khakpour has channeled her way through “Islamic Revolution Barbie,” reality TV with a Persian twist, the Islamic New Year, and other topics to appease the American appetite for the Iranian “other.” In the final, titular piece, which she notes was never intended for publication, the author writes about how, “like a worm,” the essay “grew inside me until it could not be contained.” It’s identity confusion, about which stories we chose to tell about ourselves, and about being brown in a country more blindingly white under Donald Trump. “This is an essay that many of my own people would tell me to go kill myself for,” writes the author, “because I deny the whiteness they claim….I want to remind those who can claim whiteness that they are a very small group.

Provocative pieces that detonate many notions of identity.

I’m Your Huckleberry
Val Kilmer
Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-9821-4489-0

The longtime Hollywood actor looks back.

“What does it mean to be a ham?” asks the author, rhetorically. “Was I a ham? I was naturally and inordinately theatrical. I liked to carry on. I liked attention. I liked extravagant speech. I liked to emote. I liked to talk.” All of these qualities are abundantly evident in Kilmer’s memoir, which is as much a spiritual journey as it is a chronicle of his life and career. The author recounts the depth of his Christian Science faith, his decision to leave Broadway for Hollywood. There, he writes, “I was not yet a burgeoning talent but ‘Cher’s lover,’” when she was in her mid-30s and he in his early-20s. After scoring big with Tom Cruise in Top Gun, Kilmer turned down Blue Velvet and Dirty Dancing: “Neither part spoke to me.” He played Jim Morrison in Oliver Stone’s The Doors, which he considers “one of the proudest moments of my career.” Marlon Brando and Sam Shepard went from being idols that Kilmer worshipped to becoming friends. He was slated to star as Batman in three films but jumped ship after Batman Forever, which he considers “so bad, it’s almost good.” He married and divorced British actor Joanne Whalley and wooed Daryl Hannah (“kind of the female me, only better”), and he wrote and starred in a one-man show as Mark Twain. When he was hospitalized for surgery due to his throat cancer, he prayed, he read Twain and Christian Science’s Mary Baker Eddy, and he “didn’t wrestle with my angels. I sang and danced with them.” Kilmer was never a shrinking violet, and he still refuses to wilt.

An above-average celebrity memoir from an intriguing spirit. (photos)

MAD & BAD
Real Heroines of the Regency
Bea Koch
Grand Central Publishing (288 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-5387-0101-0

A pop-history look at England’s Regency era, a time period popular in the romance genre.

Koch is one of the owners of the Ripped Bodice, a Los Angeles-area bookstore “dedicated to romance.” In her debut book, the author examines the Regency (1811-1820), when George III’s illness rendered him unfit to rule and his son was installed as Prince Regent. After a cursory introduction to George III, Koch launches into stories of women who lived before, during, or after the Regency period. The author cannot explain the importance of the Regency period, however: “Ten short years in the grand scheme of history….What about the Regency continues to draw us in? I wish I had an answer (I would make millions of dollars).” Her lack of clarity about the Regency’s relevance makes the text rambling and unfocused. Koch organizes brief biographical sketches into chapters according to women’s relationships to men, to their interests, or to their own identities. Although the author notes that men controlled the historical narrative, she does little to examine how that negatively influenced the record of women in history. Much of the book features gossipy retellings of women’s lives during the period and how they were connected—or not. Several times, Koch cites fictionalized dialogue from films to support her claims. In a chapter on historical accuracy, Koch focuses on the lives of Mary Seacole and Dido Elizabeth Belle, two black women, to showcase the rich diversity present in London during the 19th century. However, the author inexplicably ends the chapter with the story of Princess Caraboo, a character created as an elaborate scam by a white woman named Mary Baker. Koch is unconvincing in her argument that Baker “shows us that everything we and her contemporaries think and thought about nineteenth-century women barely scratches the surface of the truth.”

A disjointed work that adds little to our understanding of the Regency period. (b/w illustrations)
the story of one of the most vicious murders ever committed at sea.

On July 8, 1896, the Herbert Fuller, loaded with lumber intended for Buenos Aires, departed Boston with 12 people aboard: the captain, his wife, nine crew members, and one passenger. Less than a week into the journey, in the middle of the night, someone viciously butchered the captain, his wife, and the second mate, slamming each one's head multiple times with the ship's ax. But no one heard anything, and only three men could possibly have done it: Thomas Bram, the first mate who had argued with the second mate; Justus Westerberg, also called Charley Brown, an odd Swedish sailor with a murder conviction in his past; and Lester Monks, a young alcoholic Harvard dropout whose parents had paid his fare to bring him to America. Two men were convicted of murder even though strong evidence indicates he was innocent, and President Woodrow Wilson eventually pardoned him. In the rest of the narrative, the author details the lives of Bram and Monks. This should be the stuff of a gripping, can't-put-it-down thriller, but the book is disappointing. Although Koeppel clearly conducted an impressive amount of research, there just isn't enough information available to justify a book-length project, even one this slim. Consequently, the author fills the space with unimportant, unrelated details that make the book a disappointment.
writes, “activists fiercely debated who feminism should represent and what strategies it should employ. Such disagreements proliferated not because feminism lost its way but because so many different people increasingly felt invested in shaping the movement.” Levenstein’s discussion of the multifaceted battle over welfare is especially revealing while her miniprofiles and her conversations with activists allow readers to see them growing into their roles and trying to figure out the best direction for their future actions. The author shows how feminism greatly expanded its realm of influence and makes clear how the internet provided necessary tools—e.g., Twitter, Facebook—for groups to connect with others, arouse public interest in an issue, change opinions, and raise funds. Levenstein successfully combines well-documented research with personal observations and interviews to create an accessible and informative narrative.

**Required reading for classes in women’s studies.**

**TO BE HONEST**
Leviton, Michael
Abrams (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-4197-4305-4

An obsessive search for honesty that becomes an emotional minefield.

In this uneven but oddly absorbing book, Leviton unapologetically reveals what raw honesty looks and feels like. The author was raised in a household he dubs “a little honesty cult,” in which he was encouraged by his parents to always tell the truth, no matter how painful or embarrassing the circumstances. “My parents...argued that children are born honest,” he writes, “that we revel in self-expression until parents, teachers, and friends punish or shame our honesty away.” Leviton divides his journey into three distinct parts, starting with the inevitable conflicts he inspired in other schoolchildren and the rather bizarre “family therapy camp” that would result in his parents’ divorce. Armed with a creative spark, a flair for the ukulele, and an arch sense of humor often misunderstood by others, the author landed in New York City and an invitation to an Ariana Huffington party, the author injects enough wit to make the subjects entertaining. However, it often seems like Loh is unsure of how to get from point A to point B, and many of the topics receive too little exploration.

A mildly amusing collection for the author's fans.
Devoted swimmers will want to splash about in this entertaining narrative.

SPLASH!

LIKE CRAZY
Life With My Mother and Her Invisible Friends
Matthews, Dan
Atria (356 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-1-5011-9998-1

Mathews, the senior vice president for PETA, chronicles how caring for his feisty septuagenarian mother led to the discovery that she suffered from undiagnosed mental illness.

When the author’s mother, Perry, developed chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, he brought her to live with him in Virginia. A self-identified “gadabout,” Mathews worried about his decision. A quirky loner, Perry had a history of erratic behavior, and the author was profoundly uncertain he could manage the responsibility of caretaking. But from the moment she arrived, his footloose gay bachelor life not only stabilized, but also became more colorful. His friends—as well as readers of his first memoir, Committed—adored her sass and “avant-garde, pro-homo” attitudes. However, in addition to COPD, Perry suffered from heart problems, incipient deafness, chronic arthritis, and balance problems that sometimes caused her to fall. On occasion, she also heard voices. At first, Mathews believed that these sounds were the result of drug interactions and helped his mother cut back on her medication. Meanwhile, the author began coming into his own as the adult he never thought he could become, settling into a relationship with a man newly emerged from a heterosexual marriage. Perry's moods continued to darken, and she began struggling with the proliferation of the voices in her head. A psychotic break forced Mathews to commit her to a mental hospital, where doctors diagnosed her with schizophrenia. He continued to care for her until she died, seeing in her not a “tragic victim” but a “weary survivor” who single-handedly raised three successful children without ever “succumbing to drugs or booze or violence.” A playful and humane writer, Mathews drolly examines parent-child role reversals as he meditates on the meaning of watching a beloved parent come to terms not only with mortality, but also a devastating illness.

Poignant, readable, and even fun despite the dark moments.

SPLASH!
10,000 Years of Swimming
Means, Howard
Da Capo (336 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-306-84566-6

A nimble social history of humans at play in water.

Swimming is a sport, an art, a form of meditation—and, by former University of Virginia swimming champion Means' account, very nearly a biological imperative, an expression of our kinship to critters that crawled out of the sea to make their homes on land. Those “fish-human comparisons” are intriguing. Put a human in water that’s heated to 90 degrees, and you relax their heart; “knock the temperature down 10 percent or more,” and you’re in territory that brings relief from ailments such as asthma and rheumatism, to say nothing of bliss. “No wonder whales often seem more at peace with themselves than we humans do,” writes the author. Given the antique connection with the sea, it’s intriguing that a cave in desert Egypt, central to Michael Ondaatje’s novel The English Patient, delivers the first documentation of humans afloat on the sea. Means delivers a lovely portrait of the zaftig Australian swimmer Annette Kellerman, “the woman who first liberated swimwear from the tyranny of Victorian morality”—but then, years later, sniffed of the newly invented bikini that “only two women in a million can wear it.” The author also incorporates bits and pieces of cultural and sports history, such as early long-distance competitions and the rules of Olympic swimming. But some of the best parts of his book are memoir, as when he recounts a personal best of underwater swimming that took in 75 meters, surfacing only for fear that he’d pass out: “Water is the wrong medium for fainting.” It’s surprising that two pop-history books on swimming appear within two months of each other—the other is Bonnie Tsu’s Why We Swim—but neither crowds out the other.

Devoted swimmers will want to splash about in this entertaining narrative.
Miller shows how this recognition of unled lives informs fiction, particularly in Jenny Offill’s contemporary novel *Dept. of Speculation*. The author proceeds from close readings of Dickens, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf to a particularly incisive examination of the narrative strategy in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*.

The examples begin with “The Road Not Taken,” “the classic poem of unled lives,” but Miller, a professor of English at Johns Hopkins, extends that theme all the way through *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *The Untold Story of a War Widow Turned Resistance Fighter and Savior of American POWs*. The author proceeds from close readings of Dickens, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf to a particularly incisive examination of the narrative strategy in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*.

A strong, pleasing work that is as much about living as about reading and writing.

_Mrazek, a five-term congressman and award-winning novelist, illuminates a lesser-known and appalling area of the war: life in the Philippines after the 1941 Japanese conquest. Born of an American father and Filipino mother, Florence Finch (1915-2016) attended an American-run school in Manila. As a young woman, her secretarial skills earned her jobs at the Army-Navy YMCA and then as administrative assistant in the U.S. Army Department of Intelligence. She married an American sailor in 1941. With the Japanese conquest in December 1941, her job vanished, and her husband died in battle a few months later. Concealing her American connections, she obtained a job with the Japanese-run Philippine Liquid Fuel Distribution Union, which controlled all energy resources for the island. It is historically accurate to describe Japan’s behavior in the occupied Philippines as loathsome, and Mrazek offers numerous accounts of the brutality. Civilians received rough treatment, and the awful conditions in prison and internment camps were no secret. Inmates lived in squalor and on a starvation diet. “There was never enough food for everyone,” writes the author. Soon after beginning work, Florence began forging ration coupons to obtain fuel, which was then sold on the black market to buy supplies for the prisoners and the resistance. Arrested in October 1944, she endured terrible torture, rape, and starvation until American forces arrived in February 1945, when she was 78 pounds and near death. After her recovery, she moved to the U.S. and married. The remainder of her life was less traumatic, and she died at the age of 101 with many honors, including the Medal of Freedom. Apparently a member of the history-is-lesson school, Mrazek tells his story in a novelistic style with invented dialogue and access to everyone’s thoughts. Despite the fairly lowbrow style, he capably describes significant, dramatic events.

The richly detailed account of a courageous woman’s life.

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**ON NOT BEING SOMEONE ELSE**

_Tales of Our Unled Lives_

_Miller, Andrew H._

_Harvard Univ. (192 pp.)_

$29.95 | Jun. 9, 2020

978-0-674-23808-4

How un-lived lives permeate our literature and our psyches. The examples begin with “The Road Not Taken,” “the classic poem of unled lives,” but Miller, a professor of English at Johns Hopkins, extends that theme all the way through *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *The Untold Story of a War Widow Turned Resistance Fighter and Savior of American POWs*. The author proceeds from close readings of Dickens, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf to a particularly incisive examination of the narrative strategy in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*.

_A strong, pleasing work that is as much about living as about reading and writing._

**THE INDOMITABLE FINCH**

_The Untold Story of a War Widow Turned Resistance Fighter and Savior of American POWs_

_Mrazek, Robert J._

_Hachette (368 pp.)_

$28.00 | Jun. 16, 2020

978-0-316-42227-7

A World War II heroine comes to light decades after the war.

**IN THE NAME OF GOD**


_O’Grady, Selina_

_Pegasus (480 pp.)_

$29.95 | Jun. 2, 2020

978-1-64313-507-6

Eye-opening journey through the history of persecution among the Abrahamic religions.

In this sprawling examination of “the histories of tolerance and equality, from the time when the Roman Empire became Christian to the genocides of the twentieth century” by writer and documentarian O’Grady walks readers through numerous bloody centuries and guilty civilizations. Though the author, who admittedly approaches her subject from a Western liberal perspective, purports to write a history of tolerance, it is clear that tolerance has always been lacking in the joint history of Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions.
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In some ways, however, that serves O’Grady’s overarching point, which is that tolerance itself is no virtue. “No one wants to be tolerated,” she writes. “What we all want is not to be tolerated but to be treated as equals.” As the author chronicles, tolerance has turned to hate in many frightening ways. In each of the roughly chronological chapters (beginning with an account of Diocletian, who reigned from 284 to 305 and was “pagan Rome’s most savage prosecutor of Christians”), O’Grady showcases one example of persecution after another: the formation of suppressed groups in early Islam, the Crusades, the Christian persecution of heretics, the Inquisition and expulsion of the Jews, the Jewish Ghettos, the Protestant-Catholic wars of religion, Sunni and Shiite conflict, and on and on. Many of the chapters could be books of their own, but O’Grady does a good job of keeping the narrative tight. Though the author makes clear that no religious group has innocent hands, she does take pains to suggest that Muslims have had the most tolerant history when compared to Christians—and Jews have rarely had the opportunity to show tolerance at all. Ultimately, she writes, humanity should stop valuing tolerance because tolerance is still a reflection of superiority. Instead, we must strive for the virtues of “liberty, equality, and solidarity.”

A depressing yet thought-provoking look at faith’s many great failures. (16 pages of color photos, timeline)

Madison’s Sorrow
Today’s War on the Founders and America’s Liberal Ideal
O’Leary, Kevin
Pegasus (368 pp.)
$27.95 | May 5, 2020
978-1-64313-434-5

Returning to the Enlightenment ideals of Founding Fathers like James Madison to understand the stakes in the current illiberal political climate.

O’Leary—a research fellow at the Center for the Study of Democracy at University of California, Irvine, and former reporter for the Los Angeles Times and TIME—has been an observer of the political scene for three decades, and he cares deeply about the recent drift toward “reactionary” politics in the U.S. Noting that “for two centuries, [America] has been the modern Athens for those seeking a society that values democracy, equality, and freedom,” he is appalled by the Trump administration’s seeming determination to “reject that legacy, preferring instead the ancient authoritarian principles of privilege, hierarchy, inequality, and exclusion that divides societies into winners and losers based on ethnic identity, gender, social status, and economic power.” As other historians have documented, O’Leary points out the moment when classic conservative principles turned reactionary: the ugly 1964 compromise between Barry Goldwater and the white supremacist South, represented by segregationist George Wallace. To tell the unsettling story of the nation’s continued drift into Trumpism and its many attendant ills, O’Leary plunges back into the historical record, showing the strenuous adherence to individual autonomy that the Enlightenment authors espoused despite the illiberality of their own era. The author cogently breaks down the writings of Locke, Paine, and others, showing the terrible compromises the early founders had to make in securing constitutional ratification by the slave states. Moving into the recent past and present, O’Leary cleanly melds historical research with his own personal outrage. “Donald Trump stands as the embodiment of reactionary America,” he writes. “He is both a hard-right capitalist and a man who believes that his whiteness and his maleness give him the right to hold others who are neither in contempt.”

A highly opinionated yet accessible work of history and current affairs. (16 pages of color photos)

The Demagogue’s Playbook
The Battle for American Democracy From the Founders to Trump
Posner, Eric A.
All Points/St. Martin’s (320 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 30, 2020
978-1-250-30303-5

How the Founding Fathers’ worst fear materialized.

Well-grounded in classical precedents, the founders were worried that their experiment in republican self-government could produce a demagogue, a charismatic leader who would gain and hold on to power by manipulating the public rather than by advancing the public good. Posner, a professor of law at the University of Chicago, contends two presidents have embodied that fear: Andrew Jackson and Donald Trump. However, this book is not all about Trump; it is an almost novellike stroll through American history beginning with the founders’ fear and ending with one chapter on Trump. Along the way, Posner charts the careers of such American demagogues as Huey Long, George Wallace, and Joe McCarthy and shows the similarities they share with Trump. The author argues that two things are necessary for a demagogue to rise: a propitious political condition and the right person. In Trump’s case, writes Posner, the condition was that rank-and-file Republicans were blaming “elites” for such failures as the Iraq War and stagnating wages, and they wanted something new. The necessary person not only had to be an outsider—because no one inside the party was showing any hint of anything new—but also someone with significant public recognition, great wealth, or, preferably, both. And he had to be shameless. What better person than Trump? Posner checks off the characteristics of a demagogue and details how deeply each one applies to Trump. For example, they attack anyone who opposes or criticizes them; they have contempt for the truth; they despise institutions, public and private; they blame and attack elite power. As the author writes, his goal was “to persuade the reader that in electing Donald Trump to the presidency, we Americans really did choose a demagogue.” He has succeeded.
An insightful analysis into what went wrong with the founders’ dream.

**A PEOPLE BETRAYED**

**A History of Corruption, Political Incompetence and Social Division in Modern Spain, 1876-2018**

Preston, Paul
Liveright/Norton (752 pp.)
$35.00 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-0-87140-868-6

One of the leading authorities on 20th-century Spain paints a dark portrait of the political history of the Iberian nation that has long struggled to find solid government and leadership.

Preston, a professor at the London School of Economics who has written many books on the history, politics, and culture of modern Spain, barely hides his anger at the failures of Spain’s major figures over the past two centuries. “Violence, corruption and incompetence of the political class have betrayed the population since 1833 and almost certainly before,” he writes near the beginning. He continues, “unlike, say, France or Italy after 1871, Spanish governments failed to create an all-embracing sense of nationhood.” Opening this authoritative yet searingly critical narrative with the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1874, Preston takes us smoothly through the ruinous Spanish-American War, the Spanish Civil War and its long, repressive Francoist aftermath, and the country’s transformation into a republic since the 1970s. The author, a discerning critic of a country he clearly understands, delivers a comprehensive, vivid, and bleak record of assassinations, betrayals, anarchist attacks, extrajudicial exterminations, military coups, terrorism, dictatorship, endless corruption, and economic ruin. Even the post-Franco return of representative government and democracy within a monarchy has been “painful,” the republic’s youthful mixture of “grandeur and misery.” Preston leaves readers pessimistic about the ability of Spain’s current regime to lead the country into a bright future, and the author’s unrelenting disappointment with the country he loves is sometimes taxing to readers. The book could have used some lighter-hued relief with more focus on Spain’s ordinary people, who have always gotten on with their lives despite officialdom’s poisonous struggles for power. In the book’s welter of detail about politics and culture, the achievements of average Spaniards often get lost. Still, the scope of the narrative and the obvious depth of research are impressive.

Likely to be the go-to history of modern Spain for many years to come. (20 b/w illustrations)

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A tour de force exploration of why America got better and then went into reverse.

**THE UPSWING**

**How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again**

Putnam, Robert D. with Garrett, Shaylyn Romney
Simon & Schuster (304 pp.)
$27.99 | June 16, 2020
978-1-9821-2914-9

A top-notch addition to the why-America-is-in-such-a-mess genre.

Writing with Garrett, Putnam, a professor of public policy at Harvard and winner of the National Humanities Medal, portrays a prosperous nation driven by technological innovation but burdened by massive, concentrated wealth and widespread poverty: Corruption and sex scandals fill the media; politics is gridlocked; xenophobia and white supremacist violence are rising; substance abuse runs rampant. The author then delivers a jolt by revealing that this describes Gilded Age America (1870-1890), a time when “doomsday prophecies and despairing anxieties” filled the media. Putnam’s inverted-U graph illustrates what happened since. Four nearly parallel lines rise, tracking economic equality, goodwill in politics, community social bonds, and cultural altruism. All peak during the 1960s when, although far from perfect, “America had been transformed into a more egalitarian, cooperative, cohesive, and altruistic nation.” Then all four steadily decline into the present. There follows an insightful history of what Putnam labels an “I-we-I century.” Economic equality rose mostly through the explosion of education, high schools after 1900 and college after World War II and the Progressive movement, which produced government reform, encouraged unions, passed industrial regulation, and created the first social programs (“a veritable boom in association-building”). The first half of the 20th century gave birth to iconic social institutions such as the Rotary Club, NAACP, and the League of Woman Voters. Startlingly, both political parties contributed. About half of Republicans in Congress voted in favor of Progressive and New Deal programs, nearly two-thirds for Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society. The number voting for Obamacare in 2010? Zero. The 1970s saw the steady decline of this so-called affability: “The collective norm that ‘we’re all in this together, was replaced by a libertarian…norm that we’re not.” The narrative is brilliantly argued throughout, although the traditional how-to-fix-it conclusion could use a more specific action plan.

A tour de force exploration of why America got better and then went into reverse.
A teacher and writer shares her thoughts on education and life in general. Reed, who has taught at nearly every level, including her current position teaching creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh, uses essays, lists, quizzes, and other elements to share her two decades of wisdom. Though the author didn’t always dream of being a teacher, when a job opportunity opened up at a preschool, she took the position. One day, while explaining why the season was called “fall” and seeing the light bulb go on in one child’s head, she caught the bug. “That was it for me, the first moment I was ready to admit I was no longer just a person who liked kids and liked that they liked me,” she writes. “No. I was a teacher. I had taught. They had learned. They were smarter now! I was hooked.” From the preschool, she moved on to an all-girls Catholic school in Rockaway. Because it was such a long commute from her apartment in Brooklyn, she often arrived late to class, but she loved “the diversity of the student body,” which was comprised of students of numerous ethnicities. From there, Reed moved on to a high school, where she learned how to work with bullies, particularly one boy who not only verbally and physically attacked other students, but made rude comments to her. Eventually, she got her MFA, taught college classes, and found a comfortable, rewarding spot at Pitt. Using honesty and humor, Reed sheds light on what it means to be a public school teacher in a variety of locations, working with students from different backgrounds. She often indicates that she has learned as much from her pupils about everyday life as they have from her.

Reflective essays that expose the good and the bad sides of being an educator. Good reading for aspiring teachers.

Across the vast expanse of Siberia, pianos brought culture and consolation. British journalist Roberts makes an engaging book debut with a chronicle of her travels through Siberia searching for pianos. Guided by a history of 19th-century Russian piano makers, the author was aware of the proliferation and distribution of pianos, some manufactured by Western companies, far from Russia’s major cities. By the end of the 19th century, one workshop in St. Petersburg alone had built more than 11,000 pianos, many of which were hauled by sledge to outposts in Siberia. “East of the Urals,” Roberts writes, “music teachers were paid two to three times the amount they earned in Western Russia. In these new towns of the expanding Empire, the piano played an even more important social role than it did in a Moscow drawing room.” In the town of Tomsk, for example, a place Chekhov found boring, a chapter of the Imperial Russian Music Society incited a flourishing musical culture. Its grand piano was chosen by the brother of famed pianist Anton Rubinstein. Besides forming the center of cultural life for residents who settled in Siberia hoping for fortune, freedom, or a new beginning, pianos were crucial to the region’s many penal colonies, where classical music elicited “a keen sense of European identity and pride.” In Kolyma, near the Sea of Okhotsk, Roberts recalls the “political dissidents, hardened criminals, recidivist killers, invalids half dead with dystrophy, poets, pianists, and starving women” brought by Stalin’s gulag ships. Even in that harsh colony, there was a grand piano, housed in a building constructed by prisoners. Roberts describes vividly the “bald, scarred, austere” landscapes that make up much of Siberia as well as the often eccentric individuals—many of them piano tuners—who assisted in her quest. Aiming “to celebrate all that is magnificent about Siberia,” Roberts realized that often the pianos she found were “tied up with a terrifying past.”

An absorbing history illuminates a bleak landscape. (b&w illustrations; maps)

In this history of the stages of globalization since the first foraging bands of humans, Sachs shows how the “rising scale of global interactions” has led to the crises of the 21st century—and what can be done.

“Humanity has always been globalized,” writes the author, as a result of the interplay of physical geography (climate, etc.), technology (systems of production), and institutions (from politics to cultural ideas). At each stage, humans have become more aware of and dependent on the wider world. By examining how interactions occur and how changes in one region affect another, we can learn lessons for today. The author’s scholarly overview, based on lectures given at Oxford University in 2017, identifies seven ages of globalization and explains how each prompted “scale-enlarging transformations.” Humanity progressed from foraging (Paleolithic Age) to farming (Neolithic) to horse power (Equestrian) to empire-building (Classical) to ocean-going vessels and the birth of global capitalism (Ocean) to the creation of the modern world (Industrial Age) to the present Digital Age. Sachs captures defining aspects of each age: The horse, for example, offered the speed, durability, power,
and intelligence to enable breakthroughs in every sector of the economy”; empire-building signaled “a new ethos of greed”; capitalist globalization of the 1500s sparked a “ruthless, violent” economic system. By the Industrial Age, most people remained poor and never traveled from their birthplace. “Most economic and demographic change,” writes Sachs, “has occurred…during the past two hundred or so years of our roughly three hundred thousand years as a species.” In 2020, with world population at 7.7 billion and rising at 70 million per year, the Digital Age faces “challenges of inequality, environmental crisis, and the fragility of peace” that cry out for “a new era of cooperation at the global scale” and the precepts of sustainable development.

An authoritative account of our “shared,” increasingly interdependent human journey. (maps, charts, graphs)

**A FISH GROWING LUNGS**

**Essays**  
Sawchyn, Alysia Li Ying  
Burrow Press (170 pp.)  
$16.00 paper | Jun. 9, 2020  
978-1-941681-66-4

A collection of essays about the deleterious effects of a serious medical misdiagnosis.

When she was 18, Sawchyn, a features editor for the *Rumpus*, ended up in a hospital after her mother found her sitting in her room, “knees pulled into my chest, face pushed into my knees, arms wrapped around myself as far as they would go, rocking forward and back, muttering.” She was diagnosed with bipolar I. This diagnosis, she writes, “would shape the next seven years of my life,” a period during which she “lived afraid” of what others would think and do if they found out about it.” She eventually learned that she had been misdiagnosed, that her teenage “riotous self-will” and capacity for self-harm were attributable to factors that therapy and medication only made worse. In these essays, Sawchyn paints a chilling portrait of her ordeal, her strained relations with members of her biracial family, and similar struggles endured by people close to her, including a boyfriend who made several unsuccessful attempts at suicide and a graduate school classmate with “pale scars tracked up the inside of her left arm that matched those on my right.”

A potent cautionary tale about the dangers of psychiatric misdiagnoses and the stigma of mental illness.

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**STEALING OUR DEMOCRACY**

How the Political Assassination of a Governor Threatens Our Nation  
Siegelman, Don  
NewSouth (320 pp.)  
$28.95 | Jun. 16, 2020  
978-1-58838-429-4

The former governor of Alabama recounts how he went to prison for a bribe he never offered and why Republicans targeted him before he could open a campaign to seek the presidency.
Siegelman (b. 1946) has been largely successful in his political life. During his distinguished career in his home state, he served as secretary of state, attorney general, lieutenant governor, and then governor, in 1998. Seeking reelection in 2002, the author lost narrowly because of what he claims was vote-counting fraud by Republicans. “We had been robbed but there was nothing to be done,” he writes. “Republicans insisted the results were accurate, and many newspapers supported them. The longer this went on, the more likely it was that public opinion would turn against me.” Because Republicans still feared his electoral prowess, Karl Rove and other Republican operatives concocted corruption charges, complete with witnesses willing to commit perjury. A prosecutor brought the charges to trial in front of a biased judge, and a guilty verdict ensued. After describing that event, Siegelman offers a chronological account of his treatment as a federal prisoner, temporary release from prison due to an appeal and an influential 60 Minutes segment, and soul-crushing return to prison when politically motivated, dishonest prosecutors refused to drop the case permanently. Siegelman is convincing with his detailed allegations against Rove as well as the complicity of Jeff Sessions, who went on to become a senator and then attorney general under Donald Trump. Before being released to home confinement in 2017—and since—Siegelman was tireless in advocating for prison reform, finding ways to limit the powers of corrupt prosecutors, and ameliorating the school-to-prison pipeline that negatively affects nonwhite and low-income communities disproportionately.

The book fluctuates among impassioned legal brief, indictment of systemic criminal justice flaws, and touching family saga.

THAT IS NOT WHO WE ARE!
Populism and Peoplehood
Smith, Rogers M.
Yale Univ. (176 pp.)
$32.50 | Jun. 23, 2020
978-0-300-22939-4

A notable contribution to the debate about how to reduce the appeal of “pathological populisms” while holding out hope of success in doing so.

As a leading political scientist, professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, and former president of the American Political Science Association, Smith’s credentials are impressive. In his latest book, parts of which were presented as part of the Castle Lectures at Yale, he explores how illiberal nationalism can be fought and reconciled to more humane, positive, and optimistic views of human potential and collective existence. In a narrative wide in perspective and rich in context, Smith makes two main points. First, he makes a case for the central importance to a people’s understanding of themselves of the stories they tell about the nations, tribes, and other groups of which they’re members—their “peoplehood.” Regarding the second, which is Smith’s freshest contribution, he argues for the importance of the kinds of stories he believes to be the most effective in energizing and sustaining a “population in generous solidarity with each other against the ‘conservative nationalist political movements and religious traditionalists’ who cling to ‘core essential identities’ in a changing world. “The simple, familiar siren songs of populist nationalisms” should be countered by “the development of more positive, more egalitarian, and inclusive stories of national peoplehood.” What makes a good story of peoplehood? Smith argues that it must be “expressive of [a people’s] identities and interests as well as their ideals” and “resonant, respectful” and arranged to withstand change over time. He then proposes three strong candidates for fitting stories of American nationhood and comes down on the side of Lincoln’s version of the Declaration of Independence as the richest and most enduring.

A brief but significant book that should be in the hands of anyone concerned about the nation’s political future.

LEVON
From Down in the Delta to the Birth of The Band and Beyond
Tooze, Sandra B.
Diversion Books (400 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-63576-704-9

A biography of the legendary drummer and pioneer of Americana. Levon Helm (1940-2012) hailed from Turkey Scratch, Arkansas, situated in a region where blacks and whites toiled side by side in the fields and shared songs as they did—and on Saturday nights, too, when nearby towns beckoned with their itinerant hucksters and song-and-dance players. “Today,” he remarked, “when folks ask me where rock ‘n roll came from, I always think of our Southern medicine shows and that wild midnight ramble.” Helm mastered the guitar, mandolin, and other instruments early on, but it was as a drummer that he became known, playing in fellow Arkansan Ronnie Hawkins’ Hawks, whose otherwise Canadian members eventually formed The Band. Tooze, previously a biographer of Helm’s hero, Muddy Waters, spins a story that is well known thanks to Helm’s own memoir This Wheel’s on Fire (1993) and band mate Robbie Robertson’s Testimony (2010). Tooze’s musical vocabulary is solid—“His drumming seems random here as he playfully intersperses parts on the ride and hi-hat with drags, all in an eighth-note groove”—and her reconstruction of The Band’s chronology is accurate, as when she notes that Levon came late to the sessions that would become the Bob Dylan/Band collaboration released as The Basement Tapes. She also notes that in its own day, The Band was not as beloved as it would become later; the group’s third release, Stage Fright, was its most commercially successful, for example, “even though the reviews were lukewarm.” A strong theme in the closing sections of the book, after the group broke up, was Helm’s animosity toward Robertson, whom he resented for controlling the publishing rights to The Band's songs.
Fascinating as these details are, it is Wagner’s sensitive, probing depiction of how she coped without Wood that makes for the most compelling reading.

MORE THAN LOVE

An Intimate Portrait of My Mother, Natalie Wood
Wagner, Natasha Gregson
Scribner (304 pp.)
$28.00 | May 5, 2020
978-1-9821-1118-2


Wagner was 11 years old when her mother, with whom she felt inextricably “entwined,” drowned. In this eloquent debut memoir, the author examines Wood’s life and the relationship they had while offering her perspective on the mysterious circumstances surrounding her mother’s untimely demise. Born Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko in San Francisco, Wood was the daughter of Russian immigrants. At age 4, she caught the attention of a Hollywood director. Five years later, Wood had not only played opposite such legends as Orson Welles; she had also earned enough celebrity status to negotiate movie contracts that included jobs for the star-struck parents who would control their daughter throughout adolescence and young adulthood. In 1957, Wood married Robert Wagner, her “childhood movie crush,” in part to escape a lonely and restrictive family life. The two divorced and then reunited in the early 1970s, after Wood ended her marriage to the author’s birth father, producer Richard Gregson. For most of the author’s childhood, life with Wood and “Daddy Wagner” was idyllic. But as the author remembers her beautiful mother presiding over dazzling celebrity parties, she also remembers the terror she felt being apart from Wood, which haunted her long after her mother’s death. When the author’s parents returned to full-time acting, the pressures mounted. Wood developed a dependence on alcohol, high levels of which were found in her blood after she died. The author denies years of tabloid speculation that Robert Wagner murdered her mother, suggesting instead that the reports, which came from Wood’s envious younger sister and a family employee, were motivated by greed. Fascinating as these details are, it is Wagner’s sensitive, probing depiction of how she coped without Wood that makes for the most compelling reading in a book that celebrates both a brilliant actress and a bygone film era.

An intimate and heartfelt memoir.

THE 300
The Inside Story of the Missile Defenders Guarding America Against Nuclear Attack
Wasserbly, Daniel
St. Martin’s (320 pp.)
$28.99 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-1-250-22184-1

A detailed history of the Missile Defense Agency, a little-known task force created to intercept nuclear missiles.

Wasserbly, editor of Jane’s International Defence Review, focuses on the personnel at Fort Greely in northern Alaska, the main launch site for the interceptors, chosen because its location allows a clean shot at ICBMs coming over the Pacific or the North Pole. The base, closed down in 1999, reopened in 2001 when President George W. Bush decided to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Reconstruction took another two years while crews trained to operate the sophisticated equipment. The base was initially manned by full-time National Guard troops. At the same time, at Schriever Air Force Base in Colorado, a command center tracks incoming missiles and passes information and orders to the teams at Greely. The book follows a couple dozen people, from agency directors to crew members and military police charged with keeping intruders out of the base. As you might expect in Alaska, the latter are more often moose and bears than human. The author deals with such issues as changing the length of shifts, but there are also colorful stories of daily life at Greely—and some humor. Wasserbly attempts, without much success, to generate narrative tension as the crews work to test their equipment, especially in live tests against incoming missiles. At first, the tests were jinxed by technical problems, and the Pentagon responded by cutting funds. Eventually, the glitches were fixed, and the crews are confident of success—though there’s really no way to simulate an actual attack. Without a suspenseful conclusion, the book is ultimately anticlimactic.

For die-hard military buffs who want a look at the people who operate an important element of America’s anti-missile defense. (8-page color photo insert)
Inspired by a camping trip to California’s Yuba River, mother-daughter duo Ada and Zubizarreta-Ada team up for a bilingual picture-book collection of poetry covering the ABCs of nature.

A collection of 29 poems—each one standing for a letter in the Spanish alphabet—takes readers on a nature-filled journey punctuated by glimpses of butterflies, hummingbirds, frogs, the Milky Way, pebbles, and more. For every Spanish poem there is a corresponding English translation. While the English alphabet consists of a solid 26 letters, Spanish has a few more, and through clever strategies, the co-authors incorporate most of them. For instance, “Niña de la trusa azul” is the vehicle for the letter “ñ” while the italicized English word in “Ventana o window” stands for the letter “w.” Like “ñ,” “rr” occurs in the middle of words; however, it does not get a poem. Every letter brings readers to a setting along the Yuba: evening campfires, cicadas chirping, toes dipped in water, a boulder island, forest, and sunsets. In Spanish, the poetry carries a lovely, lyrical, smooth, fluid, and rhythmic cadence; and on occasion the English pacing does not measure up. Utomo’s watercolors lend a dreamy quality to the warm browns and greens; readers will feel the sun’s warmth and hear the rippling waters.

Readers looking to strengthen their elementary Spanish or English vocabulary will appreciate this collection. (Picture book/poetry. 5-8)
This heartfelt story plumbs deep feelings with economic prose.

WHAT’S THE MATTER, MARLO?

Arnold, Andrew
Illus. by the author
Roaring Brook (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-250-22323-4

What are best friends for? Everything.
Marlo and the narrator are BFFs; they read, laugh, and play games, usually accompanied by Marlo’s dog, Hooper. Today’s different. Marlo doesn’t want to play and won’t explain. The protagonist knows something’s wrong and tells a joke to brighten Marlo’s mood. The ploy doesn’t work; in fact, Marlo gets uncontrollably angry and runs away. After searching, the narrator discovers Marlo, crying, and finally understands his overwhelming emotions without his saying anything: Observing Hooper’s collar hanging from a branch over a patch of newly dug earth, the narrator realizes that Marlo is very sad. Hooper has died—a point never actually stated; the illustration speaks poignant volumes. What can a best friend do except offer a tight hug, express sorrow, and cry together with him? This heartfelt story plumbs deep feelings with economic prose, and the expressive illustrations work wonderfully with the text. Marlo’s unarticulated but profound emotions are depicted via bold black scribbles and overwhelming, black backgrounds. Text in increasingly large fonts is incorporated effectively into some illustrations, as when the narrator frantically hunts for Marlo and shouts his name. Sharp-eyed readers will notice that the dog, seen through Marlo’s door in the opening spread, is absent following the setup pages. Both children are white, brown-haired, and attired in typical kid garb.

A sweet, reassuring validation of the power of a close friendship and empathy. (Picture book. 3-6)
As huge swaths of our planet burn or flood as a consequence of climate change, and as Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg galvanizes kids to join her in climate strikes, the book publishing industry has followed suit with a little deluge of books on environmental themes. Inasmuch as trees are felled to make these books and pounds of carbon dioxide released to bring them to market, it seems in this category above all others the imperative that they be good ones should not be questioned. But what is “good” when it comes to communicating imminent planetary destruction to small children? I think one thing to do is not to communicate imminent planetary destruction. A recent article in Wired introduced me to a sub-subgenre of adult science fiction called “doomer lit,” and that trend has made it into picture books. In If We Were Gone (Millbrook/Lerner, March 3), author Jon Coy and illustrator Natalie Capanelli imagine a future world as humans built it but that humans have suddenly vanished from. Greenery spreads through cities, and animals roam freely. It’s creepy as all get out but also hard not to imagine that the world and all its flora and fauna are way better off without us. Rather than encouraging children to action, I see this as launching them into existential despair.

If possible, Élisabeth Eudes-Pascal’s Don’t Let Go! (Owlkids, April 15) is even more disturbing. In it, readers see a happy anthropomorphic polar bear family enjoying a day at an iceberg beach. One young cub is reluctant to swim, though, repeating the titular exclamation and clinging to the parent bear. As this familiar scene plays out, one bear exclaims over the warmth of the water and another notices that the ice is melting—and in the final scene, readers see the little reluctant cub clinging to floating toys in utter distress, no family in sight and no ice to swim to. This may well mirror reality—we adults are literally leaving kids in deep water—but, wow.

There are plenty of books about recycling and otherwise caring for our planetary web, so there are alternatives for adults who want to share positive approaches with strategies that children can employ themselves; Mark Athitakis highlights five recent good ones. I’d like to highlight two more that go beyond what kids can do today by empowering them as citizens of the global community.

Anishinaabe/Métis author Carole Lindstrom and Tlingit illustrator Michaela Goade combine forces for We Are Water Protectors (Roaring Brook, March 17). Amid highly symbolic verbal and visual imagery, the Indigenous child narrator tells readers about a prophesied “black snake,” depicted as an oil pipeline with a snake’s head, that “Courses through the water, / Making it unfit to drink.” But rather than give in to despair, this narrator resolves to “keep the black snake away” and joins with the whole community “To stand as ONE” against it.

And on the other side of the globe, author Tara Dairman and illustrator Archana Sreenivasan take readers to northwest India in Desert Girl, Monsoon Boy (Putnam, May 12). In rhythmic verse and clever split-screen pictures, readers meet two children, one from a nomadic family and the other whose family lives in a village. Climate change threatens both ways of life, but both communities are resilient. They must leave their homes for “higher ground,” but readers have confidence that, like Lindstrom and Goade’s Native American characters, together they will survive.

Both these books confront the danger head-on, but both leave readers with a strong sense of hope and commitment, and isn’t that what we need if we are going to survive our current climate crisis?

Vicky Smith is the children’s editor.
**LOVE BY SOPHIA**

Averbeck, Jim  
Illus. by Ismael, Yasmeen  
McElderry (40 pp.)  
$17.99 | Jun. 16, 2020  
978-1-4814-7790-1  
Series: Sophia

Sophia’s impressive vocabulary strikes again. In this third title in the series, 6-year-old Sophia, who has brown skin and wears her hair in three puffsballs, has a conundrum: Her art falls short of her expectations, so she crumples it up in frustration after showing it to Noodle, her pet giraffe. Aided by her attentive teacher, Ms. Paradigm, who agrees with Sophia that “Art is hard,” she comes to understand some things about perspective that improve her painting she calls Love. At home, she lobbies for permission to display her art on the family’s new stainless steel CoolKitch™ fridge. (Readers will recall she used this skill effectively to get Noodle in *One Word From Sophia*, 2015.) She must convince Mother, the judge (who is also pregnant); Father, the businessman; Uncle Conrad, the politician; and Grand-mamá, the “head curator.” Ultimately it’s Noodle who helps Grand-mamá, the toughest critic, see the art and its family from a better vantage point. Readers might never have encountered the words “ossicones,” “curator,” or “censorship” before, but they will have a good idea of what each word means after reading this story, especially with the help of the robust glossary. Ismael’s whimsical watercolor-and–colored-pencil illustrations of this interracial family will entertain and delight while they inform. She captures Sophia’s shifting attitudes particularly well as the determined protagonist pleads her case for abstract art. Sophia’s impressive vocabulary strikes again.

**THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT SAM**

Barnaby, Hannah  
Illus. by Wilsdorf, Anne  
HMH Books (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | Jul. 14, 2020  
978-1-328-76680-9

The birthday boy accidentally invites a werewolf to his sleepover. At first, Max doesn’t want to invite new kid Sam to spend the night along with his other friends. “There’s something different about him,” he argues, but his mom counters that “that’s no reason to leave him out.” The third grader conveys his concerns to his other friends, but they seem to like the weirdo—apparently he “can run really fast,” says Michael (similarly initially left off Max’s guest list for nose-picking), and Elliott enthuses that he “always knows what’s cooking in the cafeteria way before lunch-time.” Sam himself seems hesitant, his hair standing on end as he says “I’m not sure I can…there’s a full moon that night.” But Sam decides to show up after all, and during the course of the sleepover he and his oddities start to grow on Max. Before long it’s revealed that the rare-meat–loving, hairy boy who’s inclined to bite is, in fact, a werewolf. The beastly reveal at the end is fun, but the journey there is bogged down by confusing transitions between scenes and awkward sentences. All the characters, including the protagonists, are awfully bland, and their somewhat interchangeable names make it hard to distinguish between them. The illustrations are unfortunately drab for such a lively concept. Max, his mother, and all his guests save Jeremy, who presents black, seem to be white.

**AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL**

Bates, Katherine Lee  
Illus. by Minor, Wendell  
Charlesbridge (48 pp.)  
$18.99 | May 5, 2020  
978-1-62354-121-7

A pictorial interpretation of Bates’ “America the Beautiful.” Few will question the aesthetic beauty of Minor’s paintings, which employ breathtaking realism.
to depict a diversity of landscapes in the continental U.S. Minor chooses sites ranging from the “purple mountain majesty” of Grand Teton National Park (first appearing on the front jacket) to a moving illustration for the line “Thine alabaster cities gleam / Undimmed by human tears!” that shows the Empire State Building illuminated in red, white, and blue with twin columns of light in the background. Throughout, Minor also varies his settings between the contemporary era and the past, selectively including people in some art. Unfortunately, herein lies a romanticizing of American history that is reliant on exclusion and erasure. The cover image of the Tetons is reused on the recto of an interior spread and expanded to a facing verso depicting three lone tepees, smoke rising from their tops. Such imagery risks delegating Indigenous people to the past and reinforces the myth of historically sparse Native populations—especially when juxtaposed with a scene of “pilgrim[s]” at Plimouth Plantation and another with a covered wagon moving through Nebraska. A spread with the figures on Mount Rushmore exalted as “heroes… / Who more than self their country loved / And mercy more than life” further whitewashes America’s history of settler colonialism and slavery.

Both beautiful and deeply flawed, like its subject. (Biographical notes, sheet music, key, map) (Picture book. 4-10)

ATTACK OF THE STUFF
Benton, Jim
Illus. by the author
Papercutz (112 pp.)
$14.99 | $12.99 paper | May 26, 2020
978-1-5458-0498-8
978-1-5458-0499-5 paper

When objects begin speaking to him, Bill realizes that now he doesn’t own his stuff: His stuff owns him.

Awakened from a dream by the fart of his alarm clock, Bill, a talking white duck, experiences a moment of strange awareness when he enters his bathroom and his toilet tells him, “Forget it. Not today, Bill,” and declares its intimate cameos and dramatic full- and double-page vistas.

A delightful lesson in the joy of living in the moment. (Picture book. 3-7)

THE UNBELIEVABLE OLIVER AND THE SAWED-IN-HALF DADS
Bosch, Pseudonymous
Illus. by Pangburn, Shane
Dial (208 pp.)
$16.99 | $7.99 paper | May 12, 2020
978-0-525-55235-2
978-0-525-55236-9 paper
Series: Unbelievable Oliver, 2

Budding magician Oliver and his twin pals Teenie and Bea are back, three months after their inaugural adventures in The Unbelievable Oliver and the Four Jokers (2019).

Readers meet them at a cake testing. The twins’ dads, Yale Drama School graduate and writer Simon and photographer/florist Miguel, are getting married. In the age of out and married...
politicians running for the presidency, the nuptials are treated matter-of-factly as a milieu for this lighthearted sequel even as the news shocks Oliver because he assumed the dads were already hitched. The ever supportive dads, at their daughters’ insistence, ask Oliver both to be a ring bearer and to entertain the guests at the rehearsal brunch. Of course, Oliver, prodded by the girls and with the help of his talking bunny, Benny, and his cousin Spencer, must elevate his repertoire, so he decides on the titular illusion. The boy magician pulls off the sleight of hand, to his, the twins’, and the guests’ delight...until one of the dads goes missing. With tongue stuffed in his cheek, Bosch builds the silliness with total seriousness, and forces of nature Bea and Teenie make a delightful foil for the earnest, slightly anxious Oliver. Pangburn’s cartoons help the text along, depicting all three kids with darker-than-white skin (Oliver is Jewish and the twins, Mexican American) and adding generous dollops of additional humor. Trick instructions are appended.

A fun and funny follow-up that celebrates the magic of family and community. (Fiction. 8-12)

THE CRANKYPANTS TEA PARTY

Bottner, Barbara  
Illus. by Barba, Al  
Caitlyn Dlouhy/Atheneum (40 pp.)  
$17.99 | Jun. 23, 2020  
978-1-4814-5900-6

Clarissa invites her stuffed animals to a tea party, but they respond with gruff, grumpy refusals.

The animals (Elephant, Rabbit, Pig, Monkey, Bear, and Pup) all harbor different grudges, which they share with Clarissa (a paper-white, ebony-haired tot about their size) while she brightly tries to persuade them to party: “Clarissa: Let’s get started. Who’s going to bring the chairs? / Rabbit: Not me. Nuh-uh. You left me outside. I’m still damp. / Pig: I’m losing my stuffing. BECAUSE OF YOU!” All those colons and speaker designations appear throughout what could’ve been a charming story, compromising lively dialogue and disrupting narrative flow. Sadly stilted when read aloud, this book won’t find an audience with independent readers, who will find the stuffed animals and their grievances (lost stuffing, knotted shoelaces, and soap in the eyes) just a bit too infantile. Readers of any age can relate to occasionally acting like a crankypants, and they can also find much to love in such evocative, empathetic illustrations. Acrylics give color (lemony yellows, grass greens, and mellow reds) and shape (lovely, loose linework) to vivid feelings (shown effectively as weather changes). The group reaches reconciliation as Clarissa unravels a series of misunderstandings, demonstrating how heightened emotional moments can resolve and actually bring people closer together. Unfortunately, the narrative form will keep readers from appreciating all this.

Delightful art and charming characters can’t compensate for a flawed narrative structure. (Picture book. 2-6)

A WAVE OF STARS

Brown, Dolores  
Illus. by Wimmer, Sonja  
nubeOCHO (44 pp.)  
$16.95 | May 5, 2020  
978-84-17673-41-3

What could be more magical than a moonbow?

Mimbi the seal and Kipo the sea turtle hear an amazing and terrifying legend from a storytelling octopus: Any sea creature gazing at the rare glow becomes human! Playing beneath the waves, the young friends are caught unaware by a storm. When they poke their heads through the water, a moonbow stretches overhead. Their miraculous transformations into children include clothing and the ability to speak in the tongue of a kindly white fisherman, who knows the legend and takes them home when he finds them on the beach. They want to return to their former selves, but the only means of accomplishing this, says the fisherman, is to swim beneath a wave of stars. This fable
demands a huge suspension of disbelief. Brown glosses over the trauma of the transformation in three sentences. White-presenting Mimbi and black-presenting Kipo somehow understand human behaviors as well as language. Also, two rare phenomena, the moonbow and the wave of stars, conveniently occur within 24 hours. Wimmer seamlessly combines black-and-white sketches with sweet full-color spreads, helping to bridge many of the story’s gaps. The best element isn’t even a character in the story—it’s Mimbi’s triton-grasping mer-king doll. Readers will be charmed by the subtle changes in the mer-king’s expressions. A Spanish-language edition translated by Luis Amavisca will release simultaneously.

A slight “Little Mermaid”-esque tale with an abrupt, less-than satisfying ending. (Picture book. 4-7) (La ola de estrellas: 978-84-17673-40-6)

ONCE UPON A SPACE-TIME!

Brown, Jeffrey
Illus. by the author
Crown (240 pp.)
978-0-553-53436-8 PLB

A space adventure with extraterrestrial, zero gravity, and a spaceship built inside an asteroid called the Potato, acronym for “Property Of The Alien Transportation Organization.”

In this graphic novel’s preface, set in 2206, an ET exits a spaceship to announce that sometimes UFOs are airplanes, but sometimes, they transport beings like himself. The ET leaves but returns five minutes later to deliver the same message. The pointy-eared beings are all clones named Tobby, and they belong to a group of beings from all across the Milky Way. Thus begins this outer-space episode that emphasizes silliness over plot. Ten years later, Tobby and Cmdr. Gusevich visit The Earth School for Space Mission Preparation and select Petra Novak and Jide Eshetu for a space mission to Mars. Upon their landing, a sentient robot takes them to the Mars Base, where a host of other beings wait to meet them. Petra and Jide enjoy learning about these friendly beings and spending time on Mars. While readers might enjoy Brown’s busy, paneled cartoons and gross humor (snot and toenails are considered edible), they will likely have trouble discerning science facts from science fiction. Throughout this episodic plot, the beings from other worlds function much like humans, reinforcing a bland, we-are-all-alike message rather than providing readers with a provocative take on the meeting of cultures. Petra, Jide, and Cmdr. Gusevich are all characters of color.

A mildly entertaining read for young space enthusiasts. (author’s note) (Graphic science fiction. 8-12)

SHARUKO

El arqueólogo peruano Julio C. Tello / Peruvian Archaeologist Julio C. Tello
Brown, Monica
Illus. by Chavarri, Elisa
Trans. by Domínguez, Adriana
Children’s Book Press (40 pp.)
$19.95 | May 12, 2020
978-0-89239-423-4

An introduction to the life of Julio C. Tello, one of the most important Peruvian archaeologists and the first Indigenous archaeologist in the Americas.

Born in the highlands of Peru in 1880, Julio and his family were Quechua-speaking Indigenous people. His fearlessness and curiosity as a child earned him the nickname Sharuko, the Quechua word for “brave.” Presented in both Domínguez’s Spanish translation and in English, Brown’s account goes on to tell about Tello’s childhood and eventual move to Lima to further his education, ultimately in medicine. Pride in his heritage and a curiosity sparked by childhood discoveries of skulls and artifacts led him to apply his medical skills to interpreting the Indigenous history of Peru. Brown’s account of Tello’s life and achievements is compelling and engaging, and the accompanying artwork goes a long way toward giving a real sense of place to the narration, starting with the endpapers that show carved stone heads from the Chavin de Huántar, one of the sites explored by Tello. Children unfamiliar with Peru and its geography will find a helpful map at the beginning that not only indicates the places mentioned in the narrative, but also helps them locate Peru within South America.

An engaging account of a man who dedicated his life to telling Peru’s long history. (afterword, illustrator’s note, author’s sources) (Picture book/biography. 6-10)

THE POWWOW DOG

Bruchac, Joseph
Illus. by Deforest, Dale
Reycraft Books (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 22, 2020
978-1-4788-6869-9


Grama and Grampa are taking twins Marie and Jamie to the powwow, where they are greeted by other attendees from different cultural backgrounds who have come to enjoy the gathering. Grama and Grampa set up a table to sell Grama’s beaded bracelets. Marie and Jamie watch the dance competition with some local kids, who tell them about a creepy old house near the grounds. When a dog steals a burger from one of the nearby food stands and then vanishes in the direction of that old house, the kids decide to solve the mystery of the disappearing dog.
In the old house they find the dog—and a fallen elder lying on the floor in need of help. Thus the twins’ curiosity and the dog’s attentiveness save the day. Abenaki author Bruchac collaborates with illustrator Deforest, who uses his experiences growing up in Navajo country to create bold and colorful comic-book-style illustrations of this contemporary Native American family and a diverse, happy gathering of powwow attendees. The flaw in this otherwise-wonderful tale is its ambiguity, as Bruchac doesn’t identify any of the Indigenous nations represented in the story, as is customary at a powwow. Though shaped like a picture book and running only to 32 pages, the story is broken into short chapters and aims for independent readers.

Happily, there are more powwow adventures to come.

(Graphic/mystery hybrid, 7-10)
grocery store), a cousin (who enjoys cooking heaps of tamales), a cat (who takes pleasure in napping on open books), and their own parents but never reveals how they achieve wholeness simply or together. Indeed, the child’s father’s delight in playing baseball with people who are not his family members stands in dramatic contrast to their mother’s belief that family is of utmost importance. Illustrations with a flat aesthetic evoking paper dolls are more successful in at least delivering a portrait of a mixed-race child beloved by family and secure in the world, but that world may well remain baffling to readers.

Too many holes to create a whole. (Picture book. 4-6)

RAY
Coppo, Marianna
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Bibi, Debbie
Tundra (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 26, 2020
978-0-7352-6577-6

Sometimes a change of scenery is all you need.

Coppo presents the story of an anthropomorphic incandescent light bulb named Ray that has lived in various rooms of a home and now resides in a closet among seldom-used items. Bored with it all, Ray leads an unfilled life until he’s called upon to power a lantern on a family camping trip. This trip exposes Ray to a new world of stars and the sun and inspires him to dream big once again. Scratching your head yet? Don’t worry, you won’t be alone. Astute children may also be confused by Ray’s tale: How has Ray never seen the sun or stars before if he’s lived in other rooms of the house? Who moves light bulbs from room to room? Why, in 2020, is Ray an incandescent bulb? The measured pacing that made Coppo’s Petra (2017) such a joy works against this story, causing it to feel needlessly drawn out. Some elements, such as an interactive moment à la Hervé Tullet, are underutilized and make the story feel disjointed. The illustrations—a combination of tempera, pastel, and digital collage—are all over the place. Some pages are very sparse while others are dark and complex, which works against large group read-alouds.

This bulb has burned out. (Picture book. 6-10)

THE GRUMPY PIRATE
Demas, Corinne & Roehrig, Artemis
Orchard/Scholastic (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-338-22297-5

It is a glorious thing to be a pirate grump.

Part of the appeal of pirates, many might feel, is that even as they’re robbing and pillaging and performing acts of mayhem, they’re upbeat about it. Not Gus. From the moment he steps aboard a seaworthy vessel with his fellow crew members, Gus cannot keep from grumping and grouching. His gripes and grouses and general whining begin the moment he wakes up and continue through every last one of his chores. His mates, all generally good-natured, finally turn to their Pirate Queen (brown-skinned and bedecked in a Prince-worthy array of purple) for help. The queen, in turn, hands Gus a parrot that will imitate his every word and syllable. Learning ensues. The gentle, rhyming text doesn’t try for anything too complicated, and the same could be said for the book itself. The art is cartoony and appealing. It won’t take much searching for kids to recognize themselves (or their siblings) in Gus’ general poutiness (and a picture of him moaning while lying sprawled on the deck is sure to trigger many memories). While Gus presents white, the crew is multi-racial and includes a child with a prosthetic leg and a crab with a hook.

A paean to grouchy Guses everywhere presented with pouty piratical aplomb. (Picture book. 4-6)
Detailed descriptions and factual information are woven naturally into the fast-moving plot.

**JULIETA AND THE DIAMOND ENIGMA**

- An animal finds humble treasures.

Little Bear adores his treasures, which are unpretentious (“a shiny button, tickly feathers”), full of potential (“a cozy hiding place” inside an inkily hollow tree), and slightly cryptic (“a soft cloud” that could only be the indistinct one hovering faraway in the sky). Little Bear waltzes joyfully by a “bush brimming with blueberries” (it’s his appreciation that brims: The blueberries are actually pretty sparse) and smiles to have “endless dust to dance in.” Backgrounds are soft pastels in round shapes with gently sparkling texture, nested in calm white space. Fine black lines sketch animals’ outlines and expressions. A haughty donkey, an irritated squirrel, a rushing rabbit with a watch (nod to Lewis Carroll!), and a bowl with a feather duster belittle the treasures—“They’re just junk”—hurting Little Bear’s feelings.

Fortunately, another creature arrives to share his pleasure. Little Bear and Little Bird, who look a bit alike, float in a “tree-bark boat” and make “thinking hats” from burrs as their path wafts toward magic. Whence the “glittering fish” they encounter with no water in sight? Where is the “mysterious fog,” made of downy grays and obscured plants, into which they gaze? Their silent, blissful ending involves snow or stardust, their transformation—a subtle but undeniable change in body silhouette shape—might be imagination, dream, or a returning.

**Sure to inspire real-life experimentation. (science facts)**

**(Picture book. 3-6)**

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**LIBBY LOVES SCIENCE**

- Science lover Libby works with classmates to run the science booth at the school festival in this companion to Derting and Johannes’ Cece books, illustrated by Vashni Harrison.

Libby is a black girl who loves experimenting, especially in the kitchen. At school, chemistry is right up her alley. When Mr. Darwin recruits students to run the science booth at the school fair, Libby works with Rosa and Finn to devise experiments that will be exciting enough to compete with the bouncy house. On the day of the festival, they decorate their booth artfully and set up their giant bubbles, slime ingredients, and rocketry supplies, but for a while they are overlooked. The trio manages to attract attention to their experiments, and soon they have a small crowd. Their booth doesn’t win the prize, but their class celebrates anyway with a fun and tasty chemistry experiment. Instructions for all of the science activities are included as note-page insets within the story spreads. The diverse characters (Rosa is brown skinned with puffy, red hair, and Finn looks Asian) are accessible and fun. Murray’s bright, cartoon illustrations, patterned after Harrison’s aesthetic, generate excitement around their adventures. While the one-note story falls a bit flat at the end, science lovers will be happy to continue collecting these titles, and the incorporation of well-loved activities like small crowd. Their booth doesn’t win the prize, but their class celebrates anyway with a fun and tasty chemistry experiment. Instructions for all of the science activities are included as note-page insets within the story spreads. The diverse characters (Rosa is brown skinned with puffy, red hair, and Finn looks Asian) are accessible and fun. Murray’s bright, cartoon illustrations, patterned after Harrison’s aesthetic, generate excitement around their adventures. While the one-note story falls a bit flat at the end, science lovers will be happy to continue collecting these titles, and the incorporation of well-loved activities like cooking and making slime just may convert science skeptics into science lovers too.

**Sure to inspire real-life experimentation. (science facts)**

**(Picture book. 3-6)**

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**JULIETA AND THE DIAMOND ENIGMA**

- This gentle, fast-paced mystery will hook readers with interesting details.

Julieta Leal, 9, is a magnet for disasters. She has a reputation at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, where both her parents work, for making trouble. Julieta is just trying to help, and it’s not her fault that sometimes things get broken or she has a hard time following the rules. When Julieta’s dad invites her along on a trip to Paris regarding the loan of some pieces from the Louvre, she jumps at the chance to add another purple pin to her family’s world-travel map. She promises to be helpful and stay out of trouble and desperately wants to shed her reputation of being a liability. This proves difficult when the dazzling Regent Diamond is stolen and Julieta and her dad are implicated in the theft. With her dad’s job in peril and the prized gem missing, Julieta must rely on her keen observations and tenacity to clear their names. Detailed descriptions of Paris landmarks and factual information about museum pieces are woven naturally into the fast-moving plot so that readers come away with knowledge of these topics alongside a satisfying story. Several pages of backmatter notes bolster the learning. The endearing Julieta is bilingual, and she and her family are Mexican American.

**Come for the mystery, stay for the backmatter. (glossaries)**

**(Mystery. 8-11) (Note: Duarte Armendáriz is a freelance contributor to Kirkus.)**
WITH SOLAR STORY, THE AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR CONTINUES HIS SERIES OF PICTURE BOOKS ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

By Deesha Philyaw


Like your earlier books, Solar Story is focused on environmentalism and sustainability. What led you to turn your attention to these issues?

A book I wrote, *Tin Lizzie* [in 2008], was based around the anniversary of the Model T Ford car. When I did my research on that, I realized that if I was going to do a book about cars, it ought to be a celebration of cars—but at the same time, you can’t celebrate cars. There’s a granddad who’s restoring this Lizzie, and he takes the kids out on the road in the car, and they start asking, “Why are there so many cars? What’s going to happen?” And the granddad says, “Well, you’ve got to figure it out.” And that really is the end of the book. Not a brilliant, exciting ending. When the book came out, I was living in Savannah, Georgia, chairing the illustration department at The Savannah College of Art and Design. We’d only recently moved there [from England], so we didn’t have a car. My kids would ride to the mall and to school on the bus. The kids at one of my children’s schools said, “Riding the bus? That’s suicide!” So there were all of these cultural shocks. So [my subsequent] books originated with *Tin Lizzie*, which, in the end, was an environmental book, accidentally.

After that, I came across a brilliant article in the *New Yorker* magazine by Elizabeth Kolbert, who had visited Denmark’s Samsø [a 100% renewable-energy–powered island]. And I just knew that would make an amazing children’s story. The thing that I dared to do [in *Energy Island*], which I hadn’t done before, was to put the book in the first person, with a schoolchild telling the story from her point of view. It became a very easy way for me to say a lot with a few words, to tell the story from within this girl’s home and from within her school.

I then moved on to trying to find the greenest city around, and that’s how I came across Greensburg, Kansas. I envisioned a set of six books when I proposed *Energy Island* to my then editor. I wanted to do a book about wind power, a book about bicycles, a book about building green, and a book about solar power. So now those six titles, over the past 10 years, are coming [to fruition].

In *Solar Story* you look at sustainability as multifaceted, introducing other concepts like energy independence,
entertainment, and infrastructure improvements that come with solar power—all in a very accessible way.

What do you hope readers will take away from Jasmine’s story and from the collection of six stories as a whole?

_Tin Lizzy_ had a lot of cars in it, so it had to have a lot of people in it. So it became a book about community, and that’s the thread that runs through the books. Each one has a subtitle, “How One Community....”

An unexpected bonus for me has been having the books [selected for] school reader [textbook] programs. That’s 2 million preteens. As a result, I’ve become familiar with U.S. librarians, who are absolutely fantastic, as are the teachers. I think about them as much as I think about my readers. They tell me that what makes these books unique is the reportage aspect and that these are stories of real communities, as told by children.

_Solar Story_ is also a little bit about struggle, and I think the best writing on sustainability has to indicate that it’s not easy. There’s this imbalance between these mega projects and what’s going on in real societies right next to the solar power plant. I wanted to go and see the world’s largest solar power plant, which turned out to be like a huge airport in the desert. But what was really interesting was happening to the communities around the plant. So that led me to an elementary school and a way into the story. It’s like being a reporter; you don’t really know what you’re going to find.


**INVENT-A-PET**

_Fang, Vicky_

_Illus. by Thaipinnarong, Tidawan_

_Sterling_ (32 pp.)

$16.95 | May 5, 2020
978-1-4549-3381-6

With the help of a machine, Katie tries to create a unique pet.

Katie doesn’t want a “common” pet, like a goldfish—she wants something “extraordinary.” When her mom gifts her a mysterious machine, Katie is excited to create her pet. Curious, she puts three items—a soccer ball, grass, a carrot—into the input slots, and out pops a rotund, green bunny. Katie eagerly adds different things, like a flower for beauty and a feather to make wings, but the animals never come out right. She decides to figure out how the machine works. By inputting the same items, then changing one variable each time, Katie discovers that the different inputs control the size, color, and animal. As she is experimenting, Katie fails to notice the number of animals running loose in her living room. After turning her driveway into a pet-adoption facility, Katie finally creates her extraordinary pet. This silly tale is a smart take on a child’s imagination and problem-solving. With fun onomatopoeia, it’s a great read-aloud, especially apt as part of a lesson on the scientific method. The cartoon illustrations, particularly those of the invented pets, are busy and bright, and readers will enjoy guessing along with Katie what animal might be coming out. Katie and her mother present Asian.

A delightful introduction to scientific experimentation—with impossibly cute pets. (Picture book. 3-7)

**LET’S RIDE A WAVE!**

_Diving Into the Science of Light and Sound Waves With Physics_

_Ferrie, Chris_

_Illus. by the author_

_Sourcebooks eXplore_ (40 pp.)

$14.99 | Jun. 1, 2020
978-1-4926-8058-1

Series: Everyday Science Academy

A picture book that explains the physics of waves.

Red Kangaroo, the protagonist of this story and the one whose questions propel the flimsy plot, relaxes on a beach andonders the surf, then decides to ask Dr. Chris whether “waves ever stop.” Dr. Chris, a lab-coated white man with pale skin and rosy cheeks, answers this question and all the others that Red Kangaroo poses about waves. Throughout the story, Dr. Chris teaches Red Kangaroo about wavelength, electromagnetic waves, the visible light spectrum, microwaves, X-rays, and more. Many of the key terms appear in boldface type, and in the extensive backmatter, the glossary offers definitions of all of the terms discussed. There’s also a quiz to help readers check their learning as well as several hands-on activities, with illustrations,
The text itself dances across the page, lines tiptoeing phrase by phrase.

**I WILL DANCE**

*Flood, Nancy Bo*

*Illus. by Swaney, Julianna*

*Atheneum (48 pp.)*

*$17.99 | May 26, 2020*  

*978-1-328-5061-7*

A girl who uses a motorized wheelchair longs to dance.

The 10-year-old narrator can't blow out the candles on her birthday cake, but she has one wish: to dance. But how can she "swirl, leap, twirl" when she can move only her head, arms, and fingers? Pretending isn't enough. At breakfast one morning (a Chris Schweizer showing barely any variation from spread to spread—or quality illustrations, with repeated depictions of a lecturing Dr. Chris showing barely any variation from spread to spread—or book to book, for that matter—help explain concepts but add nothing aesthetically.

Adequate science; inadequate art and plot. (Informational picture book. 8-10) (Let's Fly a Plane: 978-1-4926-8057-4)

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**CATCH THE MUNCHIES!**

*Fremont, David*

*Illus. by the author with Matison, Jimbo*

*Pixel+Ink (128 pp.)*

*$12.99 | Jun. 2, 2020*  

*978-1-64595001-1*

Series: Carlton Crumple Creature Catch, 1

When fast-food-frenzied monsters descend, only one hero can save the day.

Bespectacled Carlton Crumple is relentlessly terrorized by his mulleted older brother, Milt, and grows up fearful of everything. Talking to his best friend, Lulu, Carlton has a sudden insight, deciding to stop being scared and to become a creature catcher. He lands a job at Chubbzy Cheeseburgers but is sternly reprimanded when he replaces the ketchup with his superspicy Awesome Chili Sauce. When a horde of fast-food-obsessed (but not-too-scary) monsters attack, Carlton Crumple, Creature Catcher, and his special sauce may be key to stopping them. This middle-grade graphic offering is the first in a proposed series (with a promised second volume entitled *Tater Invaders*). Writer and illustrator Fremont's animation background is highly visible here, with fast pacing, quirky characters, and ample silliness. Driven by its jet-fueled plotting, young readers careen from one side-splitting scene to the next as the simply wrought, full-color (courtesy of Matison) cartoons rocket sequences along. Those who enjoy complex characters may be at a loss, but those who want their humor to have a fast and furious velocity should be right at home here, making this perfect for fans of series like Chris Schweizer's *The Creeps* or Jarrett J. Krosoczka's *Lunch Lady*. Carlton appears to be white; secondary characters display various skin tones.

Like fast food, this is quick and goes down easy. (Graphic fantasy. 7-11)

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**THE MAGICAL BOOKSHOP**

*Frixe, Katja*

*Illus. by Prechtel, Florentine*

*Trans. by Kemp, Ruth Ahmedzai*

*Rock the Boat/Oneworld (176 pp.)*

*$16.99 | Jun. 9, 2020*  

*978-1-78607-866-7*

The charming proprietor of Mrs. Owl's Bookshop magically supplies customers with just the book they need.

It is Clara's favorite place. Books seem to be alive and aware, and only Mrs. Owl and Clara can hear Mr. King, a talking mirror, and Gustaf the rhyming cat, whose pronouncements are surprisingly appropriate and helpful. And there's always chocolate to make things better. When her best friend, Lottie, moves away due to her parents' divorce, Clara is forlorn. Now she must deal with bullies on her own, and she must adjust to the new boy who becomes her seatmate at school. But worst of all, her new teacher is the woman.
for whom Lottie’s father left his family. Clara’s family and her friends at the bookstore are loving and supportive, providing encouragement and practical advice. But there is also trouble at the bookstore, where the villain of the piece tries to damage the business with dirty tricks. Via Kemp’s translation from the original German, Clara tells her own story in a conversational, British-inflected tone that will engage readers’ sympathy. The characters, who seem to be white, are wonderfully eccentric. There is plenty of action, angst, and fun as well as imaginative, sometimes hilarious magic. Friendly, informal black-and-white cartoons that enhance the fun are sprinkled throughout. There’s a happy, satisfying, if not perfect ending that will have readers glad for Clara.

A lovely mixture of friends and family and more than a touch of magic. (discussion questions) (Fantasy. 8-12)

THE ULTIMATE SURVIVAL GUIDE TO BEDTIME MONSTERS
Frost, Mitch
Illus. by Parton, Daron
Sourcebooks Jabberwocky (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 1, 2020
978-1-7282-1004-9

Most children experience fear of things that go bump in the night; here, Frost aims to alleviate those concerns with a dash of humor and a pinch of hygiene.

At Goodnight Labs, they don’t fool around. A diverse team of kid scientists, with lab coats, bubbling beakers, and somewhat questionable lab safety, have cracked the key techniques to help kids rid themselves of bedtime monsters of all sorts. Grow-ups will surely appreciate steps No. 1 and No. 2, which inform readers that both clean bedrooms and clean teeth are anathema to bedtime monsters. Of course, having a sleepover with all your favorite toys will help too. Most of the recommended techniques, however, focus less on what children might do to send monsters packing and more on making monsters appear too ridiculous to be frightening, a sense that’s ably reinforced by Parton’s humorously imagined bugaboos. Given the ubiquity of bedtime-monster literature available, it’s too bad this guide doesn’t provide practically helpful tools for dealing with the nighttime scares. Classics like Ed Emberley’s Go Away, Big Green Monster (1993) and Mercer Mayer’s There’s a Nightmare in My Closet (1960) or the more recent I Need My Monster, by Amanda Noll and illustrated by Howard McWilliam (2009), fill this niche with greater artistry. When bedtime monsters are particularly intractable, however, this may serve as booster bibliotherapy for such stalwarts.

A satisfactory if not stellar addition to bedtime bookshelves. (Picture book. 3-5)

WEASEL IS WORRIED
Gavin, Clara
Illus. by Wärnès, Tim
Tiger Tales (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 30, 2020
978-1-68010-193-5

The anthropomorphic title character isolates himself to feel safe from the elements—until an unexpected visit from Mole.

Weasel’s friendly face, fluffy, rust-colored fur, and loose polka-dot necktie remove any prejudices some readers may have about his species. Indeed, he is innocently collecting fall leaves against a colorful, bucolic backdrop when “suddenly the weather changed.” The page turn shows, on the verso, two comical vignettes of Weasel trying to protect himself from a “nasty rain” by clamping a large leaf on his head and then falling “FLAT on his bottom” as a gust of wind hits him. Little viewers will giggle as Weasel tells the sky, “That’s ENOUGH of that nonsense!”—and is soon pelted with hail. They will also empathize with Weasel’s growing sense that he’s small and powerless. Weasel builds himself a snug, protective home, where he lives in isolation until, one day, he turns around to find Mole sitting on the blue sofa. The ensuing dialogue is first about Weasel’s insistence that his home is solely for safety and then about Mole’s insistence that there is plenty of fun to be had in the fortress. A particularly comical illustration shows the bespectacled Mole demonstrating his “scary face” to thwart foxes. Mole proceeds to turn Weasel’s concerns on their heads, demonstrating to Weasel—and readers—that “a different way of seeing things” can work wonders. A healthy range of vocabulary differentiates the two creatures’ divergent approaches to life.

Sweet depictions of reassurance and friendship. (Picture book. 3-5)

CADI THE FARM DOG
Gerry, Lisa M.
Photos by Epstein, Lori
National Geographic Kids (48 pp.)
$9.99 | May 12, 2020
978-1-4263-3679-9
Series: Doggy Defenders

This introduction to the life of a working farm dog focuses on a day in the life of a border collie named Cadi.

The Baker family lives on a farm with livestock including cows, turkeys, goats, pigs, ducks, chickens, and rabbits. The family, who present white, includes a mom and dad and six children ranging in age from about 3 through the late teens. Cadi’s work herding cows is described in simple terms, illustrated with photographs showing the dog in action. Cadi is also shown interacting with the family’s children and the other animals, getting a bath, and riding in the farm truck. While the storyline is centered on Cadi’s important job herding cows, it also provides an introduction to farm life and farm products such as...
5 INSPIRING PICTURE BOOKS ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

By Mark Athitakis

With settings ranging from a coral reef to a desert to Antarctica, each of these books ingeniously explores how our everyday behavior leaves its mark on the world. And each delivers a lesson on how kids can do their bit to help preserve the planet, on Earth Day and beyond.

One Little Bag: An Amazing Journey by Henry Cole (Scholastic, April 7): This wordless and beautifully rendered pen-and-ink tale follows the surprisingly long life of one paper bag, from the moment its source tree is cut down to its final touching and purposeful moment decades later. In between, the bag serves as a boy’s carryall and a family keepsake; if a paper bag lasting a generation seems a touch unrealistic, skip to the author’s note, where Cole recalls hanging on to one paper bag for three years. “Beautifully effective as both nostalgia trip and lesson in conservation,” the book encourages readers to think about preserving things that we often toss away without a second thought.

Alba and the Ocean Cleanup by Lara Hawthorne (Big Picture Press, March 17): Alba is a fish who witnesses her colorful home on an ocean reef slowly bleach and degrade as trash keeps accumulating. Lured by a shiny pearl, Alba soon becomes trapped in a plastic bottle herself. Hawthorne’s “hopeful fable” follows Alba’s crisis and eventual rescue by a young girl, who in turn inspires her community to participate in a group effort to reduce plastic waste. The colorful cut-out-style illustrations (evoking Eric Carle) help draw young readers into the message that individual gestures can spark bigger movements to save our ecosystems.

Earth Hour: A Lights-Out Event for Our Planet by Nanette Heffernan, illustrated by Bao Luu (Charlesbridge, Jan. 21): This globe-trotting book introduces young readers to the annual 60-minute lights-out that people around the world take part in during the March equinox. Leaping from the Great Pyramids to São Paulo to Paris to Antarctica to Sydney, the story shows how reliant we are on energy resources and the importance of mindful consumption. Contrasting bright light-bulb yellows with lush and layered nighttime blues during Earth Hour, the illustrations invitingly visualize the difference our energy use makes.

The Bug Girl (A True Story) by Sophia Spencer, with Margaret McNamara, illustrated by Kerascoët (Schwartz & Wade/Random, Feb. 11): In 2017, then-8-year-old Sophia was ridiculed by her classmates for her love of bugs, prompting her mother to look for an entomologist who could give the girl a pep talk. Sophia got much more than that: The outpouring of support from scientists worldwide became a viral sensation complete with its own hashtag (#BugsR4Girls). In this inspirational book, she shares how she first became enchanted with insects, her struggle to be understood by her peers, and her sudden community of global supporters. Sophia delivers a big story with a lot of charm and humility, and the book smartly works double duty as an anti-bullying tale and handbook for budding entomologists: The closing pages feature a substantive guide to some of Spencer’s favorite bugs.

One Earth by Eileen Spinelli, illustrated by Rogério Coelho (WorthyKids, March 3): Counting from one to 10 and back again, Spinelli’s story is a sprightly rhyming take on the reduce-reuse-recycle message. Conservation suggestions are neatly tucked into the book’s rhythms (“Four pairs of socks with holes? You can learn to sew. / Three avocado seeds? Plant and watch them grow.”). Coelho’s painterly images highlight kids interacting with nature and working to preserve it, with a gentle climactic warning at the end of the countdown to remember that there’s “only one” planet.
Isabel Minhós Martins’

The concluding pages include an introduction to the family with all the children’s names, more about Cadi’s lifestyle, and two pages of informative tips on taking care of animals in general. The photo-illustrated story is geared to a preschool audience while the concluding pages are written at a slightly higher level.

An intriguing introductory look at a real farm family and their helpful dog. (Picture book. 2-6)

Eggs, milk, and vegetables (but not meat). Some aspects that are not covered are the family’s home and their barn and the dog’s diet in addition to the milk she is shown drinking. The book’s appealing design includes bold backgrounds of purple and bright green, a large type size, and high-quality photographs. The concluding pages include an introduction to the family and all the children’s names, more about Cadi’s lifestyle, and two pages of informative tips on taking care of animals in general. The photo-illustrated story is geared to a preschool audience while the concluding pages are written at a slightly higher level.

What goes on around the world in every tick of the clock? In this graphically stylish exploration of what might happen in a second, Gibert goes for hard numbers rather than the dreamyimaginings of horizon expanders such as Kathleen Rice Bowers’ *At This Very Minute*, illustrated by Linda Shute (1983), or Isabel Minhós Martins’ *The World in a Second*, illustrated by Bernardo P. Carvalho and translated by Lyn Miller-Lachman (2015). The author pores over nearly three dozen recently published official statistical reports (all listed in the backmatter) and does some math. He offers a few small figures for each elapsed second (one wedding, two serious car accidents, four new babies) but many more big ones: 100 lightning bolts; 3,000,000 email messages; 47,000 gallons of oil extracted; and 1,050,000 gallons of cow gas emitted “from both ends.” Most telling are the juxta-positions: $860 invested in humanitarian aid opposite $57,700 in arms sales; 20,000 plastic bottles produced versus 1,600 recycled; 48 trees cut down but just 158 replanted. Where relevant, each number is presented in both English and metric measures (the latter parenthetically), and each is paired to a visual expression of certain measures so that viewers can instantly contrast, for instance, the heights of the Empire State Building and the Burj Khalifa or the amount of water in a typical cat, dog, human (both baby and grown-up), cactus, and wedge of cheddar. Where humans are involved, as in lineups showing stages of development from newborn on or the seven children (one in a wheelchair) that measure up to one triceratops, Seixas consciously mixes gender presentations, races, and ages. Much of the information in the art and in Gifford’s quick comments looks to be averages or estimates—and is hard to check since sources go unmentioned. Still, this considerably streamlined spinoff of his *The Book of Comparisons*, illustrated by Paul Boston (2018), will clue younger audiences in to diverse ways of sizing up the world around them.

Playful measures and matches, whether measured in inches or dinosaurs. (Informational picture book. 7-9.)

Answers for anyone who has ever wondered whether a horse is faster than a hare or what the weight of a blue whale is—in tyrannosaurs. In a mix of infographics and captions, both of which incorporate units of measure conventional and otherwise, each spread brings together assorted animals, weather phenomena, record setters, very big machines, or other thematically linked images or items as invitations to make comparisons. Along with being drawn reasonably close to scale, the figures are positioned to make those comparisons easy. They also often incorporate visual expressions of certain measures so that viewers can instantly contrast, for instance, the heights of the Empire State Building and the Burj Khalifa or the amount of water in a typical cat, dog, human (both baby and grown-up), cactus, and wedge of cheddar. Where humans are involved, as in lineups showing stages of development from newborn on or the seven children (one in a wheelchair) that measure up to one triceratops, Seixas consciously mixes gender presentations, races, and ages. Much of the information in the art and in Gifford’s quick comments looks to be averages or estimates—and is hard to check since sources go unmentioned. Still, this considerably streamlined spinoff of his *The Book of Comparisons*, illustrated by Paul Boston (2018), will clue younger audiences in to diverse ways of sizing up the world around them.

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Playful measures and matches, whether measured in inches or dinosaurs. (Informational picture book. 7-9.)

A mysterious box brings out the best in people.

Mariana nervously walks to her new classroom with Papa. To calm her, Papa gives Mariana a small pink box but warns that she not open it until she must: if she’s “sad, scared, or worried.” Almost immediately, Mariana opens the box and feels a rush of air and a sensation like a kiss; readers see collaged floral designs floating around Mariana. She feels better, but an unfriendly classmate sends her to the box again. This time, something “like a warm hug” emerges. When Mariana creates artwork that garners admiration, she realizes her spirits have lifted without the box. At recess, the mean student falls, so Mariana opens the box to share its power with him. It’s left up to readers’ imaginations what’s inside the box—or whether there’s anything inside...
at all. Is it really magical, or is Mariana’s own agency at work? The happy ending is pat and predictable and doesn’t answer the questions. Illustrations are colorful, lively, and expressive; readers will appreciate the fanciful images that fly from the box. Characters’ names suggest a possible Hispanic setting, and print elements in the collage are in Spanish. Mariana and Papa have olive skin and dark hair; other characters have diverse skin tones and hair colors.

This is well-meaning whimsy, but it’s unlikely to truly engage children. (Picture book. 4-7)

I’M NOT A MOUSE
Golubeva, Evgenia
Illus. by the author
Child’s Play (32 pp.)
$17.99 | $8.99 paper | Jun. 15, 2020
978-1-78628-464-8
978-1-78628-463-1 paper

For all those kids who are tired of the nicknames their families give them.

A young, black, bespectacled child with hair in two big curly puffballs tells readers, “I love my mom”—but not Mom’s nickname for the child: Mouse. Whenever Mom uses that nickname, the kid transforms. Suddenly, this backpack-wearing child becomes a purple mouse, wearing miniature glasses and clothes but lugging a yellow backpack that hasn’t shrunk. The protagonist then recalls all of the instances when Mom has interrupted play and activities by inconveniently changing her offspring into this purple rodent—which sometimes puts the child in treacherous, life-threatening situations, such as when Mom causes a transformation in front of the family’s orange cat. Frustrated, the child finally screams, “I’m not a MOUSE,” and then ignores Mom until she uses the child’s given name: Olivia. The rebellion works, but Olivia soon realizes that plenty of other kids—even grown kids—deal with the same problem. Golubeva’s bold, colorful illustrations effectively capture both Olivia’s conundrum and the child’s frustration with Mom’s annoying habit. A double-page spread in a city park reveals diverse children and nickname-granting caregivers, the kids all amusingly transformed. Frontmatter pages feature Mouse in many different situations, and corresponding backmatter pages add further humor by showing all the other things nicknames have transformed kids into, some non-English languages adding further diversity.

This entertaining, ebulliently illustrated story will make grown-ups pause before nicknaming somebody without their approval. (Picture book. 4-8)

GODDESSES AND HEROINES
Women of Myth and Legend
Gresham-Knight, Xanthe
Illus. by Pattullo, Alice
Thames & Hudson (128 pp.)
$19.95 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-500-65191-9

This collection of mythical goddesses showcases global legends associated with deities ranging from ancient Greece’s Aphrodite to the West African sea goddess Osun.

Though each of these goddesses figure in many timeless tales, this anthology offers accessible versions of the more popular stories, such as the well-known Egyptian drama of Isis and her twin brother, Osiris, killed by their jealous brother, Set, only for Osiris to be resurrected by Isis. Readers are also likely to be familiar with Mulan, China’s mighty girl warrior who pretends to be a boy in order to fight for her family; but its vision of Brigit, the British Isles’ “shape-shifting ancestor,” appears in a contemporary, even cheeky tale of newspapers, snakes, and skyscrapers. Other regions represented include Iraq, Russia, India, Mexico, Tibet, Japan, and Iran. The collection ends with an appendix that explains the symbols that give each of the goddesses their powers. The strength of this collection of tales lies in Pattullo’s colorful and quirky illustrations, which capture the cultural diversity with radiance and energy. Parvati, from the Hindu tradition, bathes in the Ganges and becomes “her big self”—a human-shaped agglomeration of blooms; from the murdered Mayahuel sprouts the maguey plant relied upon by the Aztecs. A closing bibliography lists sources, sometimes several, for each tale. Figures from the Abrahamic religions are absent.

A refreshing revival of timeless, magical women that will inspire readers to dream their own stories. (Folklore. 10-14)

THE HERO OF CINCO DE MAYO / EL HÉROE DE CINCO DE MAYO
Ignacio Zaragoza Seguín
Gutiérrez, José Angel
Illus. by Marchesi, Stephen
Trans. by Baeza Ventura, Gabriela
Piñata Books/Arté Público (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 31, 2020
978-1-55885-898-5

Discover the story of the man behind Cinco de Mayo. Born in 1829, Ignacio Zaragoza Seguín grew up desiring to embody the life of a dedicated soldier. Shortly after the U.S.–Mexican War of 1846-1848, he enlisted in the Mexican army at the age of 24. Despite a burgeoning family, Zaragoza remained committed to his military life, eventually achieving the title of commander of the Mexican army and navy. The arrival of the formidable French army—with their superior weaponry and experienced soldiers—in 1862 proved to be the biggest
challenge of his life. Amid the deaths of his wife and three of their children due to typhoid, Zaragoza used his knowledge of the terrain and cunning strategies at the Battle of Puebla to best the French army and thus secure his spot in Mexico’s history. Presented in both English and Spanish (the latter via Baeza Ventura’s translation), Gutiérrez’s sober, plain account offers neither a larger-than-life legend nor a multifaceted portrayal. Rather, the author’s version of Zaragoza comes across as an uber-patriot, a man whose worth is mostly measured in military feats. More fascinating are the rare snippets readers receive of sweeping panoramas and figures frozen in conflict, Zaragoza remains a graceful symbol locked in honor.

Truly informative but often uninspired. (Picture book/biography 4-8)

MAX + XAM
Hofmann-Maniyar, Ariane
Illus. by the author
Child’s Play (32 pp.)
$17.99 | $7.99 paper | May 15, 2020
978-1-78628-087-9
978-1-78628-086-2 paper

Two little neighbors are best friends who love to play and do things together—until things change.

A tea-party disaster leads to blame, recrimination, and an end to their good times. Each claims to have lots of other friends, so they don’t really need each other. To prove this, each literally makes a bunch of creatively designed friends from found objects. But Max and Xam learn that there can be no fun with these inanimate friends, and they quickly realize how much they miss each other. Atonement gifts are exchanged, and happiness ensues. Hofmann-Maniyar employs straightforward, simple language, accessible to even the youngest readers or listeners. Literal-minded little readers will immediately get the Jonalaghan message: “STOP! The party’s OVER!...please proceed back to your signposts.”

Here is a perfect end-of-the-school-year read-alouds and good fun all year long. (Picture book 3-8)

RUNAWAY SIGNS
Holub, Joan
Illus. by Farrell, Alison
Nancy Paulsen Books (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-399-17225-0

Once school’s out for summer, the kids on a School Crossing sign decide to take a vacation.

Leaping off to adventure, they encounter a bike sign (conveniently, an equally sentient and riderless tandem) inviting it along. The three cruise the bike path, beckoning other signs to take a break from their own jobs. In Holub’s wry, pun-filled text, much of it delivered in word bubbles, many signs “[jump] at the chance.” Farrell’s humorous illustrations depict the black silhouettes of newly liberated, ambulatory figures (a park ranger, hikers, a bear, road workers). Entire signs, like HAIRPIN TURN and ONE WAY, sport sturdy white arms and legs. This animated throng is soon cavorting on the rides at the Adventure-land amusement park. From atop the Ferris wheel the alarmed kids who started this all clearly spy the signless town’s growing confusion: Cars collide on a one-way street, and summer school students are unsure about safe routes to school. In character, a certain sign takes charge. “STOP! The party’s OVER!...please proceed back to your signposts.” Racing back, lessons learned, the signs resolve never to leave their posts. Almost never, that is. Final pages reveal them making quick dashes to the ice cream wagon for double dip cones: It’s summer, after all. This union of dialogue-rich text and panoramic representations of a diverse town provides a just-right balance between community-safety instruction and kid-appealing hijinks.

Perfect for end-of-the-school-year read-alouds and good fun all year long. (Picture book 3-8)

HARRY VERSUS THE FIRST 100 DAYS OF SCHOOL
Jenkins, Emily
Illus. by Oswald, Pete
Schwartz & Wade/Random (240 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Jul. 7, 2020
978-0-525-64471-2
978-0-525-64472-9 PLB

The first 100 days of school are a really big deal.

Harry Bergen-Murphy, age 5, is starting first grade but doesn’t feel ready. As described in “Day 1” (chapters contain multiple days, each labeled), Mommy and Charlotte, Harry’s older sister, help him face “big-kid school” on his first day. Details of the subsequent 99 days are incorporated, journal-style, into the novel’s 19 chapters and narrated in third person, present tense, providing a nice sense of immediacy. As the days proceed, Harry makes friends (and becomes a great one himself); figures out silent “E” and aces sight words; creates pom pom monsters; articulates uncomfortable emotions; overcomes a fear of guinea...
IN ON THE HORIZON, THE ACCLAIMED CHILDREN’S AUTHOR WRITES OF PEARL HARBOR, HIROSHIMA, AND HER OWN CHILDHOOD

By Kathie Meizner

In a home movie from 1940, Lois Lowry is a small blonde girl playing on a Hawaii beach in the months before her family moved to New York. “We were in New York when Pearl Harbor was bombed,” recalls Lowry. “We had gone from Honolulu to New York through the Panama Canal.” She remembers it was cold on the ship: “My guess is we got to New York in the early winter of 1941.” Years later, a friend would identify a vessel on the horizon in that home movie as the USS Arizona, destroyed during the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, killing 1,177 men onboard. The coincidence resonated with Lowry, as did her link to artist Allen Say, whose memory of a young blonde girl on a green bike in Tokyo meant the two shared a place and time together as children in post-Hiroshima Japan. Lowry’s new book, On the Horizon (HMH Books, April 7), with illustrations by Kenard Pak, is a poetic meditation about Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima and her relationship to those events.

Was poetry always the form that you thought that this work would take?

I had been kind of haunted by this odd connection that I had. I couldn’t figure out how to write about it, and so I didn’t for many years. Then somehow it began to take shape in the form of various images. When I began to look into the lives of the young men [on the Arizona] in particular...and in Hiroshima, the young people...it began to take this form, sort of on its own. I think it works better than had I tried to put all that out in some narrative, as historic nonfiction, because it is a kind of imagistic thing, just little fragments here and there.

Did you learn new poetic forms—the triolet, for instance?

It was kind of exhilarating to put that together. I have a close friend who is a math professor. When she read the galleys of this book and I began to explain that particular form, she said, “Oh, it’s putting together a puzzle, a mathematical puzzle.” I had not thought of it that way, but it was fascinating to puzzle it out. The other pieces of the book took a more loose and organic form.

Did you write the poems one at a time?

I focused first on Pearl Harbor. Of course, there were 1,100 some young men on that boat, and to select whom I would write about was difficult. Each one had his own story. In each case one small detail would jump out and grab me. For example, here’s a young sailor, 17 years old and nothing about him extraordinary—actu-
ally he was a Marine; there was a contingent of Marines on the boat—until I realized that he was from the same small town in Wisconsin where my father had been born and grew up. So, I couldn’t set him aside—he had to go in.

And I read about yet one more Midwestern farm boy. There were so many of them who’d enlisted because the farm offered them nothing; they didn’t have the money for college. I read that this young boy’s two older brothers had both died. Then I read in an old newspaper interview that his mother said, “I had bad luck with all my boys.” It was such a stark and profound statement. I myself have lost a son in the military so I know what that’s like. But this reminded me of Shakespeare, where Macduff’s children are killed, and he cries “Oh, my pretty ones.”

**How did you decide to write about Japan as well?**

I don’t recall what then propelled me to Japan—in the book, I mean. I know what took me there in real life. There was, of course, the connection with Allen, and there began to feel like so many connections. I had read John Hersey’s book *Hiroshima*; I went back and got another copy of that. I had myself surrounded by those events for a period of some months while I worked.

**Do you have hope for the world?**

I always have. I’m an optimist—but ask me again in mid-November. I would like to think that there can be hope for this world.

*Kathie Meizner manages a public library in Maryland and reviews children’s books for Kirkus and the Washington Post. On the Horizon received a starred review in the Feb. 1, 2020, issue.*

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Unhappy Felix finds himself always carrying a heavy black suitcase. He walks far, all the time toting this inhibiting weight. He doesn’t know exactly what is inside, but “something dark” or “something bothersome” creeps within after unhappy moments in Felix’s life. When Felix pauses his trek to take a nap, a young boy comes along and opens the suitcase. The sky turns gray and Felix sheds “tears that [run] down his cheeks like the rain.” But once the storm passes, Felix’s burden is no more. He revels in the world around him, giving out hugs to those he meets (with permission), and returns home “empty handed but with a heart full of happiness.” The scenery mirrors Felix’s emotional outlook: Black and gray surround him in the beginning and are released from the suitcase, but colors burst to life everywhere after the storm dissipates. Jogan’s illustrations are an organic mixture of swirls and many painterly textures. Each page turn yields a double-page spread, so the images are sweeping; this is appropriate, as the illustrations effectively carry the emotional resonance of the story while the succinct, translated Slovenian text supports them. This symbolic tale leaves a few gaps (is the child who opens the suitcase a younger Felix, hinted by their similar clothing?) but effectively communicates a moral of emotional honesty and freedom.

*A jubilant, visually dramatic allegory. (Picture book. 3-8)*
A story of a girl, a cottage, and a family tradition that begs to be visited again and again.

THE LITTLE BLUE COTTAGE

Jordan, Kelly
Illus. by Courtney Tickle, Jessica
Page Street (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-62414-923-8

Like a cottage quilt, rhythmic stanzas and vintage-style illustrations are stitched together with memories and love.

Lyrical, not-quite-rhyming text tells the simple yet touching story of a girl with brown skin and straight, black hair who visits a special blue cottage every summer with her interracial family. Shared activities (waterskiing, beach play, and cycling) and meals (pancakes) convey the closeness in this family. In the summer, the girl escapes the warm cottage to play on the beach; during torrential storms, she hides within the cottage walls, peering out at the high whitecaps. The cottage, serving as a secondary character, awaits the girl's return each year as well as the sights, sounds, and smells that accompany her visit. Alternating between vignettes and broad spreads, illustrations that recall the stylings of Virginia Lee Burton and Barbara Cooney have the texture and appearance of colored pencil. Muted earth tones dominate, and prints and patterns also adorn each thoughtfully composed spread, adding to the layered visual appeal of the book. Eventually the girl grows up and no longer visits, and the cottage falls into neglect, nearly disappearing into the surrounding vegetation. The book ends as it began, with a second multiracial generation returning to the little blue cottage, to restore its timeless splendor and build new memories.

A story of a girl, a cottage, and a family tradition that begs to be visited again and again. (Picture book 4-6)

LITTLE BUNNY’S BALLOON

Jung, Wook Jin
Illus. by the author
Reycraft Books (40 pp.)
$17.95 | May 29, 2020
978-1-4788-6864-4

A balloon leads a bunny to a happy surprise.

Little Bunny pouts. It’s his birthday, and apparently everyone forgot. Seeing a red balloon drifting by, he decides to catch it and return it to its owner; it continually eludes him. A caterpillar offers help with the welcoming invitation, “Hop, hop on and hold on tight.” Little Bunny does, and an arduous trek ensues that fails to reach the quarry. Subsequently, Lady Bird (a female bird, not a ladybug), Giraffe, and Turtle show up at opportune moments, extending assistance and repeating Caterpillar’s phrase. Each ride brings Little Bunny closer to the balloon—but not close enough. After disembarking from Turtle, he arrives at his house and sees hundreds of balloons. Guess who’s having a surprise birthday-party celebration? Children will enjoy this sweet, lightweight story whose whimsical, fuzzy-edged illustrations stand out. Little Bunny is winsome with his blue outfit, spoon-handle-shaped ears, and anthropomorphic features. Caterpillar resembles a floppy-eared, many-segmented dog; wide-eyed and stereotypically eyelashed Lady Bird wears high-heeled red shoes; Giraffe has an accordionlike neck and toothy grin; and, bearing an upholstered shell, Turtle sports a boat-shaped sailor hat and sunglasses. All are expressive; backgrounds are vivid and palpably lush. Type is frequently and playfully incorporated into the main text in various colors and fonts.

Unoriginal but fun; readers will happily follow along. (Picture book 3-6)

NATIONAL REGULAR AVERAGE ORDINARY DAY

Katzenberger, Lisa
Illus. by Bakos, Barbara
Penguin Workshop (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 23, 2020
978-1-5247-9240-4

A humorous look at problem-solving and monotony.

Peter, a tot with white skin and a mop of scribbly, brown hair, is bored. Usually he has fun with his friend Devin (who’s also white), but lately everything they do has gotten stale. At one point, he breaks: “Enough!...This is SUPER BORING! I’m out of HERE!” He stomps home and tries to think of other things he can do that would be more fun. He decides to celebrate a different holiday every day. He even devises his own rating system. There is the nine-star National Ice-Cream Sandwich Day and National Lighthouse Day (a paltry two). National Underwear Day (in which underwear is worn—all over) is “an unexpected 8 stars.” But when he wakes up one morning to find out there is “NO HOLIDAY,” he must rethink his plan. What if he makes up a holiday instead? National Ride Your Bike With No Hands Day starts strong but doesn’t go well (nor as badly as it might have). Neither does combining National Squirrel Appreciation Day with National Bubble Bath Day (although the squirrels have a blast). Perhaps a day can just be ordinary, and that can be fun too. Bakos’ playful illustrations amp up the silliness of this very child-friendly premise. Readers may note that the passage of time seems off, however. When he reunites with Devin, an offhand apology, “Sorry about how I acted the other day,” seems incongruent with how many holidays he must have celebrated.

Droll and decidedly un-ordinary. (Picture book 3-7)
OCEAN SPEAKS
How Marie Tharp Revealed the Ocean’s Biggest Secret
Keating, Jess
Illus. by Hickey, Katie
Tundra (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 30, 2020
978-0-7352-6508-0

A scientific journey through sexism and across the ocean floor.

Marie Tharp (1920-2006) grew up fascinated with the natural world but as a girl was not allowed to study it. The accessible text focuses on general rather than specific historical detail but provides overall context; when war broke out and women were encouraged to learn about science, she welcomed the opportunity and eventually landed a job in a laboratory. As male scientists returned home, however, they were sent to do research while women such as Tharp were confined to desks. But Tharp was charged with creating a map of the ocean floor, a project that engaged her skills and imagination and led to her identification of a great rift, information that was initially dismissed as “girl-talk” and eventually revolutionized earth science. Engaging and inventive illustrations, including one fabulous foldout that depicts her expanding map, show her gradually becoming the skilled scientist and ocean cartographer she is recognized as today. Tharp presents white and race goes unmentioned, though there are darker-skinned people depicted in the background. The narrative doesn’t mention what Keating places in her author’s note: that when findings were first published, Tharp received little or no credit. Still this is a story that will doubtlessly inspire curiosity and consideration of the many constraints.

An intriguing tale of feminism, scientific exploration, imagination, focus, and resilience. (Q&A, further reading) (Picture book/biography. 6-10)

UNDERGROUND
Subway Systems Around the World
Kim, Uijung
Illus. by the author
Cicada Books (44 pp.)
$16.95 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-908714-63-3

An unusual seek-and-find book about subways in 10 countries around the world.

Each section (in alphabetical order, by city name) starts with a double-page spread offering a horizontal panel of basic facts. Above this is a view of the train exteriors, with windows showing the people inside. On the right-hand side, a three-quarter page opens to reveal another double-page spread, which focuses on the people in the train cars and the stations. This design allows a panel with nine or 10 objects, labeled “Find,” related to the city and country to appear on the right on each spread of each section. The illustrations are intensely colored, with heavy black outlines used to delineate each stylized figure. Every glimpse brings a story to life, with a broad range of diverse characters taking part. Family groups, friends, individuals are all pictured as they would be on trains everywhere. People are eating, drinking, and taking selfies. Most, although not all, of the objects to be found are explained in a glossary, which holds mystifying gaps. Why not explain what a balalaika is or the significance of a Russian bear? Why define kimchi but not bibimbap? The illustrations definitely engage the reader, and finding the objects will be fun, but the presentation leaves something to be desired, both for the true subway aficionado and the child (or adult helper) looking for cultural background.

Despite enticing visuals, does not serve the armchair traveler well. (map) (Informational picture book. 5-8)

AND THEN I TURNED INTO A MERMAID
Kirkpatrick, Laura
Sourcebooks Young Readers (208 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-7282-1420-7

On her 13th birthday, Molly learns the truth about her mermaid heritage in this series opener.

Molly Seabrook and her four sisters live in a lighthouse and work in their mother’s fish-and-chip shop. Molly’s job is to dress up as a giant haddock and pass out flyers advertising the shop to people on the pier. It’s not a job that guarantees her any popularity, and Molly’s a frequent target of the pretty, blonde class bully. On the night of Molly’s birthday, her mother and older sisters drag her down to the water’s edge and let her in on the family secret. Now that she’s come of age, Molly will sprout a tale and gills whenever she gets too close to large bodies of water. But unlike her sisters, who adore being half-mermaid (their long-absent father is human), for Molly it’s just more fuel to the fire of her self-loathing. How can she ever be popular, or even just ordinary, if she becomes a big, helpless, floppy fishgirl every time she gets too near unexpected water? Molly’s adolescent miseries provide a believable note of heft in an otherwise-lighthearted tale full of fart and puke jokes. Clunky Americanization of this book first published in the U.K. in 2019 adds confusion but does not materially detract from the humorous charm. Most characters are white, and Molly’s best friend is of Chinese descent.

Delightful froth with just a touch of early-adolescent angst. (Fantasy. 9-11)
THE OUTSTANDING LIFE OF AN AWKWARD THEATER KID

God, I’ll Do Anything—Just Don’t Let Me Fail
Kluck, Ted A.
Illus. by Hawkins, Daniel
Harvest House (92 pp.)
$12.99 | May 5, 2020
978-0-7369-7886-6

A self-proclaimed jock from the Rust Belt learns to express himself both on stage and in life in hopes of winning the girl.

Flex is a football player in Empty Factory, Indiana, who auditions for his first theater production in hopes of impressing a girl from youth group. To his chagrin, the school is staging Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, and he soon finds himself avoiding practice to protect his pride as he stumbles over lines and navigates culture shock. Though the characters appear to be in middle school, the language feels as though it’s intended for a much younger audience, with the glaring exception of oft-quoted passages from Shakespeare. These make for challenging reading even as the characters dismiss them as something no one understands anyway. Biblical references and lessons seem wedged into the plot with little rhyme or reason. Accompanying illustrations and pop-culture references seem plucked from a different time. Meanwhile, most of the characters—the first-person narrator not excepted—are shallow and stereotypical caricatures who give readers little reason to continue engagement, and the dismissive, even scornful attitude displayed toward mental illness is distasteful. A lack of cohesion across story elements leads to an overwhelming feeling of disorientation. All the primary characters and most of the supporting cast are white.

A lackluster hodgepodge of anachronisms that respects neither its subject nor its readers. (Fiction. 8-12)

CLEVER HANS
The True Story of the Counting, Adding, and Time-Telling Horse
Kokias, Kerri
Illus. by Lowery, Mike
Putnam (32 pp.)
$17.99 | May 5, 2020
978-0-525-51498-5

An astonishing horse baffled both the public and the scientific community.

In 1904 Berlin, Wilhelm von Osten taught his horse, Clever Hans, how to count, discern colors, and perform other intellectual tasks. He then showcased Clever Hans’ talents to the masses, and people were astounded to see a horse that could seemingly tell time, add up sums, and count money! But not everyone believed the spectacle. Some thought there are trickery involved. One scientist named Oskar Pfungst made an important discovery. What he realized about Clever Hans—who was certainly clever, just not quite in the way everyone thought—changed the scientific process forever. Kokias’ clear, accessible tone pairs well with Lowery’s cartoon style. The comically smiling horse invites readers in, and intermittent paneled frames help organize the flow of information and visually propel the storytelling arc. Von Osten, the investigators, and spectators present white. English translations of certain German words (“Zeitungen”—“Newspapers”) are also included, with playful arrows pointing readers to them. An author’s note further explains the “Clever Hans Effect” and how it changed science.

Clever, indeed. (Bibliography) (Informational picture book. 6-9)

BENNY LEARNS TO SWIM
Koppe, Judith
Illus. by Meijer, Marja
Clavis (32 pp.)
$17.95 | May 26, 2020
978-1-60537-497-0
Series: Sam & Benny

In this Dutch and Belgian import, a tiny dog yearns to swim, but his owner says he must take lessons first.

Benny, a diminutive blue canine with distinctive whiskers, really wants to jump into the lake on a hot, summer day. But Sam, a determined young gal with disheveled pigtails, declares that he must first pass a swim test. After all, that is what she had to do. (She proudly shows him her swim certificate.) She decides to take him to the pool for lessons. Alas, the swimming instructor says no. Sam isn’t deterred. “I think I know why the teacher sent you away. You’re not wearing a bathing suit. No one can go into the pool with a bare bottom!” She quickly squeezes him into a pair of polka-dot swim trunks (Benny’s uncertain expression says it all). But he’s turned away again. Will Benny ever swim in the lake? In Meijer’s friendly, informal cartoons, bright colors and stable compositions give an atmosphere of optimism to plucky, earnest Sam’s plight. The story is quite linear and obvious to those in the know, but for readers who don’t have dogs, it could be a shocking discovery. The majority of the students in the class, Sam included, appear white, although some have slightly darker skin, and the swimming instructor has brown skin and curly black hair.

A testament of true friendship. (Picture book. 3-6)
Debut author Lee paints this gripping and emotional midwinter escape with the eye of a wartime journalist.

**BROther’S KEEPER**

*Lee, Julie*

Holiday House (304 pp.)

$17.99  |  Jun. 16, 2020

978-0-8234-4494-6

Sora is 12 when she and her younger brother trek hundreds of miles to safety during the Korean War.

In the summer of 1950, the 38th parallel is closing, separating North and South Korea. Those caught in the northern part of the country will live under a Communist regime, full of harsh regulations, limited freedoms, and indoctrination. The novel, told in three parts, begins as the Pak family finally decides to escape to Busan, a city on the ocean at the southern tip of the peninsula—370 miles away. Almost immediately, Sora and 8-year-old Youngsoo are separated from their parents. Basing her story in part on her mother’s own experiences in North Korea, debut author Lee paints this gripping and emotional midwinter escape with the eye of a wartime journalist and the determined heart of a young girl. As Youngsoo weakens from hunger and sickness, Sora carries him for the rest of their journey, across frozen rivers and through dangerous cities, past the front line. Flashbacks to her family’s experiences during the Japanese occupation of Korea provide Sora strength and comfort and provide additional context for readers. Sora struggles against the Korean cultural norms of male supremacy, the low status of girls clear from her mother’s constant verbal abuse. Still, she rises.

*Some things you must learn on your own.*

In this graphic/prose hybrid, Henry Khoo embarks on a secret mission. Now that he’s 12, the legal age to travel alone, he has plans to fly from his Australian home to Singapore, where his father lives. As he haphazardly navigates his way to his flight, his tangled motivations slowly unfold. Initially it appears he wants to establish his independence, seeking reprieve from the overbearing eyes of older sister Jie, Mama, and wuxia drama-watching Popo. Soon the comedic narration reveals that Henry is confronting myriad issues: his emotionally and geographically distant father; his waning relationship with his best friend; and his need to hide his secret identity as the creator of the Fly on the Wall website. Spawned from Henry’s sense that he’s invisible to all, his online comics illustrate school gossip—and draw the opprobrium of the school administration. As in Lai’s debut, *Fly on the Wall* (2019), humorous line drawings punctuate the text and reveal Henry’s inner feelings. Flashbacks deftly illuminate Henry’s emotional journey to a wider worldview and eventual ownership of his feelings. Lai has a talent of not preaching to her readers, instead offering reassurance that no one is alone in experiencing the painful awkwardness and occasionally harsh realities of growing up. Henry and his family are Chinese, and dialogue is occasionally bilingual.

**FLY ON THE WALL**

*Lai, Remy*

Illus. by the author

Henry Holt (356 pp.)

$16.99  |  May 12, 2020

978-1-250-31411-6

Some things you must learn on your own.

This thrilling coming-of-age adventure is both quirky and sincere. (Graphic/fiction hybrid. 9-12)

**THE STEPMOM SHAKE-UP**

*Lenz, Niki*

Random House (288 pp.)


978-1-984892-54-6  

978-1-9848-9255-3 PLB

A story of changing family dynamics and a child’s struggle to keep family life the same.

Ever since Grace’s mom passed away three years ago, it has been her and her minister dad, Davy, on their own. Grace thinks their happy family is perfectly fine with the two of them. However, Davy’s Baptist congregation has other opinions about their pastor being single. At the congregation’s instigation, Davy turns into a dating man, and Grace has something to say about that. With the help of her best friend, Bea, Grace manages to sabotage her dad’s many dates, often in slapstick fashion. While her dad does not seem to realize why his dates are not successful, Grace’s world is a largely white and well-to-do one, but it is refreshing to see Grace not forced.

A funny, sympathetic look at a kid grappling with family change. (Fiction. 8-12)
unhappy. Caterpillar only shakes her head. Attempting to cheer her up, Spider collects leaves and, with an “Abracadabra,” uses them to create objects, including a guitar, a necklace, a paraglider, stars, a moon, and a sun. Despite Spider’s ingenuity; Caterpillar remains silent; indeed, by the performance’s end, she’s asleep. Spider sadly departs, and Caterpillar sleeps on. Eventually, Spider returns. Surprisingly, Caterpillar speaks, urging him to wait. Slowly emerging from her house and whispering “abra cadabra,” she demonstrates her own trick. A page turn reveals the word “abra cadabra” set in large type dominating two pages—and then…Caterpillar appears as a gorgeous butterfly. This simple, sweet springtime story offers a refreshing twist on the familiar metamorphosis tale. Readers will deduce what Caterpillar’s “magic trick” is before the end, but their wonder won’t be affected: The change from caterpillar to butterfly is perennially captivating. The child-appealing illustrations feature lots of white space and bright greens, yellows, and oranges. Spider’s oversized face demonstrates myriad expressions; he’s smartly dressed in red shirt and boots. Caterpillar remains silent; indeed, by the performance’s end, she’s unhappy. Caterpillar only shakes her head. Attempting to cheer her up, Spider collects leaves and, with an “Abracadabra,” uses them to create objects, including a guitar, a necklace, a paraglider, stars, a moon, and a sun. Despite Spider’s ingenuity; Caterpillar remains silent; indeed, by the performance’s end, she’s asleep. Spider sadly departs, and Caterpillar sleeps on. Eventually, Spider returns. Surprisingly, Caterpillar speaks, urging him to wait. Slowly emerging from her house and whispering “abra cadabra,” she demonstrates her own trick. A page turn reveals the word “abra cadabra” set in large type dominating two pages—and then…Caterpillar appears as a gorgeous butterfly. This simple, sweet springtime story offers a refreshing twist on the familiar metamorphosis tale. Readers will deduce what Caterpillar’s “magic trick” is before the end, but their wonder won’t be affected: The change from caterpillar to butterfly is perennially captivating. The child-appealing illustrations feature lots of white space and bright greens, yellows, and oranges. Spider’s oversized face demonstrates myriad expressions; he’s smartly dressed in red shirt and boots. Caterpillar looks winsome peeping out from her chrysalis. Can anything compare to nature’s magic? (Picture book 3-6)

In this almost-wordless picture book, five small children walk obediently through an art museum with their caregiver/teacher—and the art itself demands interaction.

A very young child who presents Asian climbs the steps of an imposing, neoclassical building to join a racially diverse but similarly aged group lined up before a red sign that reads “No touching the art.” Their teacher and museum guard—both women whose expressions change from vexed to pleased; even the guard becomes a participant. The art is appropriately colorful and exuberant, with varied layouts. Unfortunately, the red sign becomes a didactic, unnecessary punchline. Lozano carefully places plaques next to each work replicated but fills them with scribble instead of useful information; the pieces are identified in tiny type on the copyright page. The strong effort to show diversity in museum patrons and workers is undercut by the highly Eurocentric representation of art depicted. Anna at the Art Museum, by Hazel Hutchins and Gail Herbert and illustrated by Lil Crump (2018), is more sophisticated and more engaging. Entertaining if limited arts appreciation. (Picture book 5-7)
The HIDDEN RAINBOW
Matheson, Christie
Greenwillow (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-06-239341-8

This color/counting/concept book will have young readers buzzing. Following a bee as she emerges from the hollow of a tree and visits a nearby garden full of flowers and fruit trees, readers will learn a lot about both nature and essential concepts. Starting with red tulips, the honeybee is joined by nine of her sisters as they visit a range of flowers and colors in rainbow order. With each new visit, readers are encouraged to perform a small kinetic act to advance the action before the page turn: wipe snow off a blossom, wave the bees onward, blow away some rain drops, etc. Experienced educators and librarians will use these time-honored tricks to turn this into a memorable and active experience, and the directions are so straightforward that an untrained caregiver or new reader will be able to take full advantage of the book during a lap-read too. Once the work with the flowers is done, the bees are off to the fruit trees and bushes, where the book allows readers to engage in a conversation about healthy fruits and how they’re grown. The watercolor-and-collage illustrations deftly support the text, and bright, full-page color that backgrounds text as each new flower is introduced is bold enough to be seen from the back of the room. Additional backmatter expands on the role of honeybees.

This book is sweeter than honey. (Picture book. 4-8)
MAD ABOUT PLAID
McElmurry, Jill
Illus. by the author
HMH Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-358-17244-4

Everyone knows about King Midas’ golden touch, but what about Madison Pratt’s tartan touch?

When Madison picks up a plaid purse in the park, “Her fingers tingled. / Her thumbs were hot. / Her arm started twitching and itching a lot. / Then the plaid from the purse crept slowly up her sleeve” and eventually covers all her clothing. Madison even weeps plaid tears at her plaid predicament. Her mother, a nurse, consults How To Cure a Plaid Curse, of course. Madison tries to comply with the remedy, but “a little plaid burp escaped her lips,” and gigglesome cartoon illustrations of plaid houses, cars, trees, poodles, and even squirrels capture the “plaid germ” spreading throughout the town. Madison races to the park to find the purse again so they can “reverse the plaidening curse!” Turning the purse inside out to hide the plaid reveals a “sad shade of blue,” which infects Madison, the town, and the illustrations with the blues. But luckily, Madison knows how to “cure the blues”: by singing “an extra-silly round of ‘Piddly-diddly-doo’s,’” which spreads silliness from place to place. “And as you probably already knew, / with a silly grin on, you CAN’T stay blue!” Readers will pore over the illustrations, which range from typical city scenes to spreads amusingly infected with the “plaid germ” and the blues before returning to normal. Madison and her mother present white, and their community includes individuals with skin tones and hairstyles that suggest diversity.

A tartan twist on an old standard with plenty of humor both visual and verbal. (Picture book. 4-7)

THE LAND OF ROAR
McLachlan, Jenny
Illus. by Mantle, Ben
Harper/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 30, 2020
978-0-06-298271-1
Series: Land of Roar, 1

A fantasy world comes to life and lures its young creators back into it in this imaginative middle-grade debut and U.K. import.

Narrator Arthur always loved playing make-believe in Grandad’s attic with his twin sister, Rose. Years ago they dreamed up Roar, a magical land that they entered via an old fold-up cot that acted as a portal. Now that they are 11 and starting school at Langdon Academy, Rose has new friends and wants nothing to do with her brother or their imaginary world. Rose may be done with Roar, but it’s not finished with her. When their grandfather is kidnapped and taken into Roar, Arthur and Rose must team up to mount a rescue mission. McLachlan does an excellent job of establishing the sibling tension before introducing the fantasy elements, and Rose’s desire to grow up and fit in feels as familiar and accessible as Arthur’s yearning to remain a child. While obviously reminiscent of classic fantasy, this narrative’s sheer inventiveness marks it as distinct. The twins’ widowed grandfather, a larger-than-life joker from Mauritius, is a Peter Pan–like figure whose abduction brings the narrative into Roar, allowing the text and Mantle’s illustrations to go wild with creativity. The use of a wordless double-page spread to depict Arthur’s arrival into the fantasy realm is particularly inventive. Arthur and Rose are depicted as kids of color.

A sweet adventure and a paean to imagination and childhood innocence. (map) (Fantasy. 8-12)

METAPHROG’S BLUEBEARD
Metaphrog
Illus. by the author
Papercutz (176 pp.)
$19.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-5458-0412-4

In this diminutive graphic-novel adaptation of the “Bluebeard” tale, Eve and her siblings confront the mysterious and sinister man whose castle looms over their village.

The sparse text is narrated by an older Eve as she recounts her youth and reluctant marriage at age 18 to Count Bluebeard. Her slow-burn tale successfully builds suspense, though it’s somewhat diluted by clunky writing and excessive use of ellipses. The stylized illustrations have a soft quality that contrasts with the characters’ exaggerated expressions. Spreads and panels that predominantly feature blues and pinks seem to correspond with Bluebeard and pink-haired Eve, respectively. Despite the limited color palette, readers can distinguish characters’ skin tones: Eve, her family, and Bluebeard all appear white while her best friend and true love, Tom, has brown skin along with several unnamed townpeople. This adaptation retains many elements that characterize existing versions of the tale, including a bloody key, dead wives (here, with minimal gore), sibling saviors, and an enchanted castle. Yet, though Eve claims that the “bond between two sisters, our love, proved stronger than any evil spell,” this self-identified “feminist fairy tale” treats that bond superficially (a slap from Eve is what finally breaks her sister Anne’s trance). Overall, the characters and worldbuilding are frustratingly two-dimensional; readers would be better served with Emily Carroll’s Through the Woods (2014).

A passable introduction to horror for young readers in an engaging format. (Graphic fairy tale. 10-16)
The ocean and how Juillet learns to engage with it are the novel’s strengths.

**SUMMER AND JULY**

*Mosier, Paul*
Harper/HarperCollins (320 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-06-284936-6

Juillet, a Midwest preteen grieving her parents’ breakup, finds a soulmate and discovers surfing in Southern California.

With her mother working at a nearby hospital during their monthlong stay in Santa Monica, Juillet, 12, expects to miss her (one) friend, Fern, back home. Together, they read cult horror fiction and hang out at the mall in goth makeup and attire. In Santa Monica, she meets Summer, a beautiful, blonde surfer girl who’s intrigued by Juillet’s look and delighted to learn Juillet means “July” in French. Friendship quickly follows. Outgoing Summer introduces Juillet to the neighborhood, its denizens, and So-Cal surf culture. Juillet’s smitten with everything, especially Summer herself, who coaxes Juillet out of her comfort zone and onto a boogie board, a skateboard, and, eventually, a surfboard. Though mostly sunny and upbeat, Summer keeps secrets. Why won’t she won’t talk about her family or where she disappears to? The ocean and how Juillet learns to engage with it are the novel’s strengths, vivid and convincing, but not the far-fetched plotting or carelessly written major characters (who are white). While surfing culture is central to both plot and theme, the customs and argot Summer teaches Juillet are dated, feeling as though they’ve been sourced from inauthentic, pop-culture iterations like the 1959 film *Gidget*. Even as the book ignores Hawaiian surfing history and culture, the surfing meme “Eddie would go,” celebrating legendary surfer Eddie Aikau, appears in an adapted form without attribution or context. **Skip this stale beach read. (Fantasy. 10-14)**

**PLAY OUTSIDE!**

*Moreau, Laurent*
Illus. by the author
Norton (48 pp.)
$18.95 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-324-01547-5

As Mom exhorts her two children to go outside and play, their imaginations summon diverse geographical regions from around the world, all densely populated by animals.

All three humans—mom and two kids—are flat images, white as paper and outlined in red. After the children’s unruly indoor behavior results in a broken vase, the mother orders them outside. Each following double-page spread shows the children against a new backdrop while the mother’s banal suggestions for how to spend their time outside appear above each scene. Initially, one kid follows Mom’s suggestions (“lie in the grass and look for shapes in the clouds”) while the other flies a kite. When that child loses hold of the string of the kite, both run after it as some tired, ecological preachiness incongruously enters Mom’s words. Only occasionally does the art make clear any interaction between the children and the scores of primitive-art animals. The text offers some clarification when the humorous efforts to shade the trio’s friendship with a quarrel over Joey’s loss of Houdini’s wand in the previous book, but the conflict is entirely circular and doesn’t add much dimension. Joey and Leanora are white; Shazad is depicted on the cover with pale skin and hails from the fictional country of Jorako.

The ocean and how Juillet learns to engage with it are the novel’s strengths, vivid and convincing, but not the far-fetched plotting or carelessly written major characters (who are white). While surfing culture is central to both plot and theme, the customs and argot Summer teaches Juillet are dated, feeling as though they’ve been sourced from inauthentic, pop-culture iterations like the 1959 film *Gidget*. Even as the book ignores Hawaiian surfing history and culture, the surfing meme “Eddie would go,” celebrating legendary surfer Eddie Aikau, appears in an adapted form without attribution or context.

**LOST KINGDOM**

*Myklusch, Matt*
Aladdin (464 pp.)
$18.99 | May 19, 2020
978-1-5344-2490-6
Series: Order of the Majestic, 2

The sorcerer’s apprentice must become the master.

In the wake of his master’s death in series opener *Order of the Majestic* (2019), Joey Kopecky and his friends Shazad and Leanora have become the new Order: a circle of magic users who protect what little magic remains in the world by fighting the dark forces of the Invisible Hand. This sinister group acquires and corrupts magical objects, and they’ve been searching for several magical items scattered around the world. Thanks to an old witch and the Secret Map of the World, Joey and his pals are one step ahead. The race is on in this globe-trotting sequel that does its best to expand the series’ world but comes up short where it really counts. Joey, Shazad, and Leanora are a trio of bland protagonists, with little characterization differentiating one from the other. The action sequences and magical moments are presented with little flair, and at over 400 pages, the book quickly becomes a slog, even for readers who found a bit to enjoy in the previous oversized installment. The author attempts to shade the trio’s friendship with a quarrel over Joey’s loss of Houdini’s wand in the previous book, but the conflict is entirely circular and doesn’t add much dimension. Joey and Leanora are white; Shazad is depicted on the cover with pale skin and hails from the fictional country of Jorako.

A disappointing sequel. (Fantasy. 10-14)
Na’s beautiful, textured illustrations—bright yellows, purples, oranges, and greens—simply pop.

THAT’S MY CARROT

Na, Il Sung
Illus. by the author
Knopf (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 12, 2020
978-0-399-55358-1

Neighboring rabbit gardeners raise remarkably oversized produce.

A fence separates a bespectacled, yellow rabbit’s garden from a bow tie–clad, purple rabbit’s plot. Both anthropomorphic rabbits claim to LOVE carrots. Apparently, they’re experts at growing them, too. The yellow rabbit’s methods involve some sort of chemical fertilizer; the purple rabbit’s horticultural strategy encourages vegetable growth through saxophone music. Both yield results: the gardens produce an astonishing number of carrots (though some appear to be partially eaten). One day, the biggest carrot of all turns up smack dab on the property line. Each rabbit lays claim to the giant root vegetable. They fight over who will dig it up (and how), kicking up a huge cloud of dust in the process. When the dust settles, only a giant carrot top remains. The dejected rabbits team up, descending into the hole beneath the carrot to—quite literally—get to the bottom of things. But what will they find down there? Na’s latest is a humorous tale of garden rivalry told almost entirely through color-coded dialogue (blue for yellow rabbit; purple for purple rabbit). Na smartly employs parallel composition to introduce characters through comics-style panels. Double-page spreads drive the rest of the story, inching the rabbits closer and closer to the carrot in the gutter. Set against grayscale backgrounds, Na’s beautiful, textured illustrations—bright yellows, purples, oranges, and greens—simply pop.

Definitely not garden variety. (Picture book 3-6)

A BAREFOOT KING

A Story About Feeling Frustrated

Nance, Andrew Jordan
Illus. by Holden, Olivia
Bala Kids/Shambhala (32 pp.)
$16.95 | Jun. 19, 2020
978-1-61180-748-6

King Creet’s preventative measures for stubbed toes are just unsustainable.

“Long ago there was a young king named Creet. / In his land, people walked with bare feet.” The king’s mind has a tendency to wander, and he’s easily distracted; one day, as he walks down a country road, he stubs his toe most painfully. His solution, after a restless night, is to cover the entire country with soft leather. Everyone in the kingdom works to get it done… but the solution causes slick roads and keeps the rain from the soil. When the king consults his ministers, the wisest offers some mindful advice. With a little thought, mind training, and a little leather—on his feet—the issue is solved. Writer, acting teacher, and mindfulness proponent Nance bases his fable about the origin of shoes on a quote from eighth-century monk Shantideva’s long poem of Buddhist instruction, A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life. The passable couplets get the job done, though without any explicitly Buddhist content, and Holden’s bright illustrations make the tale friendly and inviting. Creet’s kingdom is racially diverse (Creet himself has light-brown skin and black hair), and its inhabitants wear tunics, loose trousers, robes, and the occasional turban. An author’s note locates the origin of footwear in Mesopotamia and discusses the inspirational source material.

A good first peep at mindfulness training if not at Buddhism. (Picture book 3-7)
For tornado-focused seventh grader Frankie, “Manners seem like wrapping words in cotton balls.”

She’s known since fourth grade that she isn’t like other kids. Frankie’s bothered by scratchy clothes, being touched, socializing, change, being different from her twin, Tess, but probably most of all by the end of her only friendship—with Colette, whom she’s known since kindergarten. Now Colette has disappeared, and it seems that Frankie was the last person who saw her, but their final contact wasn’t a positive one. Colette had turned up unexpectedly and wanted the special notebook that she, Tess, and Frankie had used to document their yearlong game, “dare-or-scare.” The police are dismissive of Frankie’s realization that after Colette went missing, she posted videos of new “dares.” Frankie uses the clues in the videos to launch a search. Tess assists, in the process helping to heal their battered sisterly relationship. Frankie’s first-person narration is spot-on as she describes her feelings about her attention-deficit and sensory-processing disorders and her Asperger’s syndrome as well as her distaste for the medications that impair her thinking. Her confusion with her own unexpected emotions as she falls for skateboarder Kai—who’s just as smitten with her—is poignant. Although all doesn’t end well, this moving account of Frankie’s emerging maturity—with extra challenges—is perfect.

A fluffy read for kids who like dance in theory, not in practice. (Fiction. 10-15)

Can a self-taught dancer make it big in the world of ballet?

Katarina dreams of being a ballerina, but lessons are expensive, so she’s been teaching herself via the internet. Then at the school talent show her dad sees her passion and finally agrees to pay for lessons. Katarina’s first class is difficult and embarrassing, but with the help of a new best friend and encouragement from principal New York City Ballet dancer Tiler Peck (acting as character), Katarina might be able to dance her way to her dream. An endless stream of inspirationally flat dialogue and narration fill the short chapters of this quick read co-written by real-life ballerina Peck and actor Harris. A charming concept gives way to pandering wish fulfillment that may satisfy only readers who don’t know anything about formal dance class, as the passages about ballet are less than believable. Readers should go to either Noel Streatfield’s classic Ballet Shoes (1936) or Maddie Ziegler’s contemporary The Audition (2017) for a more realistic look at dance. The cover depicts Katarina with light brown skin and light brown curls, but Collina’s black-and-white drawings and the lack of any specific racial or cultural details in the text points to an assumed white protagonist with unruly curls. Some supporting characters have diverse names or appearances.

We think you can, we think you can, we think you can... skip this superfluous outing. (Picture book: 5-6)
Two lonely outcast preteens find truth and solace through friendship over the summer of 1983.

June Bug Jordan and Ziggy Karlo share a lot in common. They both have well-meaning mothers who love them but “don’t know how to make it stick”; they both have had a traumatic year; and they’re both in need of a friend. June Bug’s father has died of AIDS, a disease only recently discovered and still tragically misunderstood. Her devastated mother is incapacitated with deep depression and an intense germ phobia—she even makes June Bug bathe with bleach. June Bug struggles daily with guilt over the last thing she said to her father while hiding the truth of her home life from neighbors. Ziggy, a “gangly,” sensitive “beanpole” of a boy with long hair and a pet ferret called Matthew, has come to live with his loving and formidable Nana Jean, down the street from June Bug, for a fresh start.

In chapters that interleave Joy Fon-der’s story now and Lukas Brunetti’s story from one year ago, readers learn the two have been friends since second grade and share August birthdays, quirky humor, insights, and con-fidences. Just as they each begin to identify and acknowledge each other, misfortune complicates everyone. Reading from two perspectives and in two differ-ent timelines, readers get the benefit of being inside of Lukas’ thoughts while he plants the scavenger-hunt clues and Joy’s musings while she follows them a year later. The story of their friendship and of the subsequent tragedy unfolds along with the scavenger hunt. This is complex storytelling from two experi-enced writers, with a delivery that feels both seamless and well-paced. The setting of the story: fictional Port Bennington on New York’s Long Island, much like the real-life Port Washing-ton, looks out on a fateful island with a lighthouse called Execution Rocks. Readers will be drawn to the contrast between Joy’s and Lukas’ families and the small moments that change everything. Joy, Lukas, and their families seem to be white.

An exceptional story for readers who feel deeply. (author’s note) (Historical fiction. 10-14)

A heartfelt tour de force. (Fiction. 9-12)

Another

TROWBRIDGE ROAD
Pixley, Marcella
Candlewick (336 pp.)
$17.99 | May 12, 2020
978-1-593-11963-1 PLB

SEVEN CLUES TO HOME
Polisner, Gae & Baskin, Nora Raleigh
Knopf (208 pp.)
$16.99 | $19.99 PLB | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-593-11961-7
978-0-593-11963-1 PLB

QUINTESSENCE
Redman, Jess
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (368 pp.)
$16.99 | May 19, 2020
978-0-374-30976-3

YOU MATTER
Robinson, Christian
Illus. by the author
Atheneum (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-338-2169-1

Another (2019), Robinson shows that every living entity has value.

This won’t fly off shelves, but it’ll be just the right mirror for a very particular reader. (Fantasy. 8-12)

After opening endpapers that depict an aerial view of a busy playground, the perspective shifts to a black child, ponytails
Whatever Bunny’s tale lacks in plot, it more than makes up for in sweetness.

**BUNNY OVERBOARD**

Bunny sets sail and goes for a dip. This gentle seafaring jaunt begins with Bunny, clad in an old-fashioned bathing costume, bidding readers “Ahoy!” and setting sail for a day on the peaceful, summery sea. With a little help from readers, Bunny puts wind in the sail, rocks the boat, and “kerplunks” safely back on deck after a near miss of the titular “Overboard!” After donning snorkeling gear, Bunny’s delight at staying dry is rendered endearingly moot as—“buns away!”—Rueda takes the frame under the sea, where Bunny invites readers to touch a “gooey rock” and pat a pufferfish and asks for assistance with an inky octopus and hunting treasure. Whatever Bunny’s tale lacks in plot, it more than makes up for in sweetness: soft, simple pencil illustrations are colored with a cheerful nautical palette, and Bunny smiles welcomingly out on every page. A charming surprise mirror will surely show readers smiling right back. On the return trip, a sea reader has seen all along is at long last revealed to the oblivious narrator, and all ends well with a refreshing glass of carrot lemonade for everyone involved. Small details add to the charm: The little sailboat is named, hilariously, “BunY,” and the range of expressions sported by the assorted sea creatures demands a second read.

Forget your troubles—but not your snorkel!—this read is smooth sailing. (*Picture book. 3-6*)

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**THE BIRTHDAY CASTLE**

Kids learn teamwork when they launch a fort-building business. When 8-year-old Caleb is $10 short for a special edition of a book from his favorite series, he enlists his best friend, Jax, to help him think up ways to earn the money. After the boys have a ball building a box fort, they decide to go into business creating forts for other kids (Jax needs money for a new soccer net). Some of the humor comes in the kids’ aping of adult language they don’t quite get: What’s an “odd job” anyway, and who hasn’t wondered if businesses use “Inc.” in their names just “to sound fancy”? In this way, the humor bolsters instead of competing with the seriousness with which the kids take their operation, empowering kids rather than laughing at them. To handle the business end, they recruit artistic Eddie (who’s saving up for a new brownie pan) to help with signs and marketing, and—when their big job, a box-fort castle for Analise’s birthday—is imperiled by Analise’s changing request—they bring professional Kiara on board. As their tight deadline looms, they adapt to unexpected obstacles and learn how to manage their team. On the cover, Caleb and Jax present white, and Eddie presents black; brown-skinned Kiara is South Asian. A glossary, discussion questions, and STEM activity add further heft; a cast of characters helps transitioning readers keep track.

**Positive and upbeat. (Fiction. 5-9)**

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**SECRETS OF THE LOON**

Photographs, accompanied by a rhyming text, document the first summer of a young loon the author calls Moon. Salas imagines the story of a young chick from a series of photos of loon chicks and their parents taken by Dayton, an environmental lawyer—turned—nature photographer. Her text, conveyed in loose quatrains, follows Moon from hatching to first migration. Much of loon development is instinctive, the writer explains: “Every secret Moon needs, / she carries inside.” In fact, in Salas’ text, her body parts have actual agency. Moon is prompted to dive by her “heavy bones” and to fly by her wing feathers, but readers also see her parents teaching her—to feed and defend herself and even that flying is a possibility. Fran Hodgkins’ *Little Loon*, illustrated by Karel Hayes (2015), tells a similar story; Susan Vande Griek’s free-verse *Loon*, illustrated by Karen Reczuch (2011), provides more information. What sets this book apart are the sharp, clear photographs of the loons tied with beaded elastics, peering into a microscope. So begins an exercise in perspective. From those bits of green life under the lens readers move to “Those who swim with the tide / and those who don’t.” They observe a “pest”—a mosquito biting a dinosaur, a “really gassy” planet, and a dog whose walker—a child in a pink hijab—has lost hold of the leash. Periodically, the examples are validated with the titular refrain. Textured paint strokes and collage elements contrast with uncluttered backgrounds that move from white to black to white. The black pages in the middle portion foreground scenes in space, including a black astronaut viewing Earth; the astronaut is holding an image of another black youngster who appears on the next spread flying a toy rocket and looking lonely. There are many such visual connections, creating emotional interest and invitations for conversation. The story’s conclusion spins full circle, repeating opening sentences with new scenarios. From the microscopic to the cosmic, word and image illuminate the message without a whiff of didacticism.

Whimsy, intelligence, and a subtle narrative thread make this rise to the top of a growing list of self-love titles. (*Picture book. 4-7*)
While readers will not close this book knowing what specific job they want to aim for, they will have a broader sense of the world of work.

**WHAT CAN I DO WHEN I GROW UP?**

Aimed at any young person who has been flummoxed by the question, “What do you want to do when you grow up?” this book deconstructs the absurdity of aiming this question at a child, then helps readers see the many considerations that go into choosing a career and lifestyle. The short chapters answer questions such as “What is a job?” and “How do jobs get invented?” and “How important is money?” Many chapters end with an exercise for readers to think and write about as they consider their futures. Readers will learn how work is and is not like school as well as the difference between competitive

**DISCOVERING ENERGY**

Sanz, Verónica
Illus. by Altarriba, Eduard
Button Books (48 pp.)
$17.99 | May 1, 2020
978-1-78708-049-2
Series: Discovering Big Ideas

A basic introduction to various forms of energy.

Starting with the sun’s energy and how, at a basic level, plants and animals use it to create their own energy, this book moves, more or less chronologically, through discovery and advancement to outline the basics of energy up through how space travel is powered. The physicist co-authors explain concepts in easy-to-understand ways and with logical sequencing. Measurement of energy, nuclear fission, and nuclear fusion are just a few of the big concepts that are briefly introduced, whereas some, such as electromagnetism, are better described and built on. In contrast, greenhouse gases are initially introduced without context in a paragraph about how the sun heats the Earth and later as a main factor in climate change, still with insufficient context. Graphic-design elements work well when diagramming items such as the windmill, steam engine, and combustion engine. Depicted scenes vary by time and culture but are predominantly European, with few figures of color included. Key words are set in bold with definitions generally explained in text, but the presentation requires linear reading and retention of previous information presented for full understanding. A table of contents is provided, but there is no glossary, index, or other supplemental backmatter.

This resource is pretty to look at but hard to use. (Nonfiction, 8-11)

**WHAT CAN I DO WHEN I GROW UP?**

A Children’s Career Guide

School of Life
Illus. by Mason, Tylia
School of Life (160 pp.)
$19.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-912891-20-7

This British import helps young people consider the factors that go into discovering work that is right for them.
The easy-to-read type and clean, colorful illustrations of diverse
The third-person narrative is steeped in historical facts and
die discovers a love of typesetting. When Frederick Douglass
questions of gender, class, and race that are addressed in the
discusses Stanton's racism, which is not addressed in the story.
A tortoise reflects on a year in its life.
Oliver is an 80-year-old tortoise and lives in a sunny, flow-
Bridie’s release from the poorhouse after her mother’s death
is not what she had hoped. The Kigleys, a white family, bring her
to their farm on trial before contracting her as an indentured
acceptance of change. It’s also terribly funny in its memoir
who’s also 80. The two are dear friends, and Oliver reflects on
how he and Ike love each other and how they have their com-
fortable daily routines (“Oliver, fetch” says Ike, and they both
laugh). But one day Ike is gone, and Oliver, saddened, makes
the trek (10 gardens away) to talk with his 137-year-old mother.
This gentle, poignant, and humorous story presents the themes
of friendship, loss, and appreciation of life’s moments from
refreshingly different perspectives: narratively from Oliver’s point of view and visually from the low vantage afforded by Oliver’s stature. Both work wonderfully. The story is both heart-
rending and uplifting as Oliver leads readers on a tortoise-speed
journey of his quiet moments in the garden and his graceful acceptance of change. It’s also terribly funny in its memoir aspect (“A banana for dinner”) and in the speed (or lack thereof) of Oliver’s journey to see his mother. Bowers’ vibrantly colorful illustrations bring the Florida-like landscape to life with full-
bleed single-page- and double-page-spread illustrations while the choice to use an illustrative perspective mainly from Oliver’s close-to-the-ground view gives readers a strong sense of being right there.
An unusual and wonderful gem. (Picture book. 4-9)
A tortoise reflects on a year in its life.

starting from seneca falls
Schwabach, Karen
Random House (240 pp.)
978-0-593-12505-2
978-0-593-12506-9 PLB

Bridie, an Irish orphan fleeing a fate of indentured servitude, meets Rose, a free black girl, as both test the limits of
what they can do with their lives.

Bridie’s release from the poorhouse after her mother’s death
is not what she had hoped. The Kigleys, a white family, bring her
to their farm on trial before contracting her as an indentured
servant, but the abuse Bridie suffers at Mr. Kigley’s hands leads
her to run away. When she meets Rose, they become (improb-
ably) fast friends, and Rose helps Bridie find work at the home
of Mrs. Stanton, an educated white woman with property who
organizes conventions for women’s rights. (Knowledgeable
readers will identify her fairly quickly as Elizabeth Cady Stan-
ton.) At first confused about Rose’s desire to study science, Bri-
die discovers a love of typesetting. When Frederick Douglass
visits Mrs. Stanton, and Mrs. Kigley and her daughter beg for
help escaping their abuser, both girls find themselves tested.
The third-person narrative is steeped in historical facts and
details, which will particularly fascinate history buffs. Bridie’s
well-paced story is engaging enough to carry the multilayered
questions of gender, class, and race that are addressed in the
text. The combination of plain narration with period dialogue
is slightly awkward; without a glossary, young readers may need
a dictionary on hand. A historical note providing context discus-
ses Stanton’s racism, which is not addressed in the story.
The political is personal in this effective introduction to
19th-century society and women’s rights. (Historical fiction. 8-12)

Doodleville
Sell, Chad
Illus. by the author
Knopf (288 pp.)
$20.99 | $23.99 PLB | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-9848-9470-0
978-0-593-12682-0 PLB
Series: Doodleville, 1

In a world where art literally comes alive, a girl must figure out how to create harmony between her doodles and her
friends.

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In a world where art literally comes alive, a girl must figure out how to create harmony between her doodles and her
friends.
figure out how to create balance and harmony. Sell's worldbuilding is simple and may leave some readers with questions, but he tells an engaging story that uses a fantastical idea to ponder real-world dilemmas: How do you cope when things feel out of control? How do you reduce harm, and how do you make amends for harm that you’ve caused? Characters are shaped a bit like bitmojis, with slightly oversized heads and skinny necks. Drew has pale skin and dark hair, and her friends are a diverse bunch in terms of racial presentation, pronouns, and gender presentations. Several pages of backmatter discuss the history of Doodleville and its denizens.

**Will draw readers in and inspire doodles galore. (Graphic fantasy. 8-12)**

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**THE TRUCE**

Smibert, Angie

Boyds Mills (208 pp.)

$17.99 | May 26, 2020

978-1-62979-852-3

Series: Ghosts of Ordinary Objects, 3

The conclusion of a trilogy that began with Bone’s Gift (2018).

It’s now December 1942, and the coal town of Big Vein, Virginia, is preparing for Christmas when the mine whistle blows, signaling disaster. This time, though, all the miners are safe and accounted for—but there’s a dead body in the mine, covered in rock dust, head crushed beyond recognition. When the corpse is discovered to be wearing a World War I dog tag that belonged to Bone’s uncle Ash, who’d left town a few weeks earlier, a black man named Tiny Sherman is arrested for his murder. Uncle Ash always forbade Bone to touch the two dog tags he wore, not wanting her psychic gifts to allow her to see the memories they contained, but now Uncle Junior asks her to. The memories she sees aren’t from Uncle Ash—who are they? Bone seeks the truth while Mr. Hill, an African American attorney, works for Sherman’s release. Smibert packs a lot into the story, told, as always, in the third person from Bone’s perspective. Her characters—mostly white—and setting are fully evoked, and her language is both thoughtful and precise. The plot hinges on the presumption that the body is Uncle Ash’s, which doesn’t feel entirely believable—but the paranormal parts, including the appearance of a mysterious ghost dog, ring true. Smibert has a talent for ghost stories.

A satisfying conclusion to a worthy series. (Historical notes) (Historical/paranormal fiction. 8-14)

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**WHAT SOUND IS MORNING?**

Snider, Grant

Illus. by the author

Chronicle (48 pp.)

$15.99 | May 12, 2020

978-1-4521-7993-3

Each day begins with riotous noise. Listen!

As sunrise’s gentle rays set the landscape ablaze, a new day is ushered in with a harmonious aural feast. Cue the antemeridiem orchestra for the melodies of birdsong, yawning dogs, buzzing alarm clocks, clicking light switches, gurgling babies, whistling wind, crowing roosters, the cacophony of zooming traffic, and much more. This sweet, simple story will awaken young listeners’ imaginations to a world of early-a.m. wonders. The economic prose, occasionally rendered in rhyme and near rhyme, flows gently and well and will help kids happily recognize what goes on before and after they awaken. The book makes a fine springboard into laptime, classroom, and library-programming activities, as youngsters can be challenged to identify and/or illustrate morning noisemakers they’re familiar with in their homes and neighborhoods. Bold illustrations burst from the pages and are filled with eye-popping pinks, blues, yellows, greens, reds, purples, and other hues; pre-dawn dark colors lighten and dissipate as the day proceeds. People’s skin tones are primarily nonrealistic, though one woman is shown with dark-brown skin. A wonderful image accompanying the charming turn of phrase “Today is a melody still to be written, / today is a tune no one’s heard before” depicts a five-lined “staff” of electric wires with birds resembling musical notes perched upon them.

Children will raise a loud cheer for this morning story. (Picture book. 3-6)

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**WHEN EMILY WAS SMALL**

Soloy, Lauren

Illus. by the author

Tundra (40 pp.)

$17.99 | Jun. 23, 2020

978-0-7352-6606-3

An inspiring tale of renowned Canadian artist Emily Carr, set in her childhood.

Basing her tale on a story written by Carr called “White Currants,” Soloy uses poetic, onomatopoeic language to present a glimpse of the young Emily Carr and to reveal how Carr’s childhood perception of the grandeur of the natural world inspired her artistic vision. It’s an impressive feat to deliver a story about connection with the natural world as seen by an artistic eye without lapsing into overromanticized expression or illustration, but Soloy succeeds. Young Emily, exploring the yard outside her home one day, sits down and begins to
Full-color panels blaze vibrantly, defined with heavy black outlines that give this an easily recognizable panache.

YORICK AND BONES

A skeleton yearns to find a friend. In this middle-grade graphic novel by a father-daughter duo, an interred skeleton awakens after an unnamed magical item lands near its resting place, leaching power into the ground. Speaking in appropriately Shakespearean language, Yorick proclaims: “Alack, there is but one thing I desire. / A friend.” Shortly thereafter, the skeleton is exhumed by an adorable gray dog who wishes to nibble his tibia (to which Yorick protests, “Oh biteth not me so, thou foul beast!”). Yorick attempts to shoo the dog away but reconsidered, hoping its canine cuteness will help win him some friends. After a handful of bumbling, failed attempts send humans running away screaming, Yorick gives up. But Bones the dog wordlessly (though not always silently) shows the loquacious skeleton that a real friend is closer than he may have realized. Told in a three-act structure, the Tankards’ debut collaboration is a delightfully quirky and lively introduction to Shakespearean conventions and iambic pentameter. Pairing the Elizabethan-era vernacular with visuals works well, and once they become accustomed to the syntax, those unfamiliar to Shakespearean conventions and iambic pentameter will be able to enjoy this tale of seeking acceptance and friendship. Jeremy Tankard’s full-color panels blaze vividly, defined with heavy black outlines that give this an easily recognizable panache. The few humans that Yorick and Bones encounter present with a range of skin tones.

Fun, forsooth. (Graphic fantasy. 8-11)

A FAMILY FOR LOUIE

A French bulldog named Louie lives by himself and eats meals alone at neighborhood restaurants. But Louie wants a family to call his own.

Little Louie has a comfortable life, sleeping in his tiny home hidden away underground. He eats each meal sitting alone at neighborhood restaurants. As he sees human families enjoying time together, Louie wishes he could have a family of his own. He tries to insert himself into several families, but each presents some barrier such as unacceptable food or a cranky cat. When Louie visits a new bakery, the daughter of the owner takes a shine to Louie and convinces her mom to let Louie join their family. The story has a gentle air of make-believe, as Louie’s anthropomorphic lifestyle and ability to read and reason are never explained.

A French bulldog named Louie lives by himself and eats meals alone at neighborhood restaurants. But Louie wants a family to call his own.

Little Louie has a comfortable life, sleeping in his tiny home hidden away underground. He eats each meal sitting alone at a different restaurant, enjoying dishes like raspberry pancakes and fish tacos. As he sees human families enjoying time together, Louie wishes he could have a family of his own. He tries to insert himself into several families, but each presents some barrier such as unacceptable food or a cranky cat. When Louie visits a new bakery, the daughter of the owner takes a shine to Louie and convinces her mom to let Louie join their family. The story has a gentle air of make-believe, as Louie’s anthropomorphic lifestyle and ability to read and reason are never explained.
but are believable nevertheless. His emotions are conveyed in soft-focus illustrations, especially in one poignant view of families playing together at sunset as Louie looks on in solitude from a hillside. The bakery owner and her daughter present white; other characters are diverse. The family groups are also diverse in composition, including mostly single parents, a grandfather and granddaughter, and a family with two moms.

A sweet (but not saccharine) story about finding a forever family. (Picture book. 3-7)

JOYRNE TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH
Or a Planet Full of Secrets
Jules Verne
Adapt. by Papatheodoulou, Antonis
Illus. by Samartzi, Iris
Trans. by Mountokalaki, Maria
Faros Books/Trafalgar (36 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2020
978-1-9164091-8-7
Series: Jules Verne’s Adventure Stories

An abbreviated retelling, translated from Greek, of the Jules Verne classic, illustrated with suitably adventuresome montages. Papatheodoulou leaves out no significant events from the plot of the original, beginning with the coded message (here in reverse printed English rather than Latin) that sends Axel and his uncle on the titular journey. With a silent local guide, they head down a certain tunnel mouth in Iceland, past encounters with giant mushrooms and battling prehistoric sea monsters, to a dramatic reemergence through an erupting volcano off Sicily. Adding map fragments and clipped photos of spelunking gear to painted views of the white trio feeling their way through dimly lit passages and strange landscapes, Samartzi ably captures the original’s exhilarating sense of wonder. That sense comes through just as strongly in the co-published retelling of From the Earth to the Moon, though this version abruptly cuts off before Earth to the Moon: 978-1-9164091-8-7

Together with its companion, quick voyages down and up, the proto-astronauts’ return to Earth—and, more significantly, repeatedly works in a concept not found in Verne’s novel, that the whole lunar expedition is founded on the notion of turning a weapon of war to (as the subtitle has it) a “Cannon for Peace.” Journey offers a truer taste of the iconic author’s exhilarating sense of wonder than From the Earth, which is in essence a reboot that forcibly transforms the more martial original’s thematic swords into plowshares.

An enjoyable and diverse story highlighting friendship, entrepreneurship, and perseverance. (Fiction. 8-12)

FACE THE MUSIC
Westfeld, Brian & Kear, Nicole C.
Imprint (101 pp.)
$16.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-250-18045-2
Series: Startup Squad, 2

The Startup Squad discovers that selling merch for their favorite rock band is more complicated than it seems.

Harriet Nguyen lives life in the fast lane. She loves creating spectacular outfits day, adores reptiles, and is the youngest of four siblings. She has three older brothers—Sam, Joe, and Larry—who are also in a band together called the Radical Skinks, named after her favorite reptile. When Harriet accidentally breaks Larry’s guitar and dooms the band, her friends quickly come up with a scheme to keep the band together and help them compete in Battle of the Bands. Together, the four middle schoolers come up with the idea of selling Radical Skinks T-shirts at a concert to raise money for a new guitar. Though the idea seems simple at first, the girls quickly realize they have underestimated how much effort and teamwork it will take to reach their goal, especially with Harriet’s act-first-think-later attitude, which results in disastrous mishaps. Filled with flawed characters and moments of growth, including lessons on trial and error, practicing customer service, and learning from mistakes, this drama-filled, fast-paced, entertaining read places friendship and hard work at its heart. The characters are cued as the following: Harriet and her family are Vietnamese, Amelia is white, Didi is South Asian, and Resa (the focus of series opener The Startup Squad, 2019) is Afro-Latinx. Practical tips on entrepreneurship and a Q&A with a kid entrepreneur appear in the backmatter.

Poetry and art harmoniously evoke the simplicity of a summer friendship set in Japan.

Natsumi, a young peach-skinned girl with straight, dark hair, was born in lotus season. Her name means “the sea in summer,” and summer seems to run through her veins. She loves the heat, the outdoor activities, “the cool bursts / of plum rain, heavy and sweet.” Eye-catching illustrations, done in a seasonal palette of pinks, greens, blues, and purples, capture the flora and fauna of these few months—especially the cicadas. Natsumi is intrigued by these fleeting flyers and seeks them out when they arrive. On her birthday, her cousin Jill, a girl with brown skin and curly
The two are at dinner, dad's fist coming down so hard on the tabletop that his plate tilts and his drink sloshes: “You need a haircut.” Unperturbed, the cub slurps up the spaghetti. “No, I don’t.” Dad’s anger continues on the next page, where the duo tries to balance the plate on a table that his forehead creased but no other indication of his feelings or what might have prompted them. “They remember” includes a photo of a man of color standing over small children sitting on a curb. Two are crying. It’s won’t be clear to young readers what he may be remembering. While Huie is to be commended for showing such a great range of diversity, both socio-economic and racial, in the dads and family groups pictured in his black-and-white and color photos, his work suffers from having been posed: Too many photos feel forced, with one or more of the subjects looking directly at the camera.

While the photos and text don’t always mesh, still this is a refreshingly real-life view of fatherhood. (Picture book: 3-6)

## LION NEEDS A HAIRCUT

**Tum, Hyewon**

Illus. by the author

Abrams (40 pp.)

$16.99 | May 5, 2020

978-1-4197-4224-8

A cub uses some reverse psychology on his father…but gets a haircut anyway.

From the first spread, what will strike most readers is the father lion’s seemingly over-the-top anger directed at his cub. The two are at dinner, dad’s fist coming down so hard on the tabletop that his plate tilts and his drink sloshes: “You need a haircut.” Unperturbed, the cub slurps up the spaghetti. “No, I don’t.” Dad’s anger continues on the next page, where the duo shares the couch. While the lion’s words try to be reassuring, his scowl is not. On the third spread, dad finally tries to get at the heart of the matter and looks pleasant while shampooing his father’s mane as mustache and beard may puzzle literal-minded readers. Troublingly, “Are you scared?” is used tauntingly, and the interaction reinforces the notion that fear and worry are shameful. But most discomfiting is the anger that visibly radiates from the father in too many of the colored-pencil spreads.

This dad needs to learn to pick his battles and control his anger. (Picture book: 3-7)

## DADS

**Coy, John**

*Photos by Huie, Wing Young*

Carolrhoda (32 pp.)

$19.99 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-5415-7839-5

Following Their Great Gift (2016), Coy and Huie team up again, exploring fatherhood through the lens of a camera and the roles that fathers play in their families.

In the backmatter notes, Huie explains that he “combed through my archives” for the photos for this book, and that may be why they don’t always complement the text and why they may seem woefully out of step for our times. For instance, “Dads help” shows a black man tenderly cradling a baby; is he “helping” by caring for his own child? “They teach” is a strong page: Dads provide instruction in riding a bike, tying a tie, and adjusting Buddhist robes. Others photos may leave readers wondering: “They get frustrated” simply shows an Asian man adjusting multigenerational commonalities. “You and I are alike” includes a photo of a man of color sitting at a table, his forehead creased but no other indication of his feelings or what might have prompted them. “They remember” includes a photo of a man of color standing over small children sitting on a curb. Two are crying. It’s won’t be clear to young readers what he may be remembering. While Huie is to be commended for showing such a great range of diversity, both socio-economic and racial, in the dads and family groups pictured in his black-and-white and color photos, his work suffers from having been posed: Too many photos feel forced, with one or more of the subjects looking directly at the camera.

While the photos and text don’t always mesh, still this is a refreshingly real-life view of fatherhood. (Picture book: 3-6)

## GRANDMA’S GIRL

**Hill, Susanna Leonard**

Illus. by Bobbiesi, Laura

Sourcebooks Wonderland (40 pp.)

$17.99 | Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-7282-0623-3

Hill and Bobbiesi send a humungous hug from grandmothers to their granddaughters everywhere.

Delicate cartoon art adds details to the rhyming text showing multigenerational commonalities. “You and I are alike in such wonderful ways. / You will see more and more as you grow” (as grandmother and granddaughter enjoy the backyard together); “I wobbled uncertainly just as you did / whenever I tried something new” (as a toddler takes first steps); “And if a bad dream woke me up in the night, / I snuggled up with my lovely too” (grandmother kisses granddaughter, who clutches a plush narwhal). Grandmother-granddaughter pairs share everyday joys like eating ice cream, dancing “in the rain,” and making “up silly games.” Although some activities skew stereotypically feminine (baking, yoga), a grandmother helps with a quintessential volcano experiment (this pair presents black, adding valuable STEM representation), another cheeses on a young
This multigenerational snuggle will encourage the sharing of old memories and the creation of new ones.  (Picture book, 5-8)

**WEEKEND DAD**

Hrah, Naseem  
Illus. by Viva, Frank  
Groundwood (60 pp.)  
$18.95 | May 1, 2020  
978-1-77306-108-5

A child’s narration captures the confusion and sorrow that children of separated and divorced parents can feel.  

Dad and mom have separated or perhaps even divorced, resulting in some life-altering changes. The redhead child narrator has dad on the mind all week after Dad moves out on Monday. But on Friday night, it is time to say goodbye to Mom and visit Dad’s new apartment: “My dad says I have two homes now.” Accustomed to a home once shared with both parents (all three family members have pale skin), the child feels scared on the first night in dad’s apartment and wanders into his room to watch him sleep, wondering if even grown-ups get scared too. The story captures little moments that have big meaning—the tender kiss Mom gives the child when leaving to stay with Dad for the first time; Dad’s wide eyes as he picks up his kid at what used to be his own dad make a baby, and that makes a family,” Olive avers. “So dad make a baby, and that makes a family,” Olive avers. “So one mom and one dad make a baby, and that makes a family,” Olive avers. “So which one is the real dad?” Holzwarth’s informal, friendly paintings show Riley looking hurt and confused, and as the day goes on, she thinks about her “belly mommy who gave birth” to her and about how she shares qualities with both of her dads, with black hair like Daddy’s and freckles like Papa’s. (Illustrations depict Riley, Daddy, and Riley’s belly mommy as people of color with brown skin and dark, wavy hair while redheaded Papa presents white.) When she goes home, Riley’s parents notice she is upset, and she shares what happened at school. Daddy and Papa comfort her and affirm that their family constellation is just one of many diverse possibilities, and a cluster of vignettes depicts a range of configurations. “But what makes a family a family, if every family is so different?” she asks. “LOVE” is the immediate answer, underscored by an illustration of the trio in a group hug.

**DADDY LOVES YOU!**

James, Helen Foster  
Illus. by Brown, Petra  
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)  
$14.99 | May 5, 2020  
978-1-4338-3239-0

A continuation of James and Brown’s Loves You! series.  

As in her previous titles in the series, James’ first-person narrator, a bipedal but unclothed father bunny in Brown’s illustrations, describes the many ways he shares his love and affection with his child. “Daddy loves you, bunny-bear, / much more than words can say. / You are your daddy’s sunshine. / I’ll love you every day.” Readers follow along, the adults possibly remembering their own shared experiences with a father figure, as the father-child duo explores the world, plays together, and beds down at night. The father echoes sentiments common to parents everywhere: “Do your best. Be bold and kind, / be all you want to be. / You’ll be a superhero / …especially to me.” But James missteps when the father says he’ll “protect you, / wherever you may go,” a promise parents can’t always keep. Brilliant spring colors and adorable, loving animals make this a title kids will gravitate toward. Indeed, Dad’s paw atop his tot’s head in a tender caress and the child cradled in their father’s arms, nose to nose, as the sun rises are hard to resist. Labeled a “Keepsake Edition,” the book has a page in the frontmatter designed for a gift inscription and date, and the backmatter has space for a personalized “Special Letter to My Favorite Bunny” and a photo of “Daddy and child.”  

**PAPA, DADDY, & RILEY**

Kirst, Seamus  
Illus. by Holzwarth, Devon  
Magination/American Psychological Association (32 pp.)  
$14.99 | May 5, 2020  
978-1-4338-3239-0

A little girl with two dads confronts homophobia.  

When Riley’s parents drop her off at school, she calls, “I love you, Papa and Daddy,” as she waves goodbye. This prompts a classmate named Olive to challenge her. “One mom and one dad make a baby, and that makes a family,” Olive avers. “So which one is the real dad?” Holzwarth’s informal, friendly paintings show Riley looking hurt and confused, and as the day goes on, she thinks about her “belly mommy who gave birth” to her and about how she shares qualities with both of her dads, with black hair like Daddy’s and freckles like Papa’s. (Illustrations depict Riley, Daddy, and Riley’s belly mommy as people of color with brown skin and dark, wavy hair while redheaded Papa presents white.) When she goes home, Riley’s parents notice she is upset, and she shares what happened at school. Daddy and Papa comfort her and affirm that their family constellation is just one of many diverse possibilities, and a cluster of vignettes depicts a range of configurations. “But what makes a family a family, if every family is so different?” she asks. “LOVE” is the immediate answer, underscored by an illustration of the trio in a group hug.
The loose linework, gentle palette, and soft visual texture of the art is a perfect match for the lilting, easy cadence.

PAPA BRINGS ME THE WORLD
Kostecki-Shaw, Jenny Sue
Illus. by the authors
Christy Ottaviano/Henry Holt (40 pp.)
$18.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-250-15925-0

A father’s travels inspire a young child to dream of exploring the world.

Lu’s papa is a photojournalist who frequently leaves their cozy home to take pictures all over the world. Each time he returns, Papa brings Lu a small treasure: coins, an abacus, a game, a musical instrument. Lu misses Papa but never wishes for him to stop traveling. When Papa’s gone, Lu tracks his travels on a map and flips through his illustrated journals, dreaming of being old enough to travel too. Finally, it’s time! With an empty journal ready to be filled, Lu declares “I was born to explore. Just like Papa.” Lu’s first-person narrative is filled with Papa’s stories, heartfelt conversations between father and child, and Papa’s letters. Collages rendered with cut, layered paper and finished off with painted textures and rubber stamps create a warm, earthy atmosphere. The illustrations—which feature a brown-skinned, dark-haired father and child and a fair-skinned, dark-haired mama—alternate between filling the whole page, and highlighting a specific moment or object. Backmatter, including a map showing the origins of Papa’s small treasures and a game for readers to play with friends or family plus Papa’s and Lu’s illustrated journals, creates plenty of connections to personal expression and educational concepts. An accompanying note provides details about the author’s own childhood with a father who traveled the world.

A comforting story that will prompt exploration at home or in school. (Picture book. 4-8)

PLENTY OF HUGS
Manushkin, Fran
Illus. by Alizadeh, Kate
Dial (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 14, 2020
978-0-525-55401-1

A sweet portrait of parental love, notable for its depiction of a two-mom family.

The text neither names nor defines the family relationships in this picture book, so Alizadeh’s art takes the lead in depicting two women and their baby. One mother appears white, with light skin and short-cropped brown hair, while the other has long, dark, wavy hair and a slightly darker skin tone. Their child has coloring more like that of the latter mother and is clearly abundantly loved by both parents. The illustrations depict the family riding their bicycles to a farm and a zoo before heading home for dinner, a bath, and bedtime. The loose linework, gentle palette, and soft visual texture of the art is a perfect match for the lilting, easy cadence of the affirming text: “There’s a buzz for each bug, / and a breeze for each tree, / and plenty of hugs for you and me.” The speaker and addressee of this line and others are never defined, which underscores the clarity of Alizadeh’s intention in depicting this particular queer family constellation. “You” could have been depicted as one person, after all, but this line is accompanied by a group hug shared by the child and two moms.

Plenty of need for this warm hug of a book. (Picture book. 1-5)

CUDDLE CLOSE, LITTLE KOALA
McLean, Danielle
Illus. by Ward, Sarah
Tiger Tales (24 pp.)
$17.99 | Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-68010-187-4

After a day of play with friends, it’s bedtime, but where is Little Koala’s mommy?

Lots of things seem familiar in the forest—is that flash of gray fur her mommy? No, it’s Mommy Wombat, who gives Little Koala a hug, but it’s not the same as Mommy Koala’s hugs. Is that a snatch of her mommy’s bedtime stories? No, it’s Mommy Platypus, who snuggles Little Koala close as she continues the story she was telling her babies. Similarly, the lullaby she hears isn’t her mommy’s; it’s Mommy Emu’s. And though kind in both action and in appearance on the page, these mothers aren’t her own. Suddenly, she hears a familiar voice calling her name: It’s Mommy Koala, and she has the “most perfect koala cuddle ever.” After hearing about all the ways the other mommies were like Little Koala’s mommy, readers may feel let down that Little Koala doesn’t get a story or a lullaby from her own mother. Still, it’s a mostly satisfying ending to an overall gentle look at being lost—indeed, Little Koala looks worried about her situation on only one spread, otherwise soaking in the love from the other Australian fauna. Readers who find themselves in similar situations will learn little from Little Koala’s experience other than to find another mother with children for help. The black type on increasingly dark backgrounds as night falls becomes difficult to discern.

Sweet but unsubstantial. (Picture book. 3-6)
Such positive images of gender-nonconforming presentations are rare in children’s literature, making this a valuable addition.

**MY MADDY**

_A loving, celebratory window into a young child’s relationship with their nonbinary parent._

The latest in Pitman’s LGBTQ books for children introduces young readers to a parent whose gender identity and expression are “entirely fantastically their own”—not a mommy or a daddy, but “my Maddy.” Told from the perspective of a light-skinned, redheaded child, the story normalizes what’s “in between, and kind of both,” which is everywhere in nature, from dawn (“it’s not day and it’s not night,” Maddy explains) to the color hazel (a mix between green and brown). Vignettes from the main characters’ everyday lives are vibrantly depicted in artist Tobacco’s bold, full-bleed illustrations, including walks to school, snacktime, and stories before bed. Particularly noteworthy is the heartwarming scene when Maddy kisses their kid goodbye before dropping them off at school: Beside a glowing portrait of the beaming family, the text reads, “Maddy’s kisses feel like sandpaper against my face.” Such positive images of gender-nonconforming presentations are rare in children’s literature, making this a valuable addition to any school, public, or personal library for its engaging art and accessible representation for a wide age range. The adult-oriented backmatter uses person-first language and identifies the book’s inspiration as intersex; notes on intersex identity and supporting children in understanding their parents’ genders are accompanied by resources. Unfortunately, one of these is the Human Rights Campaign, known for its fraught relationship with trans communities.

_Much needed in the landscape of family-oriented picture books._

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**WILD ABOUT DADS**

_Murray, Diana_

_Illus. by Alvarez, Amber_

Imprint (40 pp.)

$17.99 | May 5, 2020

978-1-250-31574-8

Three human dads bookend this list of things animal dads do for their children, and readers will find them all to be very familiar.

“Dads can help you reach up high, // and help to keep you warm and dry.” These two double-page spreads show, first, a marmoset with a baby on his back reaching for some red berries and then penguin dads with their chicks on their feet. Some anthropomorphization creeps in with eagle dads, who “like fishing,” and prairie dog dads, who enjoy “playing games, like dad duties: “Sun-grebe dads carry young hatchlings in a pocket familiar.

A final spread in the backmatter shows a vignette illustration of each species and one to three sentences of further information about the animals and their dad duties: “Sun-grebe dads carry young hatchlings in a pocket under their wings to keep them safe” (disappointingly, this is inaccurately depicted like a kangaroo’s pouch); “Marmoset dads groom, feed, and carry their babies on their backs.” This info will fascinate those young children with the patience to sit still to listen to this text-dense spread after the terse couplets. Alvarez’s full-bleed illustrations lightly anthropomorphize her animal subjects with smiles and some postures. The bright colors will attract an audience.

_A fascinating look at dads in the animal world who behave similarly to human dads._ (Informational picture book: 3-7)

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**I LOVE DADDY EVERY DAY**

_Otter, Isabel_

_Illus. by Más, Alicia_

Rodale Kids (32 pp.)

$10.99 | Mar. 24, 2020

978-0-593-12305-8

Children point out the things they love about their fathers.

“Daddy is always kind. He gives us support and shelter when things go wrong.” A child with a skinned knee (and downed ice cream cone) gets a bandage and loving pat from Daddy (no shelter is visible, but the child’s concerned sibling sweetly extends their own cone). Daddy’s a storyteller, a magician, supportive, loyal, silly, patient, and he knows everything. A die-cut hole pierces most pages, positioned so that the increasingly smaller holes to come can be seen through it; what it represents in each scene varies, and it does so with also-variable success. The bland, nonrhyming, inconsistent text does little to attract or keep attention, though the die cuts might (until they fall victim to curious fingers). The text also confusingly mixes first-person singular and plural, sometimes on the same page: “Daddy is like a gardener. He lovingly cares for us and watches us grow. I’m
A father’s love, epitomized by the titular gesture, lasts a lifetime.

The first two spreads set up a family tradition shared between father and son, both depicted with pale skin and straight, brown hair: “When you could neither talk nor stand, / life’s hourglass still filled with sand, // I gently held your tiny hand / and gave it three soft squeezes.” Subsequent spreads gradually age the child as he faces common life experiences, three squeezes always communicating his father’s comforting presence: a nightmare, a broken leg, a missed catch, a quarrel between the pair, the death of a pet, graduation. The boy becomes a father himself. On a sunset-lit forest path, he pushes his father in a wheelchair. “The day may come, you understand, / when I can neither talk nor stand, / and if it does, please take my hand / and give it three soft squeezes.” The final page shows the three generations together, the son squeezing the old man’s hand while the text spells out that three squeezes mean “I love you.” Sheban’s illustrations are the perfect complement, playing up the relationship and using color to enhance emotions. While inevitably begging comparison with Love You Forever, this comes out much the better with its portrayal of the normal progression of aging, though it requires just as many tissues.

Belongs among the gifts given at every baby shower; three squeezes should be part of every caregiver’s toolkit. (Picture book. 3-8, adult)

A mother and child interact in familiar ways in Raschka’s latest, which uses unique formatting to stand out from the crowd.

Mama and baby face each other across the gutter on the first spread, and then the pages’ orientations change. Mama is still on verso, baby on recto, but now they are sideways if the book is traditionally oriented. To see each right side up, readers will need to turn the book first 90 degrees clockwise to see the adult right way up and then a full 180 degrees to likewise see the child. The design is clearly meant to emphasize the mirroring that occurs between parent and child as they interact: smiles; clapping; hiding behind hands and then “Peeek-a-boo!”, “Pat-a-cake.” (Even the text is hand-lettered sideways.) One interaction near the ending may be too on-the-nose: On the mom’s side, musical notes appear and her eyes slide sideways. The next three spreads show baby alone, expression modulating from pouty questioning (“Mama?”) to surprise to an open-mouthed wail that brings Mama back. The baby’s “up up” appears before the book returns to a traditionally oriented spread of the two cuddling. Raschka’s watercolors are very simple, showing each from midchest up. Mama has dark hair and slightly darker skin than blond Baby’s fair skin and light hair; both have pinkish spots on their cheeks and large, pouty lips.

Cleverly shows mirroring in action, though the manipulation required may make sharing difficult. (Picture book. 2-4)

“Aba want book”: A tot’s demand for a book before bed will strike chords of recognition in many a household.

After a busy day (“Dada tired. Hunt gather all day. Dada no read book”), Cave Dada just wants Baba to sleep. But his fur diaper-clad tot isn’t having it: “Uh. Baba feel cry.” And when Dada attempts to distract his tot in other ways, that’s just what Baba does, in an up-close, full-bleed page of the child’s blotchy face, screwed-shut eyes, and uvula visible at the back of the wide-open, wailing mouth. Off Dada goes to get the book: a stone tablet carved with symbols. But it’s not the right one. “Dada feel cry, too.” And when he returns with a book taller and wider than he is, he does cry—it’s not the one Baba wants either. Even the discovery of fire (from the friction of moving the book) doesn’t distract for long—it’s off to get the big book with the necessary help of a mammoth. Adult readers will guess what Dada finds upon his return, but the ending spread is still sweetly satisfying, even though it ultimately fails to promote bonding through books. Reese’s soft-edged cartoons are masterful, the backgrounds simple so as to keep the focus on the dilemma (and humor) at hand. Both Baba and Dada have light skin.

This is the Neolithic equivalent of “one more book,” “I need a drink,” “gotta go potty,” and it’s uproarious. (Picture book. 4-8)

A fair-skinned, freckle-spattered mom and her brown-skinned, dark-haired daughter each feel the nervousness that comes with approaching a new experience.

In a remarkably sparse text—sentences are often single
words and only twice more than three words in length—the pair’s story unfolds side by side. Daughter is a plucky pitcher out to prove herself and improve her skills on the baseball field. Mom is a tenacious mason looking to secure a new job and execute it with excellence. Both are fiercely hardworking and determined, emphasized through the use of minimal words and the illustrations’ focus on the tasks at hand. After each secures her position, the bulk of the story depicts the daily grind required to reach her goal. Between pages of work, softly textured cartoons show mom and daughter taking respite at home, where it is just the two of them and their cat. While there is much to be done and each is tired at the end of the long days, there is no sense of struggle implied; empowerment abounds. The graphic-novel illustration style, in which windows of alternating action move the storyline forward, adds to the feeling that this duo of everyday heroines is unstoppable.

A celebration of female perseverance and success: brava! (Picture book. 4-9)

SOMETIMES DADDIES ARE...
van Genechten, Guido
Illustrated by the author
Clavis (32 pp.)
$19.95 | May 5, 2020
978-1-60537-523-6

A rhino child lists many different aspects of daddy-ness.

Daddies can act like babies or animals, can be too big or too rough, can be distracted or forgetful, and so on. As the child runs through this list, readers see a rhino family composed of mother, father, the preschool-age narrator, and a baby. This daddy, though he goes on the occasional business trip, is the very paragon of a present dad, playing with his children with evident glee. He gives horsey rides, takes the family to the zoo and on other outings, splashes in an inflatable backyard pool, and flings his children in the air to everybody’s obvious delight.

For all this rhino dad’s focus on his children, van Genechten still reinforces the stereotype of the mother as primary caregiver in a scene in which the dad comes home from the market with everything except diapers. This Belgian/Dutch import also includes several scenes of playacting as American Indians, with a toy tepee in the background and feathered headbands for both father and child, the latter of whom also wears a faux buckskin dress and carries a bow and arrow in two double-page spreads. Haphazard continuity will have children wondering whether these depicted events all take place on one day or over several, a confusion not mitigated by an overall blandness in tone and palette.

Leave this daddy book on the shelf. (Picture book. 3-5)

MY MAMA
van Haeringen, Annemarie
Illustrated by the author
Gecko Press (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-776572-67-0

An elephant calf gives readers his imaginative perspective on life with Mama.

Van Haeringen’s tongue is firmly in cheek here. The opening spread shows a very pregnant, upright mama elephant wearing a white dress with colorful designs; the text reads: “I’ve known my mama for a long time. / For my whole life, actually.” A page turn later, the calf, sporting white pants covered in large orange stars, is old enough to be playing with toy cars with Mama, explaining that it’s good fun as long as she helps clean up. And so the book continues, readers never sure where the page turn will lead them: to the market, the swings, mountain climbing (up Mama’s not inconsiderable bulk). Readers will enjoy the perspective of the calf, but even more, they’ll like to be in on jokes the earnest narrator misses: The child likes “watering the plants” (a little urination joke) but notices that “when I do, it always starts to rain”—Mama stands behind with a watering can. Still, the book as a whole suffers from the lack of a solid narrative arc. Though the simple compositions on generous white space keep the focus on the relationship, it’s not quite enough to make up for the basic absence of a plot, though the last page comes close: “At bedtime, my mama shakes the stars off my pants.” A sweet but plotless mother-child interlude. (Picture book. 2-5)
TAKE ME WITH YOU
Altebrando, Tara
Bloomsbury (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 23, 2020
978-1-68119-748-7

Four teenagers find a mysterious device that tells them what to do in this timely science fiction thriller.

When Eden Montgomery, Eli Alvarez, Marwan Gamal, and Ilanka Sokolova are summoned to an empty classroom after school one day and find a shiny black cube waiting for them, they have no idea they are about to embark on a dangerous journey of self-discovery. The cube—named Aizel—gives them a number of rules that must be followed, including: “DO NOT TELL ANYONE ABOUT THE DEVICE. DO NOT LEAVE THE DEVICE UNATTENDED...TAKE ME WITH YOU...OR ELSE.” What does Aizel want? Where did it come from? And why did it choose the four of them in particular? As time passes, Aizel’s orders become increasingly terrifying and invasive, and the group has to decide what to do before it is too late. Chapters alternate among all four characters, and each teenager is well developed and richly portrayed in a high-energy story that allows for character growth against a backdrop that looks at digital technology, social media, and the dangers of data mining as well as issues of online privacy and artificial intelligence. There is also an important and skillfully executed subplot about growing white nationalism and anti-immigration sentiment in the U.S. Eden is coded as white and Eli as Latinx; Ilanka and Marwan (who identifies as culturally Muslim) have immigrant parents from Russia and Egypt, respectively.

An engrossing and topical techno-thriller. (Science fiction. 14-adult)

TEMPEST TOSSED
Anderson, Laurie Halse
Illus. by Del Duca, Leila
DC (208 pp.)
978-1-4012-8645-3
Series: Wonder Woman

Not all heroines wear capes. Protected on the hidden floating island of Themyscira, black-haired, light-skinned Princess Diana anticipates the end of her challenging changeling phase on her 16th birthday.
HONORING A LEGEND:
RUDINE SIMS BISHOP

My first reaction upon learning that Rudine Sims Bishop, Ph.D., will give the 2021 Children’s Literature Lecture Award from the Association of Library Service to Children (ALSC) was shock that she hadn’t already received this honor. I can’t think of anyone whose wisdom can better guide us at a time when debates about stories, who tells them, and how they tell them are at the center of public consciousness.

When I was in library school, Dr. Bishop’s work *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction* (1982) offered a critical structure that was revelatory for me, as it has been for so many others.

An Ohio State University tribute, “Rudine Sims Bishop: ‘Mother’ of multicultural children’s literature,” stated:

*Shadow and Substance*...remains a standard in the field.

Some of the books she studied, by white authors for white children, portrayed black people as exotic or “different.” Others ignored cultural differences and connoted sameness. “You wouldn’t know the characters were black unless you saw the pictures,” she said.

[Others] were what Bishop calls culturally conscious.

These were rich in cultural memes, language and familiarity with true African American identity. The passages and illustrations reflect what children of color see in their everyday lives, and thus validate their experiences. Most were written and illustrated by African Americans.

These types of differences are still quite evident today.

Even more widely known is Dr. Bishop’s 1990 article “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” although I am dismayed at how often her vivid and memorable metaphor is used without credit. She famously wrote:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.

Crucially, this passage emphasizes the reader’s relationship with and experience of the material, not the author’s intent. The same book can function in different ways depending on who is reading it. The idea that a book is “diverse” rests on assumptions about who readers are; it’s a useful shorthand for books centering marginalized communities but nevertheless rests on a bedrock of assumptions positioning some people as the norm.

Vicky Smith, my Kirkus colleague and children’s editor, “would like us to talk more about the sliding glass doors. That’s a hugely important part of the metaphor, and it gets skimmed over way too often. It implies action on the part of the reader that looking at mirrors or through windows doesn’t capture.” She is absolutely right: The idea that books invite readers to actively engage with different worlds is frequently overlooked.

White librarians often wonder how they can “get kids to read diverse books” rather than having them “just sit on the shelf.” The implication is that they support books in theory but can’t justify spending the money if they won’t be used. There is much to unpack here. Why is ethnic diversity considered a barrier when white children regularly enjoy books about animals or fantasy creatures? Why are “diverse books” often promoted to young readers in a way that makes
them sound like boring social studies lessons? How are titles with multicultural content incorporated into collections (are they well represented, for example, in popular sections like graphic novels and fantasy)?

This year’s Youth Media Award winners, announced at the American Library Association’s Midwinter conference in Philadelphia, represent a huge step forward in that a number of titles were honored both in general award categories as well as heritage-focused ones, and many general award winners and honorees centered the stories of people from marginalized groups. Whether these titles hold up mirrors to your life or not, they offer rich and rewarding reading experiences.

Nikki Grimes’ verse memoir, *Ordinary Hazards* (Wordsong/Boys Mills, 2019), a powerfully gripping and lyrical story of survival and the power of the arts, was honored with both the Printz Award, recognizing excellence in YA literature, and the Sibert Informational Book Award.

*Frankly in Love* (Putnam, 2019) by David Yoon, a stunningly emotional title about love, identity, friendship, and family, was the YA Honor pick of the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature as well as a finalist for the Morris Award, which recognizes debut YA authors.

Another Printz honor title was the magical, exquisitely crafted Japanese fantasy *The Beast Player* (Henry Holt, 2019), written by Nahoko Uehashi and translated by Cathy Hirano, which also received a Batchelder Honor as a title representing excellence in translated works.

Laura Simeon is the young adult editor.

She desperately wants to be a warrior like the other Amazonian women. A gift to the queen from the Five Mothers, Athena, Aphrodite, Demeter, Artemis, and Hestia, Diana is different—tall but clumsy; once hale but now weak. However, outside Themyscira’s magical barrier, Diana’s agility, intelligence, strength, and compassion shine. When Themyscira is breached by mortals, Diana disobeys her mother’s command, braving the violent sea to save drowning refugees. Mistaken for a refugee herself, Diana is hustled to a camp where she witnesses the devastating effects of war and cares for the mortals. After her extraordinary abilities are recognized by a United Nations employee and his husband, who get her a student visa, Diana moves to America, where she continues to fight for the weak and finds the place where she belongs. Astutely attuned to the current social climate, the story humanely and intelligently addresses complex issues, including immigration, child trafficking, hunger, and poverty. The text and illustrations, which show brown-skinned characters with a range of skin tones and hairstyles, naturally weave in characters of different backgrounds who are not reduced to their struggles.

Will engage readers until the final battle. (Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America) (Graphic fantasy. 14-18)

*WHERE DREAMS DESCEND*  
*Angeles, Janella*  
*Wednesday Books* (464 pp.)  
$18.99 | Jun. 2, 2020  
978-1-250-20435-6  
Series: Kingdom of Cards, 1

In a world where men dominate the stage, Kallia is determined to win a magicians’ contest. Kallia is the showgirl magician star at Hellfire House, descending each night from a chandelier and inspiring awe in patrons. It’s the only home she’s known; she was left in the cursed Dire Woods as a baby. Club master Jack favors her above all others and acts as her mentor. Despite this, Kallia feels called to Glorian, the city beyond the cursed woods surrounding them, where she’s learned of a competition for magicians. Jack won’t hear of it, but when Kallia discovers he has been lying to her, she can no longer stomach staying put. She arrives in a city that’s colder and less friendly than she’d imagined and barely makes it into the competition. Soon she’s a controversial star, wowing the audience and inspiring ire in the judges in equal measure. But as her confidence grows, so does her fear of Jack’s returning and taking all of it away. When horrible things begin to befall competitors, Kallia’s caught in the middle. Glorian is awash with stunning scenery and spectacle, and Kallia enchants as a flawed and fiery lead, armed with tricks and witty banter. As the romantic tension ratchets up, so deepen the mysteries. Readers will ache for the next installment. Most characters seem to be white; Kallia is brown skinned.

A lush, captivating blend of *The Phantom of the Opera* and fresh, new magic. (Fantasy. 14-adult)
RAO SAYS THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT HAS BEEN WHITEWASHED. SHE WROTE ONE EARTH TO PLACE WORK BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND PEOPLE OF COLOR BACK AT THE CENTER

By Anjali Enjeti

In January, at the World Economic Forum annual meeting in Switzerland, the Associated Press cropped Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate out of a photograph that featured white environmentalists Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer, Isabelle Axelsson, and Loukina Tille. Anuradha Rao’s debut book, One Earth: People of Color Protecting Our Planet (Orca, April 7), isn’t intended as a response to this exclusion, but it feels like one. One Earth addresses a movement that has historically focused on the work of white people by shining a light on 20 black, Indigenous, and other “environmental defenders” of color from around the world who are spearheading innovative programs to preserve the environment. This book for young readers includes Ismail Ebrahim, who researches and saves rare and endangered wildflowers from extinction in South Africa; Ken Wù, who works to protect old-growth forests in British Columbia; and Richelle Kahui-McConnel, who filters toxins out of waters in New Zealand.

Environmentalism is an extension of Rao’s genealogy. A few thousand years ago, her ancestors lived in northern India along the banks of the Saraswati River. When it dried up, they became environmental refugees and migrated south to Goa. Her parents emigrated from southern India to Canada, where Rao was born. Rao’s Hindu culture and family history have shaped her perspective as a conservation biologist and researcher.

She talked about One Earth from her home in Vancouver, the unceded territory of the Coast Salish people.

What led you to write this book?
I have been working in the environmental field more than 20 years. At events, I’m oftentimes the only brown person in the room. I’m also one of the only people in my cultural community to have gone into this line of work. It doesn’t have to be this way. So I wanted to celebrate diverse role models in the environmental movement in a book for young people.

What is an “environmental defender”? How is this different from an activist?
Words are tricky. Activist and environmentalist can be loaded words (all words are), so I was trying to find a term that was as neutral and inclusive as possible. In the conversations I had with people, especially Indigenous people, “environmental defender” seemed to be OK.

Can you talk a little about the whitewashing of the environmental movement?
This movement has whitewashed those who are on the front lines. I could have written an entire book about Indigenous defenders. I could have even written an entire book about Indigenous defenders only in British Columbia, where I live. So many people are in a life-and-death struggle trying to preserve their cultures and traditions.
And it’s so important for young people of color who are trying to find something to do about environmental issues to see people who look like them. I explicitly addressed this in the book when I asked the defenders how their culture helps them to achieve success in a way that the mainstream white environmental movement hasn’t.

Why is it important to center the environmental work of Indigenous people?
There’s this understanding that conservation is for white people and that the people who are the stewards of the land and the waters need to be educated about conservation instead of the other way around. The defenders in the book all said this. Environmentalism is a very colonial discipline.

Identity becomes very important. Indigenous people have a deep understanding of the world around them, how to interact with it, how to respect and sustain families for generations to come. It’s not someone else’s job to tell them how to do this.

Is there an overall theme that’s common throughout these profiles?
Many of the interviewees suggested that people get out in nature. Go outside and play to see how much you can learn about what’s around you. Walk or ride your bike. Step outside and listen. Learn about native and invasive plants, find out what Indigenous territory you live on. Have a conversation with your family about plastic water bottles. Find out something you’re really passionate about and go for it. Start these conversations at home with friends and members of your community. Even an interest in exploring nature can grow into bigger things.

Anjali Enjeti is an Atlanta-based journalist whose reviews regularly appear in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. One Earth received a starred review in the Feb 1, 2020, issue.

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**DOGCHILD**

Brooks, Kevin
Candlewick (480 pp.)
$19.99 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-1-5362-0974-7

The Call of the Wild meets Mad Max in this blood-soaked, nihilistic thriller.

Brooks’ latest follows a traumatized protagonist struggling to find the right words amid copious casualty and senseless causality. The apocalypse has come and gone; the surviving world consists of two enclaves—that of the enemy Dau and the town, a walled, seaside citadel—and a no man’s land populated by wild dogs. Born to teenage parents on a wagon trail, captured and raised by a dog pack, and rehumanized by his uncle, first-person narrator Jeet has always struggled to resolve his dogchild double consciousness: His is a canine soul in a human body. Gun Sur, the town’s authoritarian Marshal, charges Jeet with recording the entirety of known history prior to a pending battle. When Chola Se, another dogchild, is abducted, delivered to the Dau, and brutalized by Pilgrim (Gun Sur’s second-in-command) upon her return, the dogchildren must untangle the Gordian knot of her ordeal, sorting out multiple murders, double- and triple-crossings, and the inconceivable contours of the looming showdown. Racial signifiers are limited to skin tone; Jeet has brown skin, and many character names evoke a South Asian feel. Jeet’s unconventional prose, lacking quotation marks, eschewing apostrophes, and employing novel compound words such as “Ime” and “weare,” eventually wears smooth. Chola Se’s gang rapes followed by a questionable consensual sex scene feel like a plot device for inflating the stakes, troubling an otherwise egalitarian tale.

Uncompromisingly brutal and black hole–dense; howls to a niche audience. (Survival thriller. 15-18)

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**SMOOTH**

Burns, Matt
Candlewick (368 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 16, 2020
978-1-5362-0438-4

Kevin’s terrible acne has survived every cream and facial scrub; next up is Accutane, a medication with a zillion side effects.

At the mandatory monthly blood tests, 15-year-old Kevin befriends Alex, a cute girl from a different school. Kevin becomes obsessed, looking forward to their monthly waiting-room chats and detaching himself from his two best friends, who have joined both the football team and a different social circle. With the first-person narration, readers are, for better or worse, trapped within the lonely teen’s mind as it circles round and round the carousel of depression. Kevin runs scenarios in his head, trying to figure out the best way to impress Alex and turn himself into
the kind of person he thinks she will like (or even love). This portrait of teen angst is well drawn but a bit overlong. Kevin wallows in his “woe is me” depths, and while that may be the point (being a teen is uncomfortable; being a teen with severe acne and depressive episodes is hell), readers may have trouble staying on Kevin's side. Kevin’s friends and family have just enough shading to hint at inner lives but not so much so that Kevin registers them as people instead of obstacles to his own happiness. It’s a tricky balancing act, and the author pulls it off. All main characters are white.

A rewarding depiction of a teen fighting isolation and depression. (Fiction. 13-17)

ADMISSION
Buxbaum, Julie
Delacorte (352 pp.)
$18.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-984893-62-8

Ripped from the headlines of the 2019 Varsity Blues admissions scandal. Seventeen-year-old Chloe Berringer is the wealthy, white daughter of Joy Fields, beloved TV sitcom star. An indifferent student, Chloe attends private school and is stunned by the revelation that her entire application was doctored. Chloe wrestles with guilt, shame, anger, brutal social media responses, and frayed family relationships following the revelation of her parents’ cheating and bribery. The intersections of race, class, and privilege are explored primarily through Chloe's relationship with her best friend, Shola, a Nigerian American girl on scholarship at the school. The chapters alternate between the present day, beginning when her mother is arrested, and the point leading up to the arrest, starting three weeks into her senior year. Knowing that there were dozens of real-life students coping with similar crimes and the deep betrayal of their trust in their parents makes Chloe's tale both heartbreaking and thought-provoking. Believable subplots focus on her love interest (a biracial Asian Indian/white boy), undocumented immigrants (through Chloe's mentoring of a young El Salvadoran boy), and the pain of drug addiction (through her older half brother). While not entirely one-dimensional, supporting characters who do not share Chloe’s racial and financial privilege sometimes seem to be present as devices to support her awakening.

Deft, page-turning, and fresh as the latest college admissions gossip. (Fiction. 13-18)

HALF LIFE
Clark, Lillian
Knopf (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 9, 2020
978-0-525-58050-8

A stressed-out high school student finds herself living the plot of a science-fiction thriller with her self-possessed clone. Sixteen-year-old Lucille Harper feels like she’s just another “privileged, straight white girl with a four-point-oh from a Mountain State.” Her sardonic inner thoughts reveal her ever present fear that she’s not good enough for anybody—not the Ivy Leagues, not the boy she likes, and not her best friend, Cass, a popular beauty (cued as black) who’s been spending her time with her new boyfriend. Plus, Lucille’s parents are getting divorced. It’s the perfect time for a shadowy corporation to offer her a clone of herself. Lucille, finally feeling good enough for somebody, figures she'll get a much-needed assistant; meanwhile, Dr. Thompson, another ambitious white woman, needs a working prototype. It takes the snarky defiance of clone Lucy to show Lucille that the consequences of her rashness could hurt a lot more people than her original self. Jumpy at first, the dual narration picks up speed when corporate human rights violations add deadly urgency to more garden-variety teen drama. Occasionally, long-winded dialogue and ’90s references make the characters seem more like adult millennials than contemporary teens, but the casual use of “allo” restores a modern sensibility.

A hopeful, sensational take on the clone morality tale told in an adept, amusing voice. (Science fiction. 15-18)

SHORT STUFF
Ed. by Constantine, Alysia
Duet (192 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-945053-89-4

Happiness and hope weave four stories into a feel-good collection. These authors skip teen troubles and tropes and, instead of heartaches, deliver four tales of romance where flirtations go right. Only happy endings are found in this set of unrelated shorts. Mixed messages and communications launch the first tale, “I Ate the Whole World To Find You,” by Tom Wilinsky and Jen Sternick, as two teen boys, an Olympic hopeful and an aspiring chef find stability with each other. Next, in “The August Sands” by Jude Sierra, two young men on the verge of college have life-defining beach encounters. Kate Fierro’s “Love in the Time of Coffee” involves two girls sipping their way toward intimacy in a series of coffee dates. The final story, Julia Ember’s fantasy “Gilded Scales,” has no distressed damsels but rather a defiant, would-be warrior who questions rigid gender roles and befriends a dragon girl.
Timely and timeless.

**THE CIRCUS ROSE**

A queer reimagining of “Snow-White and Rose-Red.”

Dark-skinned Ivory and pale-skinned Rosie (each named for her hair color) are 17-year-old twin daughters of the Circus Rose’s ringmistress. When the circus returns to their birthplace, Port’s End, Rosie’s and Ivory’s growth unfolds against a volatile backdrop that echoes contemporary politics: Recent regime and policy shifts result in aggressive behavior by the Brethren, whose church formerly occupied a position of political power. After tragedy strikes the circus, Ivory must shoulder ringmistress duties even as she attempts to discover who—or what—is behind the devastation. The present-tense, first-person narrative alternates between Rosie’s dreamy verse and Ivory’s looping prose as the sisters navigate new romances, professional challenges, and oppressive religious fanaticism on tour. Rosie is attracted to women but prefers the mysterious Bear above all while Ivory’s understanding of her own sexuality expands when she meets Tam, a black-haired, olive-skinned Fey magician who is “neither male nor female, like all Fey.” Tam’s pronouns, fe/fer/fers, are seamlessly integrated into the text. The twins have different fathers: Ivory’s is brown skinned while Rosie’s father is pale. The well-constructed fantasy world evokes elements of northern Europe and the United States during the Industrial Revolution, placing fluid Fey society and magic in an uneasy truce with established human monarchies and technologies. This creative exploration of chosen family, self-knowledge, love, and the tension between opposites is both timely and timeless.

**Dazzling.** *(Fantasy. 14-18)*

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**POISONED WATER**

*How the Citizens of Flint, Michigan, Fought for Their Lives and Warned the Nation*

*Cooper, Candy J. with Aronson, Marc*

Bloomsbury (304 pp.)

$18.99 | May 19, 2020

978-1-5476-0232-2

Foregrounding the intergenerational activism of community members, this work takes a long view of the Flint water crisis as an indicator of U.S. environmental struggles.

The authors begin by highlighting the wisdom of activists, pastor, and lifelong Flint resident Elder Sarah Bailey, who points to the importance of sharing Flint’s story while expressing caution about the impact of outsiders coming to study and report on the water crisis. The context is set through an overview of Flint’s long history, from its beginnings as a fur trading settlement following land dispossession of Ojibwa citizens to its racially segregated heyday as General Motors’ “Vehicle City” up until the dwindling tax revenues of postwar deindustrialization and the organized abandonment of white flight left a heavy burden on the city. The book emphasizes that residents collectively and consistently levied demands against the significant harm caused by enforced austerity, legacies of socio-economic segregation, and environmental negligence long before the highly visible national coverage beginning in 2015. In-depth research and interviews with well-known leaders and ordinary citizens, including many young people, augmented by ample photographs, bring home the tragic outcomes for Flint residents of environmental injustice and the decay of public infrastructure. Readers will understand how this impact will continue to be felt disproportionately by people of color and the poor unless we transform how we govern society.

**A careful, conscious encapsulation of a consequential U.S. frontier for renewed environmental justice activism. (Nonfiction. 12-18)**

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**SEASONS OF THE STORM**

*Cosimano, Elle*

HarperTeen (480 pp.)

$17.99 | Jun. 23, 2020

978-0-06-285424-7

Seasons are meant to hunt and destroy each other, but what happens when two Seasons fall in love?

Jack is a Winter. With the help of his Handler, he hunts down the Autumn who comes before him, kills her, and runs from the Spring who comes next—until she kills him in turn. This cycle maintains the seasons and the weather, which is why Seasons are regulated: kept to their own territories when out in the world and to their own sections of the compound they call home. But since the beginning, Jack has sought out gaps in the system, which may be why he finds himself drawn to Fleur, the Spring tasked with killing him. Monitored both
EARTH DAY:
A TIME TO CELEBRATE?

By Laura Simeon

What strikes me most when I listen to teens talking about the environment is the degree of fear and anxiety they express. While Earth Day is a time for focusing on environmental education and protection, it is sadly ironic that at a time when more young people than ever have little connection to or direct knowledge of the natural world, they are also terrified for its future in a way that is unprecedented.

As a recent Washington Post article reports, “Eco-anxiety” or ‘climate depression’ is playing out in real terms among young people, sometimes in extreme ways.” An Alabama teen expressed her generation’s fears succinctly: “It’s like, the ice caps are melting and my hypothetical children will never see them, but also I have a calculus test tomorrow.”

There is an abundance of dystopian environmental disaster fiction for teens but relatively little about enjoying the natural world. For a generation raised in front of screens, often with little unstructured time and lots of fear about unsupervised outdoor play, this is perhaps not surprising—but it is very sad. The mental and physical benefits of time spent in nature are well documented. And the sense of belonging that comes from knowing a natural space intimately is priceless.

A desire to protect the environment that emerges from a deep love for and connection with nature feels qualitatively different from sheer terror for one’s own survival. Severe anxiety can easily tip over into a sense of hopeless paralysis—whereas love can motivate us to action. I’m hoping to see more books that focus on the pleasures of the natural world, especially those featuring teens of color who are often written out of rural stories.

Joseph Bruchac (Nulhegan Abenaki) wrote Found (7th Generation, Jan. 28), in which Nick, an Abenaki teen who is on his way to work at a First Nations summer youth nature camp, encounters a murderous stranger on a train who ends up chasing him through the wilderness. In this taut thriller, Nick puts his knowledge of natural history and outdoor survival to use as he attempts to elude his pursuer. His ingenuity, appreciation of the beauty of the natural world, and connection to the grandparents who taught him critical skills add texture and interest to the story.

The final volume in Mildred Taylor’s multigenerational Logan family saga, All the Days Past, All the Days To Come (Viking, Jan. 7), beautifully expresses the clear sense of being grounded in the land that is a hallmark of her work. The African American family whose forefather struggled in post–Civil War Mississippi to purchase land where he could put down roots has, several generations later, succeeded in doing just that. Even though by the 1960s many younger Logans have moved north, their land in Mississippi—every inch of it familiar and comforting—remains their anchor.

Land of Fences (Text, 2019), which concludes the Wilder Trilogy by Mark Smith, might seem like a strange choice, focusing as it does on the aftermath of a virus pandemic that sweeps across Australia. However, Smith contrasts the ugliness of human actions—enslavement of refugees, among them—with the abundant beauty of the land and sea. As the story opens, Finn, a white Australian boy with intimate knowledge of the natural world, and Kas, the Afghani girl he loves, are reveling in a paradise nearly devoid of people—an interlude soon to be shattered.

Notes From My Captivity by Kathy Park (Katherine Tegen/ HarperCollins, 2018) perfectly captures the mystical, spiritual, healing qualities of nature. When, following the death of her stepfather and the rest of their party, a white American teen is held captive by an eccentric Siberian family living off the land, it seems like a recipe for tragedy. However, the story is a surprisingly gentle one that leaves an indelible mark on readers who follow suburban Adrienne’s adjustment to a life based on the rhythms of the seasons and her growing appreciation for the natural beauty that surrounds her.

Emily France’s Zen and Gone (2018) is a love letter to the Rocky Mountains. City boy Oliver meets nature-loving Essa when he leaves Chicago to stay with his aunt in Boulder. He experiences culture shock in this laid-back, outdoorsy setting, but the two white teens develop a relationship that is mutually supportive and healing, thanks in part to the mountains, the wilderness survival games Essa plays with her friends, and the peaceful gardens at the zendo where she introduces him to meditation. Family crises and mental health struggles work out against this majestic backdrop.
by technology and the magical creatures controlled by Chro-
nos and Gaia—the beings responsible for the Seasons—as well
as watched over by their own skeptical Handlers, Jack and
Fleur nevertheless take a risk that could destroy the delicate
balance in their lives and in the world. Melding high-tech bun-
kers in London and secretive road trips across the U.S. with
mythology and magic, Cosimano tells a story of the bonds of
friendship and the power of hope for the future. Though the
large cast is sometimes cumbersome, the themes of friend-
ship despite differences and self-sacrifice nevertheless shine
through. Jack and Fleur seem to be white while a secondary
character is cued as Latinx.

A solid urban fantasy with a novel premise. (Fantasy. 14-18)

JUSTICE
Craig, Kymbali
West 44 Books (96 pp.)
$19.95 | Jun. 1, 2020
978-1-583-8423-7

An African American teen learns tough lessons about fairness.
Justice begins his day thinking about the makeup test he faces following a
failed English exam. He wants to keep this from his mother, knowing she would
be upset. As is stands, she seems irritated and worried, and he tries to reassure her that he is carefull in his actions. He thinks about his friend Eric’s ease with everyone, including the young ladies. Justice is interested in one special girl, Ebony, a biracial
(Japanese and black) teen in his English class—which also happens to be his favorite, taught by a teacher he likes. In a school full of African American teens, Ms. Clarendon, a white woman from Scandinavia, is open, popular, and encouraging. Justice is devastated when he sees Ebony taking something from Ms.
Clarendon’s purse but even more upset when Ms. Clarendon accuses him of being the thief. The challenge of standing up for himself while attempting to help a girl he cares for gives Justice a powerful lesson in life's realities for a young man of color.

This text for reluctant readers shows how issues of fairness for African American teens often happen in everyday places such as school and home. The narrative has little nuance but is full of the concerns that affect many black teens and will provide a good basis for discussion.

An accessible story for examining important issues. (Fiction. 12-15)

YOU DON’T HAVE TO DIE IN THE END
Daher, Anita
Yellow Dog (192 pp.)
$11.95 paper | Apr. 30, 2020
978-1-77337-043-9

A juvenile offender is sent to a western Canadian ranch rehabilitation
program.
Eugenia Grimm is 16 and a high school dropout. Her depressed father
died by suicide when she was 8, her mother walked out when she was 14, and she lives with her eldest brother, Darcy, and his young family. Her other brother, Jackson, is an alcoholic ne'er-do-well. Unfortunately, Eugenia seems to be following in his footsteps. After a young woman spits on Eugenia’s best friend, Luda, and Eugenia attacks her, she is given the chance to attend an alternative program on a ranch rather than being incarcer-
ated. Eugenia has to learn how to work with the wild horses as well as attend therapy sessions. Trust, respect for others (both human and equine), and cooperation with staff come hard as the teens struggle with their individual issues. All are scarred—by fear, mental health issues, and abandonment—but are working toward their visions of a better life. A few hints at heterosexual romance, disappointment in Luda’s friendship, and some dangerous moments with a horse round out the action, but this first-person narrative tells too much and shows too little. Eugenia experiences significant emotional turnaround in an unrealistically short time, and she and other characters never fully come to life. The characters present white except for Indigenous ranch guide Hayden, who is Nisga’a; Luda is queer and nonbinary.

A heavy-handed story about dysfunctional families. (Fiction.
14-18)

DON’T ASK ME WHERE I’M FROM
De Leon, Jennifer
Caitlyn Dlouhy/Atheneum (336 pp.)
$18.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-5344-3824-8

An inner-city Boston student is accepted into a high school desegrega-
tion program.
Liliana’s dad’s absence has been occupying her mind ever since he dis-
appeared at the end of summer. This isn’t the first time he has
gone away, but this time feels different: Her mom keeps having
hushed, frantic phone conversations and won’t tell her where he is. Even more stress is added to Liliana’s life when she is pulled out of class by the vice principal and told that her acceptance into the Metropolitan Council for Education Opportunity (METCO) program means she’ll be commuting 20 miles to a predominantly white school in the suburbs. When she arrives at
Westburg High, Liliana is surprised to see some other METCO students, like her peer mentor, Genesis, or the basketball team’s star, Rayshaw, completely immersed in the school’s academic and cultural activities. After finding out the truth about her dad’s absence, Liliana begins to analyze her own identity and biases in order to survive and excel at Westburg. While the aspiring young writer theme feels tired at times, De Leon’s debut deals tactfully with the tensions that race relations and the stress of keeping family secrets can bring on teenagers, producing an honest and empathetic portrayal. Liliana’s mother is from El Salvador and her father’s from Guatemala.

A thought-provoking tale about navigating race and immigration issues. (Fiction. 14-18)

THE BOY WHO STEALS HOUSES

Drews, C.G.
Orchard/Hachette UK (368 pp.)
$11.99 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-4083-4992-2

A bleak, poignant story about families: those you’re born with, those you find, and those you try to steal. Sammy Lou, only 15, and his autistic older brother, Avery, are homeless, scraping by on Avery’s precarious earnings and whatever Sammy can steal. Until he breaks into the De Lainey house, the polar opposite of empty: one dad, seven kids, and all their friends. Sammy hides in the effervescent chaos, aided by the gorgeous, ferocious, talented Moxie…until his past catches up with him. Australian author Drews leans hard on the pathos, burdening undersized Sammy (cued as white) with a runaway mother, a brutal criminal father, an abusive aunt, constant hunger, illness, and injury; but also an explosively violent temper and toxic co-dependency with Avery. Lush prose with distracting lapses into idiosyncratic formatting reveals a lonely, self-loathing teen yearning to belong. Avery is a complicated foil; his autism presents matter-of-factly, neither blamed for nor excusing his poor choices. Other characters are less well drawn; Moxie, with her olive skin and frizzy “chocolate hair,” may have her own goals but serves mostly as a vehicle for Sammy’s dreams; her brothers exist to be charmingly quirky; and every adult (e.g., Tabby’s sister, her rival, and their best friends) confess their sides of the story directly to readers. Ratcheting up the tension are secrets of their own along with their unreliable versions of Tabby and Mark’s relationship, including their possible sexual indiscretions and jealousy. But is the judgment greater because Tabby is female? As even complete strangers assess her culpability, Flynn explores slut-shaming culture and unrealistic expectations forced upon teenage girls in this edgy psychological thriller, perfect for fans of We Were Liars and One of Us It Lying. All characters are white.

Intense and thought-provoking. (Thriller. 14-18)

I KILLED ZOE SPANOS

Frick, Kit
McElderry (384 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-5344-4970-1

Seventeen-year-old Anna Cicconi finds herself in the middle of a mystery when she takes a summer nanny job in the swanky Hamptons enclave of Heron Hills. Frick begins her story at the end. Well, sort of. August in the Hamptons signals the turning of the leaves and sees the grisly discovery of 19-year-old Zoe Spanos’ body. Zoe disappeared on New Year’s Eve, and Anna, who happens to strongly resemble her, has confessed to her murder. However, Martina Green, who runs the podcast Missing Zoe, doesn’t believe Anna did it and attempts to find out what really happened. Flash back to June: Hard-partying recent high school grad Anna sees her new job caring for Tom and Emilia Bellamy’s 8-year-old daughter as a fresh start. As one sun-drenched day melts into the next, Anna is drawn to Windemere, the neighboring Talbots’ looming, Gothic-style home, and to
the brooding, mysterious Caden Talbot. But Anna can’t shake a feeling of déjà vu, and she’s having impossible memories that intertwine her life with Zoe’s. Frick easily juggles multiple narratives, and readers will enjoy connecting the dots of her cleverly plotted thriller inspired by Daphne du Maurier’s classic Rebecca. Anna and Zoe are white; the supporting cast includes biracial characters Martina (Latinx/white) and Caden (black/white). Caden discusses grappling with being raised by white adoptive parents, facing racialized suspicion as Zoe’s boyfriend, and feeling marginalized at Yale.

An atmospheric and creepy page-turner. (Thriller 14-adult)

LOBIZONA
Garber, Romina
Wednesday Books (400 pp.)
$18.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-250-23912-9
Series: Wolves of No World, 1

An Argentinian-folklore–inspired fantasy. As undocumented immigrants from Argentina, Manuela Azul and her mother fear being deported back to their homeland, where the criminal associates who killed Manu’s father could find them. Because of her unique eyes—her irises are yellow suns and her pupils silver stars—she is confined in their tiny Miami apartment most of the time, wearing mirrored sunglasses on the rare occasions when she goes out. But when a loved one is attacked and her mother is taken by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the young woman goes in search of answers and discovers that the world of the lobizones—Argentinian werewolves—exists. Infiltrating a magical school for werewolves and witches, she begins to uncover family secrets and the truth of her existence. Garber, who authored the Zodiac series under the pen name Romina Russell, has crafted a complex fantasy system in this series opener. Despite some missteps—plot twists that readers will see coming and italicized word-for-word English translations of Spanish that grow tiresome—this novel is filled with timely topics and nuanced characterization. Touching upon undocumented immigrants, rigid gender roles, sexuality, and mixed-race identity, its themes run deep. Refreshingly, the book also talks openly and in depth about menstruation, which is still fairly uncommon in YA literature. The entire cast is Argentinian or Latinx, with a range of skin tones.

This genre-bending mashup will win over fans of swoon-y, suspenseful paranormal dramas. (author’s note) (Paranormal romance. 14-18)

LITTLE CREEPING THINGS
Ichaso, Chelsea
Sourcebooks Fire (356 pp.)
978-1-72821-052-0

Cass is obsessed with figuring out who murdered her worst bully—because they followed her very own plan. Cass is known for having survived a fire as a child. Her brother pulled her out—but her friend Sara wasn’t so lucky. Now, she’s tormented by Melody, Sara’s cousin. Cass is called “Fire Girl” and treated as a loose cannon; only her best friend, Gideon, views her without stigma. One night at a party, Cass gets drunk and details how she’d kill Melody, outlining the perfect murder plot. When Melody and the notebook containing Cass’ plans are missing, Cass becomes paranoid and frantic. She receives threatening texts but daren’t tell the police in case they find out about her notebook. Her need to find the murderer distances her from Gideon as she hides information from him, too afraid he’ll start seeing her like everyone else does. She careens into her own reckless investigation, no longer able to draw a clear line between the girl she once knew herself to be and the vengeful Fire Girl she’s perhaps been all along. Cass’ feverish journey becomes repetitive as she hammers on the same suspects with little success. Rather than being led along a tightly drawn line of suspense, it feels like running full force into walls. However, the reveal on the other side is both well earned and eerie. All major characters are white.

An unnerving but uneven thriller. (Fiction. 14-18)

THE DARK TIDE
Jatinska, Alicia
Sourcebooks Fire (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-7282-0998-2

Once a year in the city-island of Caldella, the powerful Witch Queen leaves her Water Palace to find her true love, whom she must drown to appease the dark tide of the ever hungry ocean. Thomas Lin is the only boy who’s ever escaped—by convincing the last Witch Queen to drown herself instead. Ever since then, her sister, Eva, who is the new Witch Queen, has been unable to appease the dark tide—she’s felt nothing for the boys she’s sacrificed. When Thomas is chosen a second time, Lina, a town girl with a crush, decides to rescue Thomas from the Water Palace and volunteer as sacrifice to make sure both Thomas and her own brother stay safe. As Lina and Eva spend more time together, they realize that they have a surprising amount in common: their love for their siblings, their desperation to change the sacrificial system, and their desire for one another. The close third-person narration is focalized alternately through Lina and Eva, and although Lina’s perspective provides greater depth, the narrative voice for
THE IDEALISM OF STUDENT ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS ANIMATES THE AUTHOR’S NEW NOVEL, WE DIDN’T ASK FOR THIS
By Omar L. Gallaga

MEXICO CITY–BORN YA author Adi Alsaid realizes that the central character of his new novel, We Didn’t Ask for This (Inkyard Press, April 7), will remind readers of a very famous environmental activist: Sweden’s 17-year-old Greta Thunberg. This story of a “lock-in” at an international school that gets hijacked by a small group of protesters features a headstrong protagonist who becomes a polarizing figure among parents, school board members, and even fellow students.

But the author says he didn’t hear about Thunberg’s story until he was midway through his second draft of the novel. “It’s amazing; I feel like I was thinking of the idea as she was living it and implementing it,” he says.

The book jumps among a sizable cast of diverse, multinational student characters who are living through the ramifications after Marisa Cuevas and a group of other students chain themselves to the school entrances to demand more sustainable environmental policies. Alsaid recently spoke with Kirkus about the book.

Was there a specific news story or event in your life that sparked the idea for the book?
I love the book Bel Canto, and I’ve been trying to think of writing my own version of that. The very initial inspiration is “I want to write a book where the kids are all stuck in one place,” the way that all the characters in Bel Canto are stuck in one place. And I want to kind of dip in, even if briefly, to the POV of secondary characters and just do this ensemble book. And then I had the idea that something like The Breakfast Club would go very well with the idea of Bel Canto.

Did you create the entire list of Marisa’s demands, all 30 of them?
I started to. I never had like an actual list of 30. The fact that it’s only 30 was actually something that happened in later drafts. It was a fabulous amount of demands. And in my mind, they were just kind of like an endless list.

For the school in the book, Central International School, you don’t really name a country or a specific location. The physical layout and the idea of the international school is based on the international school I attended growing up in Mexico City. But the reason I didn’t set it in a specific place is because climate change is a global issue. I wanted it to feel like this could be happening everywhere. Because it is happening everywhere.

All the kids in the book, no matter where they’re from or their background, are coming from a place of wealth and privilege. Did you worry about making your characters more sympathetic or more identifiable to a wider audience?
I think kids are kids. And I think when you're writing about kids that are privileged, I would say a way of making them sympathetic is to acknowledge it. They themselves are acknowledging that privilege. It just makes it easier for everyone to get on the same page.

In the acknowledgements, you thank your sensitivity readers. Were they important to have with so many different characters of different nationalities in the book? Absolutely. We had a couple of sensitivity readers, both reading for specific characters that match their backgrounds and then also in general, in case they saw anything that needed to be flagged. I am a male and straight, and I’m writing a female queer Muslim character. And so I knew that I had to tread carefully there and make sure that I’m representing without damaging and without presenting any stereotypes.

Also in the acknowledgments, you use the phrase, “kids fighting for change in a way we adults fail to.” What is it that that young people have that older people don’t in terms of activism?

It’s absolutely idealism. Sometimes what I feel like as an adult is that maybe the idealism of my youth is gone. But I can look to teens to remember that I can still fight for the things I believe.

Omar L. Gallaga is a technology, culture, and entertainment writer who has written for NPR, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. We Didn’t Ask for This received a starred review in the Dec. 1, 2020, issue.

each is removed, with more telling than showing. Characters are racially ambiguous but often implied through skin tone to be non-white. Diverse sexualities and gender expressions are also implied, but heteroromanticism is disappointingly the default.

Exciting concept; underwhelming execution. (Fantasy. 16-18)

MAISON ROUGE
Memories of a Childhood in War
Juma, Liliane Leila
Tradewind Books (118 pp.)
$10.95 paper | Jun. 20, 2020
978-1-926890-30-2

Congolese Canadian author and storyteller Juma presents her memoir of fleeing armed conflict as a teen in the 1990s.

Her story begins with reminiscences about happier days in her multicultural, multifaith border town of Uvira in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where an abundance of nature, feasts, friendship, and community life prevailed. Slowly, events unfold—the arrival of refugees from Burundi and Rwanda, a civil war in Congo—climaxing with a harrowing hijacking and an escape via a perilous mountain trail. Juma, her mother, and siblings eventually make it to a United Nations refugee camp in Tanzania and then to Québec. The story builds momentum while maintaining key individuals’ storylines. Neither boastfulness nor bitterness shadow Juma’s narrative as she describes her family’s comfortable prewar status and subsequent losses. In a dignified tone she narrates her personal grief—a friend taken as a child soldier, the death of her beloved father, and the bombing of her childhood home, Maison Rouge. This is no tragedy porn, however. Juma’s book serves, above all, as a reminder that refugees, though uprooted, have enduring cultural and spiritual roots. This slim volume is appealing for its rich descriptions of everyday social life and effortless weaving in of culture through the use of Baswahili words from the author’s native language and faith tradition.

A thoughtful, moving story of loss and triumph. (author’s note, introduction, map) (Memoir. 13-adult)

AURORA BURNING
Kaufman, Amie & Kristoff, Jay
Knopf (512 pp.)
$18.99 | May 5, 2020
978-1-328-2092-6
Series: Aurora Cycle, 2

Aurora Legion Squad 312 is back in this sequel to Aurora Rising (2019), and this time they’re on the run from...pretty much everyone in the galaxy.

Having been framed for the massacre at the end of the first book, the remaining members of Squad 312
of various humanoid races, led by Tyler Jones, a blond-haired, blue-eyed human, now have a bounty on their heads. Besides staying alive, the squad’s main mission is keeping their stowaway, Aurora Jie-Lin O’Malley, safe so she can learn to harness her supernatural powers and fulfill her destiny. She may be the one person who can stop the evil race of Ra’haam from destroying the galaxy. They are aided only by a cache of objects mysteriously planted in a safe box years before they even met. Their greatest obstacle, however, is the Unbroken—a warrior faction of the Syldrathi race who threaten a galaxywide war. As with many sophomore installments, this volume is heavy on exposition and plot development but still features nonstop action, romance, and a few satisfying surprises. Darker in tone and more violent than the first, there is less of the charming humor that characterized the previous book but still lots of feels. Warning: the cliffhanger ending may prove extremely frustrating for impatient readers. As before, the cast is diverse in skin tone.

A thrilling space epic that will fly off the shelves. (Science fiction. 14-18)

This workbook for teens suffering from anxiety offers lessons, examples, and exercises.

Ten chapters instruct readers in rewiring their brains in various ways to reduce or eliminate the limitations imposed by symptoms of anxiety on daily life. The chapters address self-denigrating thoughts, staying in the present moment, coping with emotional pain, developing resilience, recognizing negative biases, handling intense emotions, moving past procrastination and avoidance, developing confidence, and consolidating gains over the long term. Readers are encouraged to keep a training journal as they work through the book, and free worksheets available for download online are referenced as well. An explanation of basic brain hardware and functions forms the introductory lesson, and the first exercise asks readers to imagine who they might be without anxiety in order to motivate them to do the work required of them in the training program. Chapters begin with a scenario in which two teens face the same situation and react differently—one with anxiety, one without. After an analysis of the real effects of the anxious symptoms, related exercises aim to decrease the power of these behaviors. The scenarios are realistic and relatable, and the analyses are logical and clear. The exercises are straightforward, though some require determination to implement, as when readers are asked to conjure physical symptoms intentionally.

Readers will learn how symptoms of anxiety stem from useful bodily responses gone awry as well as many useful thoughts and actions to interrupt their anxiety.

Practical, challenging, informative—positively worthwhile. (references) (Nonfiction. 14-18)

The last dwarf in existence forms unlikely friendships while in search of a lost city.

She Dwarf has been lonely since the death of her heroic mother and longs to find the mysterious Dammerung, home of other dwarves like her. During her first time in the “Big World,” She Dwarf proves her dominance over showboating Hack Battler in a beard challenge (She Dwarf’s beard is long and luxuriant), gets duped by a leprechaun, and fights a wolf-bat-dragon creature. Stubborn and determined, She Dwarf continues her quest with none other than Hack Battler, who, disgraced by his defeat, is hoping to learn from She Dwarf. Their journey takes them to an abandoned dwarven outpost, an oracle, and a relaxing bathhouse. Along the way they meet Drift, an elven assassin, a monster with bears for hands, and many more interesting individuals. In the end, She Dwarf has to confront the truth about what happened to her people and make a difficult decision. In this action-packed, fast-paced graphic novel, readers will feel the energy in every detailed panel. At times the pacing feels too rushed, possibly causing confusion and missing the opportunity to further explore She Dwarf’s surroundings. The bright colors pair well with the lighthearted tone of this adventure but don’t detract from the emotional moments. Most characters with natural human skin tones appear white; Drift is black.

A fun, heartwarming questing story. (Graphic fantasy. 14-18)

A sullen, rock-music–loving Quebec teen embarks on a tumultuous summer filled with humor and horror.

In the summer of 1994, Elodie reluctantly heads off to work as a camp counselor. Upon arrival, she meets the disheveled, strangely behaving camp chief, whom she finds creepy. Elodie is assigned
as the monitor in charge of a group of redheaded girls who are notoriously hard to control. Over time she unexpectedly forms bonds with her lively campers and develops a close friendship with Catherine, another monitor. Things start looking up for Elodie, but confusion ensues as Elodie and Catherine develop feelings for each other that are more than platonic. Their closeness makes them a target for frequent homophobic slurs that are never unpacked. Another major issue is Elodie’s growing suspicion of the camp chief, especially in connection to the legend of the spirit rumored to haunt the campgrounds. Lenoir’s lively language and dialogue combined with eye-catching, detailed, full-color illustrations make for a captivating page-turner. While the fantasy aspect feels underdeveloped with an anticlimactic resolution, the relationships formed and the growth of the campers make up for this. Most characters are white, although there is one black secondary character, camp counselor Magalie. Magalie’s characterization unfortunately evokes negative tropes of the sassy, angry black woman; a scene in which white campers touch and comment on her hair lacks sufficient context.

An entertaining story let down by stereotypical portrayals. (Graphic fantasy. 14-18)

**YOU AND ME AND MISERY**
Louise Charles, Rayel
West 44 Books (200 pp.)
$19.95 paper | Jun. 1, 2020
978-1-5383-8278-3

A boy hoping for a better future and a girl who can’t see her own find one another.

Gin and Johnny are high school juniors struggling through life with little consideration for their futures. Gin, suddenly dumped by the first girl she’s ever dated, is sadder than ever, as she still grieves for her dead mother and wonders whether her mom would have loved her if she’d known she was gay. Johnny, who struggles with bulimia, has little respite from life at school (where he is laughed at) or home (where he lives in fear of his abusive father) unless he is in his secret hideaway. Neither can see through their own problems long enough to help the other, but they find themselves becoming friends after Gin discovers Johnny’s hiding place. Though they grow closer, Gin and Johnny aren’t sure if they can trust one another with their closely guarded secrets. But the weekend of Johnny’s birthday, things take a turn for the worse, and they realize just how much they mean to one another. Told in alternating perspectives, the author deftly details the suffering and sadness that Gin and Johnny live through. Readers will appreciate the simple, yet carefully chosen words that show the realistic, and occasionally raw, feelings of two teens wading through uncertainty. The short text and quick-paced storyline make for an engaging novel. Gin is cued as black and Johnny as white.

An emotional, realistic tale for reluctant readers. (Verse novel. 13-18)

**FRACTURED TIDE**
Lutz, Leslie
Blink (336 pp.)
$18.99 | May 5, 2020
978-0-310-77010-7

A group of teens are marooned on a creepy deserted island in Lutz’s heart-pounding debut.

Diving is in 17-year-old Tasia “Sia” Gianopoulos’ blood. Sia’s Yiayia (grandmother) spent much of her youth free diving in the waters off Kalymnos, Greece, and now Sia helps her mother lead diving trips in the Florida Keys. She has a bad feeling about diving the wreck of the USS *Andrews*, but since her father’s incarceration for murder they desperately need the money. Sure enough, a client dies, and when a nearby charter, chock full of science students, arrives to help, they’re attacked by a giant tentacled creature. Soon after, Sia wakes on an island that shouldn’t exist along with her 7-year-old brother, Felix; her crush, Ben, whom she met right before the attack; and his ex-girlfriend, Steph. Simple survival is hard enough without the creature that attacked them lurking right offshore, and a series of disturbing events leads to the island’s mysterious heart and a shocking revelation. Lutz strikes the perfect balance of realistic and uncanny, and Sia’s dive sequences, in particular, are seriously spooky. While this type of thing has been done before, Lutz does it so darn well that readers won’t mind, and the choice to tell the story via Sia’s letters to her father adds poignance. Sia’s family is Greek American, Ben is cued as black, and Steph is white.

An escapist thriller that will reel readers right in. (Science fiction thriller. 13-18)

**IMAGINARY BORDERS**
Martinez, Xiuhtezcatl
Penguin Workshop (64 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-593-09413-6
Series: Pocket Change Collective

Indigenous youth climate change activist and musician Martinez (Mexica) reimagines environmentalism for a new generation.

The many facts presented in this slim volume are enhanced with details of his personal story, including growing up in Boulder, Colorado, and being involved with environmental activism from early childhood. Martinez argues that climate change is an urgent issue that disproportionately impacts communities of color like his own. He also traces the political history of climate change rhetoric, pointing out that it was once a bipartisan issue before fossil fuel and fracking companies and wealthy lobbyists stymied conversations by exerting pressure on Republican politicians. He points out that all too often members of both major political parties keep silent,
Rich in historical detail and inspired by a true story.

REBEL SPY
Rossi, Veronica
Delacorte (968 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 23, 2020
978-1-5247-7122-5

A riveting read. (author’s note)

HISTORICAL FICTION

WHEN YOU GET THE CHANCE
Ryan, Tom & Stevenson, Robin
Running Press Kids (272 pp.)
$17.99 | May 5, 2020
978-0-7624-9500-9

Teenage cousins Talia and Mark confront family drama and relationship struggles when they end up on an unplanned road trip to Toronto Pride.

Mark and Talia haven’t seen each other since they were about 10, but when their grandfather dies unexpectedly, they end up spending a week together in their family’s summer cottage in Muskoka, Ontario. Talia is preoccupied with her rocky romance with Erin, who is nonbinary, while Mark just wants to meet cute guys and ignore the boyfriend he is stringing along back home. The flimsy plot is secondary to the growth of Talia and Mark, who are both presumed white and identify as queer and gay, respectively. They seem caught between a queer history that they don’t quite understand (what does it mean to be a butch, anyway?) and a queer future that they are trying to create (is the taboo against outing still relevant if being queer is no big deal?). Ultimately, this story captures a coming-of-age moment in two

A move calculated to increase short-term profit while courting long-term financial ruin. Using his own experience as an intersectional, socially aware hip-hop artist, Martinez concludes the book with a call to action, encouraging his generation to use nontraditional, artistic approaches to creating change. This beautifully argued book is packed with facts, seamlessly weaving together the author’s personal experiences with well-researched observations of politics, economics, and history. Martinez’s language is clear and decisive, and his voice is intimate, bold, and inspiring, all of which make the book impossible to put down.

A hopeful, well-argued book on climate change written in a refreshing new voice. (Nonfiction. 14-18)

A SONG BELOW WATER
Morrow, Bethany C.
Tor Teen (288 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-250-31532-8

Rich in historical detail and inspired by a true story, daring and riveting.

HISTORICAL FICTION

Two young women literally and figuratively embody #BlackGirlMagic.

Sixteen and with deep brown skin, Tavia is a siren who uses American Sign Language to push against the mesmerizing call that burns like a fire in her throat and could mean being silenced forever if it is released. Plagued with mysterious body ailments and no knowledge of her biological heritage to inform a diagnosis, light-brown-skinned 16-year-old Effie, Tavia’s sister-by-choice, is haunted by survivor’s guilt after a traumatic childhood incident. Portland, Oregon, provides a memorable setting for Morrow’s solid and intentional unpacking of myths around black people and their aversion to water activities through their stories. Chapters alternating first-person narration between the two protagonists set up Tavia to confront family drama and relationsh...

MY FAIR LADY IS A SPY

Two teenage cousins Tavia and Mark struggle when they end up on an unplanned road trip to Toronto Pride. A day of wrecking turns into a thunderous and violent night in which another ship sinks and a young woman drowns, giving Frannie an opportunity to flee. Frannie assumes the petticoats, gown, and life of the late Miss Emmeline Coates and boards the Ambrosia, tricking the crew into bringing her to New York. Little does she know that her subterfuge would lead to a new life of wealth and luxury, espionage and danger. Convinced by her reading of Thomas Paine’s Common Sense while sailing to Manhattan, the heart of the American Revolution, Frannie becomes a spy for the patriots. As a lady with access to some of the crown’s highest officers, Frannie gathers a wealth of information and passes it along to George Washington’s network. Endangering her freedom, life, and reputation by serving as an asset for the patriots, Frannie risks it all. Rich in historical detail and inspired by a true story, daring and courageous Frannie, code name “355,” does her bit for the American Revolution. Frannie is white, her mother was an immigrant from Spain, and she is portrayed as a supporter of abolition.

A riveting read. (author’s note) (Historical fiction. 12-17)
young people’s lives as they begin to figure out where they fit in the world. Mark confronts his entitlement while Talia begins to form her own identity independent of her partner and family. This book is packed full of teaching moments, and while some feel tedious, others perfectly capture the frustration of, for example, explaining “they/them” pronouns yet again.

A thoughtful meditation on being a young, white, queer person today. (acknowledgements) (Fiction. 14-18)

YOU DON’T LIVE HERE
Schneider, Robyn
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins
(368 pp.) $18.99 | Jun. 2. 2020
978-0-06-256811-3

Sixteen-year-old Sasha’s world is upended when her single mother is killed in an earthquake.

After surviving a 6.0 San Bernardino earthquake, Sasha must go live with her maternal grandparents in Orange County, California. She hibernates for three months before emerging to begin 11th grade. Severely bullied in middle school, her coping strategy thus far has been to hide behind her camera as a yearbook photographer. Unfortunately, Sasha’s ambitious and controlling grandmother refuses to let her join the yearbook team or art club at her new school and instead insists she participate in mock trial, which she loathes. Wanting to please her grandparents, Sasha caves. She makes some new and cool popular friends via her grandparents’ country club, but events at a party soon clarify their untrustworthiness. The interesting twist to the perennial teen themes of fitting in, self-discovery, and truth-telling is that Sasha is bisexual. Her love interest is art club president Lily, despite her grandparents’ desire that she date golden boy Cole.

The traumas of grief and earthquake survival take a backseat to the more pedestrian anxieties of what club to join and which friends and romantic interests to claim. The first-person narrative is plodding; Sasha agonizes for many chapters about the same issues. For teen readers who are slowly uncovering their own truths, the pace might feel appropriate. Most main characters are white; Lily is Chinese American.

While not without faults, a tale of survival and rebuilding. (Fiction. 13-18)

INFLUENCE
Shepard, Sara & Buckingham, Lilia
Delacorte (368 pp.) $17.99 | Jun. 30, 2020
978-0-593-12153-5

Welcome to the glamorous—and cutthroat—world of social media influencers.

Sixteen-year-old newbie Delilah Rollins became a minor celebrity after her rescue of a puppy from a burning shed was caught on video and went viral. When she’s invited by actress Jasmine Walters-Diaz to an influencer party at a fancy Los Angeles hotel, she’s thrilled. Jasmine introduces Delilah to influencer and aspiring actress Fiona Jacobs, and Fiona’s boyfriend warns Delilah away from the blonde and supposedly toxic Scarlet Leigh. Delilah also has a meet-cute with a green-eyed guy who turns out to be none other than Scarlet’s beau, YouTube star Jack Dono. Cue the melodrama. When someone is murdered, Delilah vows to root out the killer in their midst. Via alternating narratives, the authors divvy up a handful of serious issues among the main cast, including bullying, sexuality, and mental illness, and Shepard’s co-author, real-life teen influencer Buckingham, brings authenticity to a world defined by likes and clicks. But the final product is akin to flipping through a tabloid: It’s glossy and salacious but ultimately shallow, and the murder mystery, complete with an out-of-left-field denouement, lacks tension. Still, things end on a hopeful note, and the overarching message of being true to oneself is evergreen. The cast includes some queer characters and seems to be mostly white; Jasmine is cued as Latinx, and Fiona is described as having caramel skin.

A fleeting diversion. (Mystery. 13-18)

GREYTHORNE
Smith, Crystal
HMH Books (368 pp.) $18.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-1-328-49631-7
Series: Bloodleaf, 2

A tangled web of magic and politics.

Princess Aurelia’s life is in chaos after the catastrophic events of Bloodleaf (2019). Her little brother, Conrad, has had to take up the kingship, but the lands of Achleva and Renalt are in disarray. A refugee crisis echoing current events takes up a little page time, but most of the story revolves around Aurelia’s claiming and deepening her power. Rosetta, a wild witch, teaches her how to walk through a shadow version of the world, seeing and influencing the past and the future, and Aurelia uses this to save the world from religious extremists and an imbalance in the natural world. She’s aided by Zan, returned from what Aurelia thought was death, and her old nurse, Onal, who has stronger ties to the royal family than previously thought. A too-brief interstitial chapter on
Magistrate Arceneaux, a cruel, ambitious, supernatural woman, provides the most intriguing part of this sequel, which doesn’t quite live up to the promise of the first installation. Overly complex machinations bog down the forward movement of the plot and largely overshadow any interesting themes. It’s hard to keep track of what matters, or who, or why, which means that no particular sense of urgency propels the story, and trying to figure it all out dampens the enjoyment of the world.

An unsatisfying follow-up. (map) (Fantasy. 14-18)

**FATED**

Terry, Teri
Orchard/Scholastic (464 pp.)
$11.99 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-4083-5066-9

This stand-alone prequel provides a robust backstory for the dystopian world of the Slated trilogy.

In a chaotic post-Brexit Britain, political parties unite to form an authoritarian government to quell a youth rebellion. The new regime institutes draconian measures—curfew, imprisonment, and, shockingly, “the death penalty...for perpetrators of crimes of terror and treason.” Samantha Gregory, the vibrant 15-year-old daughter of the powerful Deputy Prime Minister, finds herself at the center of the violence and intrigue surrounding the government takeover. Strongly opposing her cold, distant father and the policies of his office, she gives her minders the slip and runs away to join other rebel youth of London in a peaceful protest. Daringly coming out in public as a rebel, Sam uses social media to publicize the cause and finds herself at the center of a full-blown riot. A final surprising plot twist promises another volume. This dark story of rebellious youth in Britain may resonate with teens trending toward activism. Sam and her upper-crust friends are crisply drawn, as is her budding lesbian relationship with her humble tutor, Ava, a scholarship student at her school. The central characters present white; a few secondary characters’ names suggest diversity. This accessible story provides a robust backstory for the dystopian world of the trilogy but will appeal even to those unfamiliar with the earlier books.

Readers will be left craving more. (Dystopian. 12-18)

**BEYOND THE GENDER BINARY**

Vaid-Menon, Alok
Penguin Workshop (64 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-593-09465-5
Series: Pocket Change Collective

Artist and activist Vaid-Menon demonstrates how the normativity of the gender binary represses creativity and inflicts physical and emotional violence.

The author, whose parents emigrated from India, writes about how enforcement of the gender binary begins before birth and affects people in all stages of life, with people of color being especially vulnerable due to Western conceptions of gender as binary. Gender assignments create a narrative for how a person should behave, what they are allowed to like or wear, and how they express themselves. Punishment of nonconformity leads to an inseparable link between gender and shame. Vaid-Menon challenges familiar arguments against gender nonconformity, breaking them down into four categories—dismissal, inconvenience, biology, and the slippery slope (fear of the consequences of acceptance). Headers in bold font create an accessible navigation experience from one analysis to the next. The prose maintains a conversational tone that feels as intimate and vulnerable as talking with a best friend. At the same time, the author’s turns of phrase in moments of deep insight ring with precision and poetry. In one reflection, they write, “the most lethal part of the human body is not the fist; it is the eye. What people see and how people see it has everything to do with power.” While this short essay speaks honestly of pain and injustice, it concludes with encouragement an invitation into a future that celebrates transformation.

A fierce, penetrating, and empowering call for change. (writing prompt) (Nonfiction. 14-adult)
A young girl discovers that she's a daughter of the Greek god Zeus in this middle-grade fantasy series starter.

Phoebe Katz is a 12-year-old foster kid, and havoc, including hailstorms and lightning strikes, seems to follow her wherever she goes. As she moves from one terrible foster home to another (and from school to school), her one constant is Carl, the social worker who found her at the Manhattan bus stop where she was abandoned as a baby. Phoebe is determined to make things work at her new school, Dexter Academy—especially now that she has two new friends, Angie and Damian. But trouble finds Phoebe yet again when she discovers that she's not only a daughter of Zeus and the twin sister to the great hero Perseus, but also connected to a prophecy of the end of Olympus itself—which is why she was sent away as a baby. After the god Ares, who wants the prophecy to come true, kidnaps Carl, Phoebe and her friends time-travel to ancient Greece to rescue him. Nerdy Damian's convenient encyclopedic knowledge of Greek mythology, Angie's daring, and Phoebe's developing demigod powers help them as they tangle with personages of myth, including numerous monsters.

This first installment in Adams' Legend of Olympus series is a nonstop, fast-paced adventure with an engaging, brave, and resourceful protagonist; fans of Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series, in particular, will likely enjoy it. Phoebe's story arc involves her coming to terms with who she is and with her place in the world. The book intriguingly examines the balance between her choices and the unfair expectations that have been placed upon her—both as a troubled foster child and as a demigod child of prophecy. Phoebe's touching relationships with Carl and her two best friends form the heart of the book, and the charming, realistic grayscale illustrations by Thompson effectively show the people and the creatures they encounter.

Fans of Greek mythology will find much to love in this fun novel.
CONSERVATION TALES FOR KIDS

Ingenious animals of all kinds—including traveling cats, resilient dogs, and ambitious guinea pigs—still cavort in many children’s stories. And now, as temperatures rise in Antarctica, an array of environmental tales aimed at kids can also be found in bookstores and libraries. Kirkus Indie recently reviewed three illustrated works for young conservationists.

A girl embarks on an underwater adventure after receiving a magic stone in Casson Trenor’s Umijoo, featuring paintings by Caia Koopman. The young explorer learns that overfishing, cruel practices, and widespread pollution endanger the ocean’s diverse creatures, such as an angler fish with “two tremendous rows of teeth that gleamed like racks of sharpened knives.” This “aquatic tale provides a sensitive environmental message, beautiful illustrations, and a relatable heroine,” our critic writes.

See the Sea, by the husband-and-wife photojournalist team of Alese and Morton Pechter, focuses on a queen angelfish named Jamie who leads readers on a vibrant tour of a coral reef. She encounters various types of fish and a moray eel as she searches for a shark. Jamie ultimately sees one and assures the audience: “They’re not interested in us when other food can be found, / while they clean up the ocean as they move around.” According to our reviewer, this picture book showcasing the authors’ photographs delivers “an attractive, well-illustrated tale that examines coral reef ecology.”

In Hyacinth J. Burgess-Gregory’s Trees Are Majestic, a black brother and sister enjoy nature during the four seasons, including a snowball fight amid bare trees in winter. The boy eventually urges readers to plant trees: “Then you too will be / surprised to know / the wonder of watching / majestic trees grow.” Our critic calls the picture book—which offers dynamic, uncredited images—a “rhythmic, poetic celebration that will encourage budding environmentalists to plant some trees themselves.”

Myra Forsberg is an Indie editor.

ANONYMOUS IS A WOMAN
A Global Chronicle of Gender Inequality
Ansary, Nina
Illus. by Dufkova, Petra
Revela Press (256 pp.)
$32.00 | $19.99 paper | $3.99 e-book
Apr. 15, 2020
978-0-9864064-4-7
978-0-9864064-5-4 paper

A collection examines overlooked figures from women’s history.

In this book, Ansary, the author of Jewels of Allah (2015), explores the problem of women’s stories being left out of the mainstream telling of history. Using Virginia Woolf’s well-known suggestion that many anonymous historical figures may well be female, Ansary digs into overarching trends in women’s history and provides a statistical analysis of the group’s social, political, and economic position in the 21st century. The book argues for the value of women’s contributions, using the concepts of yin and yang as a framework, and concludes that humanity as a whole loses when their stories are omitted from the broader narrative. The largest section of the text consists of capsule biographies of noteworthy but often little-known women, all born before 1900, from a variety of professions and geographic areas. The selection of the figures is wide-ranging, and while some (astronomer Maria Mitchell, peace activist Bertha von Suttner, aviator Bessie Coleman) may be familiar to history buffs, few readers are likely to know of Cleopatra Metrodora (an early Greek medical researcher), Liang Hongyu (a Song Dynasty general), or Eva Ekeblad (a Swede who discovered new uses for potatoes). The author makes an effort to draw connections between the historical figures and present-day trends (“Recent optimistic news that Metrodora would doubtlessly applaud: For the first time in US history, the number of women enrolling in medical schools exceeded the number of men”). But the women she profiles are intriguing on their own merits. Watercolor images by debut illustrator Dufkova add artistic interest to the text, and although the profiles are brief, they are well researched, with sources and citations provided in the endnotes. The book is clearly intended for a general audience, not for students of history, and it does an excellent job of capturing readers’ attention and providing sufficient but not overwhelming information. Fans of Rachel Ignotofsky’s Women in Science and Mackenzi Lee’s Bygone Badass Broads will enjoy this addition to the category of tales of overlooked women.

An eclectic and enlightening look at the stories of women often ignored by history.
Bardell paints a poignant picture of a vanished world.  

**INNOCENCE IN A TURBULENT WORLD**

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

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

A fond remembrance of a rural childhood in Estonia charms with its story and pictures.
THE ENIGMA BEYOND
Breakfield, Charles & Burkey, Roxanne
ICABOD Press (382 pp.)
$17.95 paper | $2.99 e-book
Jan. 7, 2020
978-1-946858-40-5

The latest installment of this long-running techno-thriller series finds a next-generation cybersecurity team facing off against unprincipled artificial intelligences.

MAG is an organization of technical leaders signified only by M, A, and G. They’re intent on controlling technology and using AIs to harvest people’s information. JOAN, one such AI, uses I-Drones to attack and overtake the North American Defense System in Colorado. Lt. Tony Bough, per his superior’s order, flees the facility with the hopes of telling officials in Washington, D.C., what’s happened to NADS. Meanwhile, the R-Group, a family-run cybersecurity team that’s existed for decades, is training its young descendants to take the reins someday. Students in R-Group hacker Quip’s class gather intel when JOAN’s targeting of U.S. military and weapons-grade satellites proves understandably suspicious. But other AIs have seemingly gone rogue as well, including one holding sway over a Brazilian village and another on a Chinese space station. MAG’s nefarious plan ultimately affects R-Group members and students, like Juan Jr., on an assignment in São Paulo with Uncle Carlos, and Juan’s sister, Gracie, in a new job at Global Bank in Manhattan.

The R-Group, with help from its own AI, ICABOD, works to put a stop to the AIs’ felonious deeds. Breakfield and Burkey jam-pack the 11th entry in their Enigma series with subplots, although some recurring characters, like Jacob and Petra, take a back seat. These storylines, however, including a politician that M has compromised, ultimately intersect in some capacity. The authors’ tech-savvy prose is typically sharp, but the story also has breaths of fresh air, from the still-learning students to Tony’s off-the-grid run with new friend (aka romantic interest) Rose that’s free of contemporary technology. Villains may be largely anonymous, but they’re well rounded, as personal agendas turn them against one another. They’re likewise topical: Most readers will easily link well-known companies to M, A, and G. As in previous installments, there’s an open ending and a strong possibility of further sequels.

Dense but enthralling entry with a bevy of new, potential narrative directions.

FINDING HOME
Brown, Corinne Joy
Illus. by McDonald, Ginny
Self (138 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Nov. 23, 2019
978-0-578-46964-5

In Brown’s middle-grade novel, a wild horse and a teenage girl must overcome challenges to learn to trust others.

In rustic Wyoming, Jesse Nolan, a 13-year-old white girl, wants nothing more than a horse of her own. At a special auction of wild mustangs that were captured in a federal herd-thinning operation, she quickly has her heart set on a young “curly,” a rare breed with a curly-haired coat. Jesse has the winning bid on that horse, but she must leave the newly named Curly Girl with her horse-savvy Uncle Joe for training before she can safely ride her. Jesse prepares for Curly Girl’s arrival, knowing that she’ll be responsible for the animal’s upkeep at the boarding facility. When a panicked Curly Girl is evicted from the stable for causing damage, Jesse reluctantly accepts the only solution—for Curly Girl to live at Jesse’s estranged father’s nearby ranch. Brown’s novel is based on an original story by the author and debut illustrator McDonald, both of whom are advocates for wild horses. Jesse faces challenges with Curly Girl, but she also confronts her own resentment toward her dad due to his controlling nature and her parents’ separation. However, this is as much Curly Girl’s story as it is Jesse’s; the novel shifts between the teenager’s narrative, told from a third-person perspective, to Curly Girl’s first-person tale. Over the course of the novel, the horse offers poignant observations regarding her life before her capture and her fear and confusion afterward. The story also addresses Curly Girl’s overwhelming desire to return to her old home and herd. Brown, the author of Hidden Star (2016), deepens the content as Curly Girl and Jesse slowly progress toward a sense of acceptance. The author also presents an informative history of horses from prehistoric times in the guise of Jesse’s classroom project; she also shows her respect for her young readers by not sugarcoating the terror that the wild horses feel during the government’s culling process. McDonald effectively complements the text with expressive, informed colored-pencil illustrations of horses in human and natural environments.

A layered and thoughtful girl-meets-horse story with believable main characters.
Carroll’s limpid, engaging prose style manages to balance exotic spectacle with down-to-earth practicality.

**FRENCH LIKE MOI**

*A Midwesterner in Paris*

Carpenter, Scott Dominic  
Illustrated by Golden, Liam  
Travelers’ Tales (256 pp.)  
$16.99 paper | $15.67 e-book  
May 1, 2020  
978-1-60952-183-7

A volume of essays recounts the joys and difficulties of a Midwestern college professor’s move to Paris.

On sabbatical from teaching, Carpenter moved with his wife and daughter all the way from Minnesota to Paris. After much bureaucratic hubbub, they bought a tiny apartment and set about acclimating to the Parisian way of life. No stranger to the French but a relative newcomer to their daily routines, the author highlights the captivating contrasts between his Midwestern home and his adopted city in 18 essays and three sections: “Came,” “Saw,” and “Conquered.” Each essay focuses on a different element of Parisian life, from the relative opulence of American return policies to the ubiquity of protests and demonstrations. Carpenter’s insights are humorous and deftly crafted, interweaving perceptive details about the French language with curious incidents and stirring events. While the tone is light, the author occasionally ventures into serious territory, most effectively in his discussion of terrorism and the national climate. While his more solemn moments can verge on flippancy, Carpenter generally returns readers to a place of thoughtful consideration. One of the strongest, most innovative passages comes in a chapter recalling the difficult process of raising funds and securing approvals for apartment building improvements. The author convincingly compares this process to the drama of an opera and goes so far as to provide the beginnings of a libretto. Most of his essays are also accompanied by debut illustrator Golden’s charming sketches, which lend additional intrigue to Carpenter’s fluid scenes. Although perhaps not groundbreaking in its subject matter or style, the book is a delightful read, presenting essays filled with levity and grace.

*A winning and witty collection offering humor and insight into the French way of life.*

**KINGDOM OF THE SILVER CAT**

*Kingdom of the Silver Cat*

Carroll, Thomas  
Illustrated by Huang, Linda & Carroll, Jackie Bowker (407 pp.)  
$14.95 paper | $2.99 e-book  
May 17, 2019  
978-1-73309-170-1

In this debut middle-grade fantasy novel, a group of children are transported to another world, where they face dragon fire and huge buzzards with the help of new magical powers.

One day in fictional Annaberry, New York, a school bus full of kids drives through a mysterious blue light. Suddenly, it’s in the middle of a deserted field with no apparent signs of modern civilization. After the bus driver leaves, never to return, the 15 third-through-eighth graders are on their own in a land called Hevelen — a place that seems charming and menacing, by turns. There are luscious fruit trees to feast on, but paths through nearby woods seem to move around on their own, and ghosts emerge from the misty night who have the ability to freeze people stiff. The kids soon gain superpowers, which range from standard-issue comic-book fare (Gabrielle’s sister, Cici, can create large pink bubbles; Ted Wallis can make music by waving his hands; and Josh Hester, the group’s natural leader, is invulnerable to others’ magic). The kids are attacked by rare-eagles — giant condors who try to fly them to the castle of Sidor, who wants to collect “gifted ones” like them and use their powers. The kids get help from the Panishie, a tribe of adorable, 6-inch-tall fairies, but they also have to dodge fireballs that emanate from the tower of a dragon master. Some of the kids head north to confront Sidor while others go south to find a renowned silver cat that might be able to protect them.

In this first series installment, Thomas Carroll constructs a colorful, Narnia-esque world full of intriguing sights and creatures. With 15 characters jockeying for attention, the novel sometimes feels a bit overcrowded; indeed, it’s not until the kids separate into smaller groups that their personalities have enough room to seem distinct. They each face conflicts and inner crises, owing in part to the fact that their delightful gifts often come with weaknesses that necessitate agonizing trade-offs; for example, Bobby Forester can sense danger from far away, but it causes him excruciating abdominal cramps. These weaknesses teach the kids tough life lessons about self-sacrifice, risk-taking, and reconciliation. The author’s action scenes are exciting but never traumatic or gory, and his limpid, engaging prose style manages to balance exotic spectacle with down-to-earth practicality: “Rhea frowned. She liked the walking trees, but the snow monkeys gave her the creeps. She had almost smacked one when it slid too close and leered at her with its unblinking eyes.” The result is a fun, engaging yarn about empowered kids who impressively step up when grown-ups can’t help. The book also includes Jackie Carroll’s black-and-white illustrations of each character; Huang’s small, monochromatic illustrations at the top of each chapter; maps; and a glossary of the Panishie language.

*A fast-paced, sparkling fantasy for tweens in which great wish fulfillment entails great responsibility.*
A KILLING MOON
Craig, Alexis D.
Three Fortnights Press (272 pp.)
Nov. 6, 2019
978-1-73390-182-6

A woman acts as a bodyguard to supernatural royalty in this romantic thriller.

Cora is biding her time playing pool in a dive bar that caters to shifters—people who can turn into wolves (Lupines), foxes (Vulpines), or bears (Ursines), among other animals. She’s waiting for her latest assignment to arrive: Finnegan “Finn” O’Casey, the third in line to the throne of the unified shifter kingdom. Cora has always found him attractive, and when Finn turns on the charm, she can’t help indulging in some rather intimate acts. Just as their night of fun comes to an end, Finn is nearly gunned down on his way out of the house—and Cora’s fast thinking saves him. She was hired by a mysterious benefactor to keep Finn alive, because his brother, Brendan, the only other heir to the throne, has put a hit out on him. Now, Cora must protect Finn from further attempts on his life, although he doesn’t want to believe that his own family could be capable of such betrayal. Meanwhile, the pair can’t deny their attraction and romantic feelings, which grow as they spend more time together. In this first installment in a new paranormal romance series, Craig, the author of Shifted Into Love (2019), offers a remarkably fast-paced story. Along the way, she provides an effective mix of political intrigue, killer suspense, and steam-the-windows passion. The plot will likely draw readers in quickly, but some of the fictional world’s terminology, specifically referring to certain creatures, remains unexplained for a while, which may put off the impatient. However, readers who are fans of supernatural adventures will appreciate Craig’s attention to worldbuilding, and they’ll also look forward to further series entries.

A paranormal tale for readers who like their plot suspenseful and their romance hot.

METAL MOUTH
Engle, Jaimie
JME Books (200 pp.)
Mar. 1, 2019
978-1-73287-862-4

A high schooler struck by lightning suddenly begins hearing—and conversing with—a boy’s voice inside her head in this YA fantasy.

Fifteen-year-old Floridian Mahlorie Moore is often alone, not always by choice. Her mom, Victoria M. Reddish, a famous author of romance novels, is typically away for book signings. Her magician dad, Bob, is usually performing on cruise ships. Though socializing is low on Mahlorie’s list, one weekend she reluctantly heads to a party that her best friend, Shai Dwenger, suggests. But after an intoxicated boy’s unwanted advances, Mahlorie leaves in the midst of a raging storm. She’s hit by lightning, which she miraculously survives. Only now she hears a male voice in her head, and it’s quickly apparent he can hear her, too. It takes some getting used to, but the boy is considerate and sometimes helpful, as when he provides the solution to a math problem in Mahlorie’s class. She learns she’s speaking with 17-year-old Dyson Hertz, who becomes a friendly voice and, eventually, something much more. When his voice evidently disappears, Mahlorie wonders if he’s simply no longer talking to her. So she searches for him to get answers and maybe see the boy she loves in the flesh. Mahlorie, who narrates her story, is a bright but convincingly flawed protagonist. For example, she seemingly has a fear of abandonment while simultaneously isolating herself. But she tends to be frank, and if a boy invades her personal space, she doesn’t hesitate to let him know. Engle’s first-rate cast of characters includes sometimes-selfish but consistently loyal Shai and Mahlorie’s creepy older cousin, Philip. Her parents are likewise memorable, although their jobs are excessively conspicuous metaphors (for instance, Victoria will “plot” Mahlorie like one of her characters; control in life is merely an illusion). Nevertheless, the author recounts familiar situations in lyrical fashion, from an awkward silence (“Quiet roars between us”) to a trek in the dark woods (“Night stretches through the crunch of leaves and sticks that snap beneath my feet”).

A tale presents troubled adolescence and romance through the eyes of a remarkable teen protagonist.

THE ROME OF FALL
Gibbs, Chad Alan
Borne Back Books (280 pp.)
$12.95 paper | $3.99 e-book
Mar. 15, 2020
978-0-9857165-6-1

An ex–rock star returns to teach English at his Alabama high school in this YA novel from Gibbs, the author of Two Like Me And You (2019).

After his father runs off with his secretary, Marcus Brinks moves with his mother from Texas back to her hometown in Alabama, forcing him to complete his senior year at Rome High School. There, in homeroom, he meets fellow Weezer-enthusiast Jackson Crowder. Marcus thinks he’s found a friend—and maybe even a band mate—in a high school that really cares only about football. Cut to 23 years later. It’s Marcus’ first day again at Rome High School, but now he’s an English teacher. In the intervening years he was the singer/songwriter of the indie rock band Dear Brutus, whose first record sold a half million copies (though, as he’s quick to tell his students, he never made any money off of them). His old homeroom teacher is still at Rome High, as is his former friend Jackson Crowder—though Jackson is now the celebrated coach of the school’s football team. Just what happened in the decades
This third volume of an SF series about magical figurines explores a dangerous political faction and a gritty resistance group.

In Chicago in 2075, Shiren Tsai helps his father, Zhengyan, run the Mandarin Duck Lounge. Zhengyan is dismayed by the rise of the Futurists’ Task Force in Britain, but his son is skeptical of any danger. Though this new political faction claims to represent “prosperity, unity, and peace,” it apparently makes strides via drone strikes and AI soldiers that kill civilians. The *True Bystander*, an underground newspaper, reports the murder of Giséle Guerin, a seer in the Chamonix region of France. The Futurists fear culture, and humanity’s spiritual connections pose the greatest threat to their unified world. By 2079, the Futurists have taken over North America and formed the superstate of Atlantia. To combat this fascist monoculture, an enigmatic woman called the Empress begins contacting those willing to fight through their dreams. In 2101, after the formation of three superstates, Chika Hagiwara lives in the fenced-off village of Tyosha in the Eurasia superstate. She joins the resistance Movement at her local Sleep Clinic. A Lucky Cat supernatural doll named Shanalandra, who comes to life and can change size, eventually brings Chika to meet the Empress at Nambata Castle, where they prepare to attack Eurasia’s leader, Hanxu Xing. In this follow-up to *Lucky Cat and the Snow Maiden’s Vengeance* (2018), Gray continues to add meticulous layers to her saga of spirit-animated figurines battling for humanity’s freedom. The grisly acts committed by the superstates are numerous, including when Chika “watched the sentinels shoot the burning figure...to make sure the victim was dead.” But as fans of the series know, the author’s portrayal of magic is subtle and rewarding. Within Nambata Castle is a “cloud of swirling snowflakes” in which “the souls of the dead wept with displeasure at their fate.” Yet while grand in scope, the drama often feels diffused across too many jumps in time. The question of whether or not to kill Xing’s son provides a flashpoint in a story that sometimes feels bigger than its characters.

This engaging and complex series installment offers fans more supernatural maneuvering.

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

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

Highly recommended for fans of thrillers in the vein of Dan Brown’s and Robert Harris’ works.
After working in Hollywood for the past 20 years as a writer, director, and entertainment executive, Stephen Erickson set off to find real solutions to the climate crisis. Erickson first developed a passion for environmental and animal rights while studying at UCLA, and now, with his new book, *The Great Healing*, he has returned to that passion by bringing together extensive research and his gifts as a storyteller. Through a cast of engaging human and animal characters like Earl the Worm, Thomas Q. Piglet, or Arch Villain Big Ag, Erickson explores the science and the “Five Compassions” he believes we all must embrace in order to save the planet.

What led you to write a book about climate change?
Global warming, *during our lifetime*, threatens to bring about the end of our Anthropocene Epoch—and us along with it. Today, over 1 million species of plants and animals are facing extinction. Things are going to get worse, much worse. There is a climate archvillain, an industry responsible for 57% of all carbon emissions: It’s Big Ag (Industrial agriculture + factory farming). I wrote this book for all of us but particularly for my children, for millennials, and for Generation Z—because they need to mobilize in a big way immediately to protect what remains of their opportunity to one day raise families in a stable society and an environment fairly similar to the one we now enjoy—as opposed to being trapped in a sweltering, ugly calamity.

What are the Five Compassions you describe in your book?
There is only one way to significantly draw down carbon from our atmosphere. The Five Compassions [provide] that one solution rapidly and at necessary scale. They are Compassion for Animals, for Self, for the Land, for Community, and for Democracy. Compassionate activism can create the Great Healing—the healing of our planet, the halting of the ongoing sixth great extinction, and the preservation of as many species and living creatures as possible.

How did you approach writing something accessible?
Through my years as a scriptwriter and an entertainment executive creating marketing copy for hundreds of programs, I’ve learned how to tell an engaging story. The challenges faced by “exquisite creatures”—both human and nonhuman—reveal the immensity of the threat facing each one of us—and its urgency. Their stories emotionally engage the reader.

What was your main goal in writing this book?
The most important goal of this book is to expand awareness far beyond the “choir” of the most pressing issue of
our time. The book has to dive deeply into climate and agriculture science. I worked hard to make science engaging, even interesting. Awareness is the first step toward compassionate activism.

What do you hope people will realize by the end of The Great Healing?
How serious our climate emergency is. That we are now facing humanity’s greatest challenge. Together, we are entering the fight of our lives—a fight for our lives. And without immediate action we may not prevail. That the path to achieving this solution rapidly and at necessary scale is the Five Compassions. That we will realize we are part of a special generation: We can create the future we want to see. If we don’t act, there will be no future for the next generation. By finding our voices and using them, we can participate in what will become the most important cause of all of humanity’s endeavors to date. We have the power. More than we realize.

Rhett Morgan is a writer and translator based in Paris.
A broad, Rabelaisian comedy.

**JOE’S ODYSSEY**

LaTorre, Nick

Nick Daydreams (207 pp.)


Oct. 24, 2019

978-0-578-58312-9

A nondescript man’s humdrum life becomes suddenly and unpredictably upended.

This latest novel from LaTorre introduces sad sack Joe Kerson, a disgruntled husband, regretful father of two teenagers, and beaten-down drone employee at the Soren Agency, where he hates his job, coworkers, and bosses. At the story’s outset, one of those bosses tells Joe that he must meet a prospective new client on the man’s yacht. That client, Luciano “Luke” Galdonchino, isn’t strictly on the up and up, but the agency would like to cultivate him, so Joe sets off. Joe’s path will soon intersect with a group called the Schmorde, a goofy gang of overgrown, free-spirited delinquents who live in a run-down house and enjoy various escapades. The Schmorde is led by larger-than-life figures like Ron (the brains of the outfit), the Pirate (who likes to break things), and Brute (a 260-pound enforcer). But before they enter the scene, Joe meets Luke and immediately takes in his lavish lifestyle with signature glum insights (“This Luke guy has it made, and I’m just a bum”). On the spur of the moment, Joe knocks Luke overboard and steals the boat and piles of mobster cash; impulsively recruits the Schmorde as his ramshackle crew; and embarks on a madcap sail around the world. Joe is always just barely ahead of Luke and his colleagues in the League of International
Gangsters. The misadventures of Joe and the Schmorde almost immediately run off the rails.

The author piles absurdity on absurdity in the construction of his picaresque novel, and he whistles the narrative to a leanness that keeps the whole thing bubbling along at a page-turning pace. This is a broad, Rabelaisian comedy, and LaTorre has a keen eye for crafting over-the-top caricatures and seemingly mundane dialogue that’s constantly teetering on the brink of ridiculousness. The key to this kind of comedy is that the characters must be one-dimensional but not flat. Joe must be down on his luck but not repulsive; his wife and kids—who crop up to play sizable roles in the plot—must be outraged but not angry; the Schmorde must be roustabout sidekicks but not compellingly individualistic. The author comfortably shifts the tale into the fantastic (the heroes visit Phantasmic Island, presided over by President Richard Nixon and Humpty Dumpty) and then backs out of it. Luke’s increasingly shrill quest for personal revenge will have readers chuckling in the book’s second half. The story’s very gentle levels of violence and crudity never darken the humorous tone of the work. Long before readers reach the conclusion, they’ll be guessing the author has a fairly air-tight and eminently satisfying ending in mind. LaTorre deftly complicates his straightforward tale with amusing side characters like a band of inept Jamaican gangsters, and he has the storytelling skills to avoid narrative dead ends. This is a remarkably streamlined comic expedition.

A rollicking, absurdist take on the standard midlife-crisis adventure.

However, Jack also has a sharp sense of how money, power, and corruption are all fuel for the city’s “mad energy.” In alternating chapters, LeFurgy focuses on either Sarah’s or Jack’s perspective. The author maintains suspense throughout, and the case’s unexpected twists test the two as they use their skills to uncover the truth. What makes this mystery stand out, however, is its seamless integration of vivid details of daily life in 1909, its unflinching portrayal of the sexism and racism of the time, and its evocation of the era’s sounds, smells, and tastes. At one point, for instance, Jack walks along Baltimore Street, noticing how “the clip-clop of the passing horses was different in the rain—the sound was clearer and richer”; later, as he climbs the steps of a police station, his eyes water from the smell of a vinegar factory. An author’s note provides further information about such subjects as autism and PTSD.

A multilayered, entertaining mystery that introduces a promising pair of detectives.
THE SINGLE TWIN
Little, Sean
Lulu (246 pp.)
$15.00 paper | $5.00 e-book
Nov. 10, 2019
978-1-79472-350-4

A pair of misfit private detectives ply their trade in present-day Chicago in this soft-boiled mystery.

Little, the author of Family Ghosts (2019), introduces two eccentrics with impressive detective skills who are opposites in appearance: Aberforth “Abe” Willard Allard, the divorced father of a 14-year-old daughter, is a lanky, sad-eyed legal genius, and C.S. “Duff” Duffy, the son of a C.S. Lewis fan, is short and stocky, like a former football player—although he’s never gotten close to a gridiron. Duffy discovered three murdered bodies years ago, when he was a teenager, and has long suffered from serious obsessive-compulsive disorder, which derailed his promising academic career. Abe and Duff’s normal grind includes lots of legal work and occasional consults with police in which they wield their “weird-ass Sherlock Holmes power,” as one police detective puts it. The pair’s skills are tested when ex-CIA agent Mindy Jefferson gives them $50,000 as a retainer and challenges them to find her when she inevitably goes missing. Her mother, now deceased, had revealed that Mindy had a twin brother, adopted by another family at birth. But while trying to track him down, Mindy began to realize that she was being followed. When Mindy does, in fact, disappear, Abe and Duff must unravel the mystery.

The author’s commitment to having characters stay true to their natures. The plot is confrontational; the prose and dialogue are practical, as befits the story being told. Events unfold with a sense of inevitability (though with a few surprises), gaining momentum as they play out. Unfortunately, this first volume of a trilogy lacks a self-contained ending. Thus, readers will be left unsatisfied and a bit puzzled by the religious motif that comes increasingly to the fore.

A grim and unrelenting tale in the best traditions of the dystopian genre.
Matthews’ love story is sweet and chaste, the characters well developed, and their relationship beautifully rendered.

THE WINTER COMPANION

A pair of grisly crimes challenges the detectives of a Long Island police department.

For Neil Jericho and the other detectives of the East Hampton Police Department, complex cases can spring from ordinary tips. In this seventh installment of a series, Evangeline “Vangie” Clark receives a call from a teenager named Kevin Jenkins. Jenkins says that while riding his bike over a bridge, he saw something suspicious in the water. Jericho and Clark go to the bridge and discover the body of a red Irish setter. The dog is identified as Bridey, whose owner, Miriam Shapiro, lives near the bridge. A veterinarian determines that Bridey was drowned. Jericho believes that the case should be turned over to animal control, but Clark, a canine owner herself, is horrified by the crime and decides to investigate the matter on her own. Meanwhile, Jericho is contacted by the captain of a research boat after voyagers find a human arm in a shark they were measuring. Jericho discovers the arm belongs to Stacy Verducci, who disappeared after meeting a man named Chad Manning. As their investigations progress, Clark is taunted by Jenkins while Jericho learns Chad Manning is an alias. When a second woman named Stacy disappears, the search is on for a serial killer. This latest entry in Marks’ series featuring Jericho and his cohorts is a taut, fast-paced mystery that skillfully weaves together the investigations of two seemingly unrelated crimes while developing subplots introduced in previous installments. Although Jericho remains the series’ primary protagonist, Clark becomes an important character in the story as she rises within the department from a 911 dispatcher to detective. Her inquiry into Bridey’s death takes a number of intriguing twists and turns as Jenkins moves from helpful witness to potential suspect. Jericho’s look into Verducci’s murder takes center stage during the second half of the enjoyable novel, and it enables him to interact with characters from previous volumes, including medical examiner Dr. John Alvarez. Jericho’s personal life is the basis for a significant subplot when his longtime girlfriend, Rainbow, must decide whether to leave the safety of his familiar surroundings and an unknown future for a charming and enjoyable love story.

THE WINTER COMPANION

Matthews, Mimi
Perfectly Proper Press (316 pp.)
Feb. 11, 2020
978-1-73305-695-3

A young man must overcome insecurity to seize his chance at true love in Matthews’ latest romance novel.

The fourth installment of the Parish Orphans of Devon series finds former orphans and longtime friends Alex, Tom, Justin, and Neville reuniting to celebrate the holidays at Greyfriar’s Abbey, Justin’s Gothic home perched on the cliffs of Devon. Neville, who lives a quiet life at the abbey with Justin and his wife, is happy to have his friends and their families in attendance. But he’s also overwhelmed. Neville suffers from a brain injury caused by a childhood accident, and though he is physically and intellectually unimpaired, he struggles to turn his thoughts into words. His friends have all found love and moved on. But Neville is stuck in a prison of his own making, preferring the company of animals to people. Things change for Neville when he meets Clara Hartwright, a lady’s companion who arrives at the abbey in the company of the elderly aunt of Tom’s wife. Clara begins to help Neville take care of the horses, and a tentative friendship forms as they each share their budding hopes and dreams. However, their nascent romance is jeopardized by difficulty in Clara’s personal life. A scandal from her past and troublesome family problems resurface, demanding her presence and attention. Neville must choose between the safety of his familiar surroundings and an unknown future with a chance at love. Matthews, the author of A Convenient Fiction (2019), once again delivers in her latest Victorian novel. Her love story is sweet and chaste, the characters well developed, and their relationship beautifully rendered. Matthews also addresses the lack of educational opportunities for women of the time, supplementing her romance with a meatier storyline. Her treatment of Neville’s brain injury is sensitively handled, and it’s a welcome change to encounter a knight in shining armor who isn’t defined by perfection. In fact, the lovers stand on an even playing field, as their strengths and weaknesses balance each other. As Clara realizes, Neville “needed her, just as she’d needed him.”

Memorable characters and a well-researched history make for a charming and enjoyable love story.
A MOMENT OF FIREFLIES
McCluskey, John
New Plains Press (110 pp.)
$14.00 paper | May 3, 2017
978-0-9986857-0-0

A young boy in Depression-era Chicago deals with family turmoil, including an alcoholic father with a dark secret, in this debut novel.

David Callahan has spent a good deal of time walking the wintry streets of his neighborhood recently, as his mother orders him outside whenever his father comes home. Michael Callahan is a freight conductor for a railroad, and he drinks heavily, resulting in late-night rages that terrify David and his younger sister, Meggy. His mother gets David out of the house to protect him, but the bleak Chicago streets in 1934 are full of their own heartache and despair. Additionally, Meggy is sick and was possibly exposed to tuberculosis by a neighbor girl. Michael unfairly blames David for Meggy’s illness, and it isn’t long before the drunken man becomes violent toward his son. “It’s not me, it’s the times that make him so angry,” David tells indie kirkus.com.

McCluskey’s concise novel tackles heavy subject matter with a somewhat light touch, deftly using spare language in an evocative way. The close-knit world of this South Side Irish hood in Ireland and the painful secret that drives his unending rage. McCluskey’s concise novel tackles heavy subject matter with a somewhat light touch, deftly using spare language in an evocative way. The close-knit world of this South Side Irish community is David’s entire universe, and the author’s choice to develop just a few key occurrences works very well as the family takes tiny steps toward absolution or at least something like peace. Flashbacks and scenes of strife are told in a dynamic, stream-of-consciousness flow, which nicely captures the effort to get to the root of the family’s pain.

A lean, astute story about a family searching for hope during hard times.

LOOKING FOR ALICE
Miller, Luna
Trans. by Isherwood, Aidan
Publish Authority (290 pp.)

In Swedish author Miller’s thriller series starter set in and around Stockholm, an aging private investigator and her young team take on a seemingly simple adultery case that proves to be complex, indeed.

Nadja Franzén’s ordinarily staid husband, Mikael, has been acting strangely. He’s been staying out late at night, claiming to be working but coming home drunk, and his wife has concluded that he’s having an affair. She hires a private detective agency to investigate, and her case is assigned to investigator Gunvor Ström, a former surgeon in her mid-60s. As she pursues Mikael from bar to bar, it quickly becomes apparent that he’s involved in something altogether more sinister than garden-variety adultery. As a sexagenarian, though, Gunvor struggles to be inconspicuous at the Stockholm nightspots that Mikael frequents, so she recruits two young acquaintances to be her eyes and ears: Elin, a rather plain teenager with low self-esteem, and David, an immature dropout. The trio soon forges a plan to uncover the truth. After some bodyguards viciously attack Mikael, though, Nadja reconsiders the investigation—and things take a very dark turn when a brutal murder is broadcast live to paying customers. In Gunvor Ström, Miller, the author of the thriller Three Days in September (2016), has crafted an entertaining heroine—a modern Miss Marple with a social conscience and some impressive aikido skills. For the most part, the author also deftly handles this first installment of her new series; the storytelling, as translated from the Swedish by Isherwood, is slick, with strong dialogue, intelligent plotting, and convincing character development throughout. Things come apart a bit in the closing chapters, however, when a shift from suspense to action edges the narrative toward cliché, but this is a relatively minor flaw in an otherwise highly enjoyable read.

A lightweight but punchy Nordic noir thriller.

JIMMY
Toughest Times Ever
Mills, Sally Hill
Illus. by Gautier, Robin Gilmore
$3.49 e-book | Feb. 9, 2020

In this illustrated sequel, a little dog struggles with the death of his best friend and the arrival of a new pooh in the house.

Jimmy, a small dog with three good legs and an eye lost to a snakebite, adores Arrow, his shaggy, tough housemate. As established in Mills’ previous children’s book, Jimmy: Toughest Dog Ever (2015), the canines have bonded with each other and their human caretakers, Lola and Stan. In this touching sequel targeting a wider range of readers (its graceful treatment of love and loss will resonate with many adults, too), Arrow dies. Grieving Jimmy’s (whose speech is distinguished by italicized text) tries to understand when Stan comforts him: “Nothing ever dies. Nothing ever really dies. Everything’s always changing.” Never glib, Jimmy’s journey toward acceptance is subtly underscored by the changing seasons. When autumn brings Gus, a gentle rescue dog, to the family, Jimmy is resentful at first. He tells the big, friendly newcomer: “This is my house. These are my people. You don’t belong here. You’re doing everything wrong. Arrow would never lie down by the pond while birds and squirrels ran through the yard.” But Jimmy soon learns from Lola that “a heart can stretch…. It can hold more and more and more. A heart can hold more than you would ever think.” The soft quality of debut illustrator Gautier’s beautifully executed images, positioned at the tops and bottoms of pages throughout, deepen readers’ connections.
Moniz, Jacob’s mother, provides a succinct depiction of a premature baby’s experience in child-friendly language.

_**JACOB’S JOURNEY**_

**The Boy Born Early**

Moniz, Sandy

FriesenPress (52 pp.)


978-1-5255-6242-6 paper

978-1-5255-6241-9

A premature baby recalls his journey in this debut rhyming picture book based on a true story.

Jacob explains that he is born months too early. After birth, he is taken to a big room where there are “wires and tubes all over the place.” He chronicles his experiences in a hot, bright, clear box where he is hooked up to tubes that help him breathe and eat. Although his parents are sad, they remain hopeful that Jacob will grow healthy. Jacob explains that he needs to stay in the hospital in order to become bigger and stronger. He discusses being frequently tested and examined by nurses. He also sees other mothers, “many of whom often wept.” Eventually, Jacob observes that his mom is beginning to look less happy. He is even visited by family members who get to hold him. Now, Jacob asserts, he is big and strong enough to live at home without tubes. Although his life is just beginning, Jacob concludes: “I am mighty. I am fierce. I will continue to fight.”

The illustrations here are manipulated family photographs of the pale-skinned Jacob in various circumstances, such as being hooked up to machines and cradled by loved ones. Moniz, Jacob’s mother, provides a succinct depiction of a premature baby’s experience in child-friendly language. The moving tale may be most appreciated by parents and families dealing with babies in a similar situation.

A poignant and concise look at a preemie’s odyssey.

In this novel based on a true story, a boy with cerebral palsy struggles to find his place in a dysfunctional school system. After he is born, Alan Jones suffers a severe stroke. Even if he survives, the doctors tell his mother, he will be in a vegetative state without the ability to interact with others. But she doubts the physicians’ predictions. When Alan is 2 years old, his mother has him evaluated by Dr. Shasta, who is delighted to discover his intellectual capabilities. Alan’s mother asks the physician if the boy possesses average intelligence. “Oh, no, I wouldn’t say that,” asserts Shasta. “I would say that he’s smarter than an average kid.”

At first, Alan attends a school for special needs students. He repeatedly experiences abuse—first on the bus, when a mentally disabled student bites him, then at school, when an angry aide ruthlessly spanks him. Still, Alan thrives in the academic environment. By middle school, he needs new challenges. When Ms. Hawthorne, a school psychiatrist, evaluates him, she finds that the system has failed to give Alan the education he deserves. It’s determined that Alan should attend “regular school,” at least for part of the day. As Alan gets older, he becomes more and more independent, trying his best to fend and advocate for himself. When he enters high school, he’s the only special needs pupil among 3,000 students. While Alan’s proud of his accomplishments, he’s also lonely, “a clique of one.” He grapples with the pressures of being a standard bearer for the special needs community, and he desires what any high schooler wants: friends, a sense of belonging. He’s just like any other kid except that he faces an undue portion of difficulties.

Nankivell’s novel is a scathing rebuke of America’s education system, which has not only failed to provide appropriate educational opportunities for differently abled students, but also has exposed those pupils to ruthless and inhumane practices. The book shines when it examines what it’s like for Alan to go about his day, depending on others to help him with every bodily function. Through Alan’s eyes, the tale looks at the special needs community, and he desires what any high schooler wants: friends, a sense of belonging. He’s just like any other kid except that he faces an undue portion of difficulties.

In particular, well-conceived passage, the author takes readers through Alan’s morning routine, from waking up early and being fed breakfast by his mother to getting strapped into his leg braces, put in his wheelchair, loaded onto the bus, and driven to school. Alan is at the mercy of others. Though he is kind and smart, the tale shows him at certain low points, when he can be vindictive and harsh. He’s not an angel—he’s a human being. But at times, the work strains to overcome a formulaic approach to telling the story of surmounting adversity. Again and again, Alan is embarrassed or made fun of, then gets his revenge when he proves his classmates—and sometimes his teachers—wrong. The writing is at its best when it hews closely to Alan’s physical reality; when it tries to generalize or draw larger lessons, the prose suffers.

An engrossing, painful, and disturbing tale of education against the odds.
WIZARD OR WANNABE?
How Authors & Self-Publishers Can Vet the Professionals They Need To Edit, Design & Shepherd Their Books
Neighbour, Mary E.
Upriver, Downriver Books (107 pp.)
978-0-9962541-5-1
978-0-9962541-4-4 paper

Authors who self-publish should hire freelance editors, designers, and consultants to spruce up their books, according to this primer.

Neighbour, a book editor and ghost writer, warns readers that every manuscript requires much specialized effort to turn it into a readable, marketable work and offers expert advice on finding reliable professionals who can do it. These include experienced editors who will use a coldly objective eye to diagnose the inevitable flaws that authors cannot perceive in their own work and fix everything from a manuscript’s overall argument and tone to the placement of commas and dashes; designers who can craft eye-catching, genre-appropriate art and choose fonts for the cover; and interior designers who sweat the myriad tiny but crucial details of page layout, from picking the right margin size to avoiding unsightly “rivers” of space between words. In addition, a writer needs a book shepherd—the author has been called one—who can coordinate all of the above and also oversee a volume’s printing, distribution, and marketing to the “reader persona” who is the likeliest audience. Neighbour packs her slender, no-nonsense manual with lots of useful lore on everything from arcane publishing jargon to professional associations that keep databases of working editors and designers, and she provides a trove of practical tips for vetting prospective freelancers. (Among the questions she suggests for interviewing editors are “Do you offer free editing of sample pages, so I can see how we might work together?” and “How would you handle numbers in my manuscript?”) The author’s brisk, lucid prose is lit by tart humor (a professional cover designer is not “a family member who has never taken a design or composition course”) and, alas, marred by at least one typo that her own editor overlooked (a period missing at the end of the sentence “Self-publishing doesn’t mean you have to do everything on your own”). Authors who are serious about making a mark with their books will find a wealth of information and insights here.

A helpful, reassuring guide to putting together a publishing team.

WHEN KITTENS GO VIRAL
Pattison, Darcy
Illus. by Standard, Nicole
Mims House (122 pp.)
Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-62944-142-9
978-1-62944-143-6 paper

A feline star is born into a social media dynasty in Pattison’s kids’ chapter book.

Cats, using amazing translation technology, have taken control of KittyTube and can now share and monetize their own video content. In an homage to the golden age of Hollywood studios, Kittywood is run by five major kennels, which engineer lucrative sponsorship deals with cat-food brands. Angel, a white Persian kitten, must quickly learn to adapt to the ups and downs of internet stardom. The road to a viral breakout, however, isn’t an easy one. As the daughter of two KittyTube stars, she must master the tricky skills of posing, acting, and grooming, all while forging political alliances with rival felines—especially her nemesis, Jazz, a Siamese cat who’s consistently ranked Top Kitten week after week. In a Black Mirror–meets–LOLCats plot twist, Angel has to become Top Kitten in order to secure funds to help her estranged father, who’s stranded in France after his starring role in a film titled Puss and Boots fell through. Her mother, MamaGrace, is unable to work after a car accident left her partially blind and scarred—a possible nod to Cats’ Grizabella. Over the course of the book, cameras loom ominously over the kittens’ lives. Some video sequences can be downright sad, as when Angel looks into the camera and meows: “It was my most woebegone meow. It was a cry for my mama. It was a cry for someone to come and pick me up and pet me.” Mostly, however, Pattison’s characters delight, as when Angel compliments fellow kitten PittyPat, who adores water: “There’s an art to looking charming when your fur is all wet.” Ultimately, the underlying message is that one’s self-worth should never get tangled up in the number of views one gets. Standard’s bubbly, black-and-white pen-and-ink illustrations appear throughout, lending even more charm to an already whimsical story. Standard’s enthusiasm for animals is clear; one only wishes there were more of her drawings here.

A largely amusing, if occasionally dark, series starter for cat lovers.
A boy tries to help his mother find her lost creativity in this debut rhyming picture book.

One day, Kyle and his grandfather find an old box the boy’s mother threw away and turn it into the basis for an imaginary submarine. “A submarine? Is that what it is? I never would have guessed,” Kyle’s mother asserts. After hearing from his grandfather that his mother used to be artistic, Kyle starts making plans to help her find her lost creativity by sharing how he sees the world. The next day, Kyle spends the day with his mother, telling her how even when they are doing errands, they could be rock stars, pirates, royalty, or astronauts. Eventually, Kyle gives up, but when all the chores are done, his mother makes him a surprise decoration to show him she cares. In this moving tale, Pittman deftly captures the way imaginative kids perceive their surroundings as well as the busy sense of urgency many adults have when they feel they don’t have time for creativity. But the rhyming text is laid out in chunky blocks, sometimes making the phrases and rhythms difficult to spot. Rambaldi’s beautiful, detailed, painterly illustrations depict Kyle’s family members with slightly different shades of brown skin. The images alternate Kyle’s imagined world with his mother’s firm reality until both unite at the end.

A touching story about imagination bringing a parent and child closer together.

HELL AND HIGH WATER
Powell, Keenan
Level Best Books (312 pp.)
$5.99 e-book | Mar. 31, 2020


Maeve Malloy is at a crossroads. She was briefly suspended from the bar after a hangover caused her to mishandle a legal case, and now that she’s free to return to practicing law, Malloy isn’t yet ready to go back to being a public defender. Bills wait for no one, however, and she takes a job as a kitchen helper at Fox Island Lodge outside Seward. Upon arriving, Malloy finds the lodge to be low on people, with just a couple of staff members and a handful of guests. The morning after a stormy night, the already small number drops by one when a murder victim is found outside. Due to the weather, the state troopers can’t reach the lodge, so Malloy steps in to bag the evidence and take witness statements. Unpleasant secrets come to light, and Malloy has to deal with vengeful parties, a hungrily bold bear, and at least one person whose sanity is very much in question. The majestic natural beauty of Alaska might seem like an unusual backdrop for a crime series in which the protagonist is an attorney, but without descending into cliché, Powell uses the setting and culture of Alaska deftly, showing the individualism and looser perspective on justice that draw people to a land still seen as a frontier by many. Malloy is a fully rounded creation: smart and careful yet struggling with alcoholism and self-doubt, she is both capable and believably flawed. The complications emerge in realistic ways so that even aspects that seem unlikely—such as having a nonpracticing attorney essentially open a police investigation—come across as natural to the narrative and not authorial contrivance. Background information is doled out steadily, and while there is a central mystery, the focus of the story is more on exploring the history of a family and those connected to it in intimate, terrible ways. This narrative thrust frees the book from the stereotypical genre constructions and allows the tale to go in directions that would be more constrained in a purely genre exercise.

Sturdy plot elements and a multidimensional protagonist make this mystery an involving read.
A global apocalypse threatens the planet and the future of humanity. Manhattan journalist Claire McBeth and former Air Force Capt. Herc Ramond, the two comet-fighting heroes from Roland's inaugural SF thriller, reunite to battle a devastating planetary threat. As the story resumes, Claire and Herc are joined by two couples on a space station mission.

Merciless World
Roland, Bruce
Self (387 pp.)
978-1-07-976407-9

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

This Issue’s Contributors

Children’s & Teen

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166 | 1 April 2020 | Indie | Kirkus.com

DEATH DO US PART
Salter, J.L. & Salter, Charles A.
Self (186 pp.)
978-1-65426-073-6

A collection of short stories by brothers J.L. Salter and Charles A. Salter that centers on murder and the uncanny.

These 10 tales span multiple genres, including mystery and SF. The opening story, J.L. Salter’s “Buddies Forever,” is by far the most thought-provoking; it tells of Donague and Donahue, two soldiers who fight together in the Vietnam War. When a rookie accidentally pulls the pin on a grenade, one of the two main characters wakes up in an evacuation hospital with his eyes bandaged, but confusion about his identity leads to an unexpected revelation. Other stories by the same author present a wife whose husband may be poisoning her (“Murder on her Mind”) and a bedroom clock that’s mysterically affecting time itself (“Time Conscious”). The stories by Charles A. Salter include “A Lousy Way To Rye,” a delicious first-person narrative about a bioterrorism attack; “That ASMR Girl,”
about top-ranking officers mysteriously dropping dead at an Army base; and “The Caves of Lonesanne Blu,” set in an alternate reality in which Lord Oonain, a war veteran, has been sentenced to death. J.L. Salter writes gripping action, exemplified by a flashback in “Buddies Forever” in which the soldier remembers diving on the stray grenade: “Then the scene sped up to real time—as real as time gets in vivid dreams—and I shoved Donaldue’s body out of the way before I grabbed my helmet and threw myself on top of the grenade.” Charles A. Salter’s prose has a boldly surreal edge, as demonstrated in “A Lousy Way To Rye”: “The worst day of my life began as I noticed my left arm falling off. Luckily it wasn’t my dominant one.” Neither author writes consistently snappy dialogue, however, and, at times, the conversations can prove laborious: “Bill, we should visit Darren…maybe take a casserole or something.” ‘I can pick up something at the deli tomorrow’. ‘Tomorrow…right.’ ” Despite this weakness, the stories’ events are sufficiently curious and unnerving to make for compelling reading.

Intriguing and unsettling in equal measure despite occasionally dreary dialogue.

In this illustrated tale, a teacher named Miss Work hands out papers with drawings of hearts and announces a class assignment: “I want you to write a strength in this heart that you’ve seen in someone else.” The students—a diverse group representing multiple ethnicities—consider the topic. The assignment helps Jericka and Ze, two brown-skinned classmates, think about how much they appreciate their friendships.

A group of classmates supports a friend dealing with a bully in this companion children’s book to Sbarboro and Leach’s previous title, The Trust Heart (2018).

In this illustrated tale, a teacher named Miss Work hands out papers with drawings of hearts and announces a class assignment: “I want you to write a strength in this heart that you’ve seen in someone else.” The students—a diverse group representing multiple ethnicities—consider the topic. The assignment helps Jericka and Ze, two brown-skinned classmates, think about how much they appreciate their friendship since the former stopped being mean. Although the assignment resonates, it doesn’t give the students a strategy for responding when Kaisley bullies Jericka. Surprisingly, a math lesson provides the answer they need: It doesn’t take much to tip a scale. When Kaisley next bullies Jericka, some classmates interrupt with warm words about the latter’s strengths until their kindness surrounds her like a shield. That compassion allows Jericka to see that Kaisley may be a kindred spirit who just needs some sym pathetic words, portrayed as swirls of color, perfectly capture the emotion of what it feels like to receive praise.

A well-written, beautifully illustrated strategy for lifting up others in the face of bullying.

THE BRAVEST HEARTS
Empowering Our Friends
Sbarboro, Jayne
Illus. by Leach, Wendy
Montgomery Publishing Company
978-0-9992420-4-9
978-0-9992420-5-6 paper

A well-written, beautifully illustrated strategy for lifting up others in the face of bullying.

BRIGHT STAR
Smith, David C.
Pulp Hero Press (354 pp.)
978-1-68390-240-9

In this historical mystery, a Hollywood screenwriter digs into the past of a relative—a silent-era movie star whose disappearance nearly a century ago remains unexplained.

In 2014, writer Elliott Farr, who’s still fairly new to Hollywood, agrees to research early, influential personalities of the silver screen for a film producer. He quickly zeroes in on Catherine Farr, his great-great-aunt, a movie actress who was famous in the 1910s, when many filmmakers were producing pictures in Chicago. Catherine’s life is a mystery; she vanished in 1920, and her lover, movie director Toby Swanney, claimed that he killed her accidentally. But authorities never found a body or officially charged Swanney, who later recanted. Catherine was a striking actress who first appeared onscreen in 1912, and she quickly proved to be an inspired writer and director as well. She constantly challenged people with her movies, tackling such topical issues as women’s suffrage and racism in America. But although Catherine monetarily supported her family, who lived on a Palatine, Illinois, farm, she and her “judgmental and envious” Uncle Aran often clashed. While investigating his ancestor’s fate, Elliott finds a few surprises, including a woman who died in the late 1950s who may have been Catherine, though using an alias. Smith’s tale oscillates between various moments in Catherine’s life and Elliott’s present. Much of Catherine’s story resembles a formal, generally neutral biography, often simply detailing plots of her extensive filmography. However, as the narrative progresses and Catherine’s work becomes more political, Smith, the author of Robert E. Howard (2018), effectively and appropriately dramatizes the struggles that she faces, both as a woman and as a filmmaker. The early-20th-century time period is particularly vivid in its historical details, which include real-life films and stars as well as a reference to the 1918 influenza pandemic. The mystery, meanwhile, is sound, particularly in the novel’s latter half, which offers readers more than one well-earned shock.

An engaging tale of a fictional star’s memoir and her puzzling fate.
A poignant, vivid microcosm of a society in the throes of change.

**PLEASE WRITE**

Stone, Janette Byron
Auscana Press (306 pp.)
$17.00 paper | $9.99 e-book
Mar. 20, 2019
978-0-578-47524-0

Stone’s debut historical novel tells a story of the tumultuous Vietnam War years—from the battlefield and from the Australian homefront.

In 1966, just a few months shy of his daughter’s sixth birthday, Catherine Mary Moreton’s father deserted his wife and young daughter. Her mom packed up their clothes and, with Catherine in tow, left Melbourne, Australia, to live with her parents in Sydney. Now it’s November 1967, and Catherine is waiting to hear if she has been accepted to a university. Her mother declares that Catherine must get a job for the intervening months—and she’s found her a position in a Kings Cross record shop. The sheltered teenager, who was raised in Catholic schools and under the constant supervision of her mother and grandmother, finds herself spending her days in Sydney’s raunchy nightclub district, where she forms an assortment of diverse friendships. Stone, through Catherine’s narration, gives readers an intriguing inside view of her character’s journey from teenager to adult over the next three years. Working at the record shop and as a waitress at La Tête-à-Tête cafe, she meets many young American GIs who “cycle in and out of the city during short leaves from the war: “We had no history, not even that of growing up in the same country,” Catherine notes, “but more often than not, a feeling of familiarity and comfort swaddled our conversations and spilled over into letters once they got back to Vietnam.” Those letters, interspersed throughout the narrative, are an integral part of the story; inspired by correspondence that the author herself received, they effectively reveal the hopes, fears, loneliness, and philosophical musings of young men fighting a war far away from home, unsure of their futures. These are deftly juxtaposed against Catherine’s own search for direction and purpose as she takes her first tentative steps toward independence. Stone only minimally develops her secondary characters, but she still manages to present readers with a poignant, vivid microcosm of a society in the throes of change. A useful glossary defines Australia-specific terminology, such as “Brolic: umbrella” and “Prang: a crash involving a motor vehicle.”

An engaging reflection on friendship during turbulent times.

**CONEY ISLAND SIREN**

Varela, Theresa
Pollen Press Publishing (344 pp.)
May 9, 2019
978-1-73271-671-1

A woman struggles with a violent relationship that is foreshadowed by a mysterious, century-old diary in this thriller by the author of *Nights of Indigo Blue* (2016).

When Maggie Fuentes, a nurse at a Brooklyn hospital who lives on Coney Island, tries to break up with her boyfriend, Frank Ramirez—a publicly charming, privately abusive cop—the result is a tirade capped by a blow to her head that temporarily knocks her out. In the aftermath, she is plagued by pounding headaches, dizziness, and a growing sense of disorientation. At work, she is saddled with an emotionally unsettling patient who is semiconscious after attempting suicide. Meanwhile, Frank continues his menacing control, mixing protestations of love with callous insults and threats that leave her too frightened to seek legal protection. A few bright spots ease Maggie’s despondency without solving her problems. One is a handsome intern whose interest culminates in torrid trysts but no substantial relationship. Then there are the drugs, including painkillers, which makes her so mellow after she smokes it that she manages to fall back in love with Frank. Her self-medication helps her cope but also deepens her loss of autonomy. Maggie’s predicament is paralleled by the entries in a diary she finds at a flea market, written by a servant girl beginning in 1903. Like Maggie, Ellen is trapped by brutal, domineering men and seeks solace in gazing at the moon over the Coney Island beach until a friendship with a fortuneteller prompts her to try to take back her life. As Maggie starts having hallucinations, her identification with Ellen grows so strong that she feels the servant’s spirit entering her and transporting her back in time to a masked ball. Varela’s haunting tale is in part a superbly realistic evocation of Maggie’s downward spiral that turns darkly claustrophobic as her grip on reality loosens. The hospital scenes are well observed and full of absorbing procedural detail. The rendering of Maggie’s relationship with Frank is vivid and appalling.
as she negotiates the minefield of his hair-trigger temper and paranoid—sometimes not so paranoid—jealousies. (At one point, he carefully sniffs her to detect evidence of a betrayal, then administers a beating.) The author’s psychologically shrewd prose—“While I was relieved that I hadn’t heard from him,” Maggie muses of Frank, “I was also somewhat annoyed. I hated when he ignored me”—conveys a complex, nuanced portrait of domestic violence. Frank is monstrous but has his own history of childhood abuse. Maggie makes dangerous compromises, finding his domination reassuring and even arousing when it doesn’t terrify her. The novel’s supernatural elements are less compelling. Ellen’s diaristic narrative is threadbare and doesn’t add much to Maggie’s experiences. In addition, Maggie’s visions feel out of place as they become more psychedelic. (“He cut the air around me and a glistening dark-blue snake slithered out of my body,” Maggie observes during an encounter with the Archangel Michael.) There are third-act problems and a misfiring climax as the tale’s spiritual high point weakens the impact of Maggie’s real-world travails. Still, Varela’s portrayal of Maggie’s ordeal is a tour de force in its depiction of a battered woman struggling to recover her mind and soul.

An engrossing exploration of an intimate horror.

**ZERO G**

Wells, Dan
Self (188 pp.)
Dec. 8, 2019
978-1-70947-472-9

A boy on a future deep-space voyage awakens from suspended animation prematurely and becomes the only human able to take action when marauders invade the ship.

This middle-grade novel by prolific SF/thriller author Wells introduces readers to Su-Shu “Zero” Huang. He is the 12-year-old son of a prominent engineer who worked on the *Pathfinder*, a skyscraper-sized ship carrying earthlings intending to build a new civilization on a habitable planet 20 light-years away. Zero and his family are among the 20,000 voyagers in stasis for the 105-year journey at one-fifth light-speed to a distant star. But after only 28 days, Zero’s pod malfunctions and revives him—just as the *Pathfinder* is two days away from a perilous maneuver heading over the edge of the solar system. An adult pilot who should have been on duty is missing, so Zero finds himself completely alone except for Sancho, an artificial intelligence program that assists in maintaining the ship. Sancho tries to help Zero cope with the unexpected development but is limited by its incorporeal nature and machine logic. Then another vessel docks with the *Pathfinder*, and Zero deduces that he and his helpless fellow humans have become potential victims of space pirates. The audience may recognize the much imitated template of the movie *Die Hard* (or, if readers want to be literary about it, Roderick Thorp’s novel *Nothing Lasts Forever*, which inspired the Bruce Willis film), though a *Home Alone* parallel is equally apt. Antics in this series opener stay in the PG realm, and the plucky youngster uses improvised weapons and fancy moves against his enemies, who oscillate between the scary and the silly (a recurring panic by the bad guys—who really ought to know better—that their nemesis is really an alien definitely leans to the childish). A smattering of Asian names carries a multicultural flavor. Fans may find an echo here of the matriarch-dominated sky pirates from the classic Studio Ghibli cartoon *Castle in the Sky*. If things stay a little markedly in orbit around juvenile-level dialogue and situations (but no more than Robert Heinlein and Robert Silverberg did in their younger-skewing material), the action is still constant and fairly riveting. Sancho, smartly, is never allowed to become either a convenient, all-purpose solution to the hero’s dilemmas or an R2-D2 stand-in.

A somewhat derivative plot deftly gains altitude, atmosphere, and velocity via vibrant storytelling.
OPRAH DITCHES MY DARK VANESSA AFTER CONTROVERSY

Oprah Winfrey decided not to select Kate Elizabeth Russell’s *My Dark Vanessa* for her influential book club because of a controversy surrounding the novel, the Associated Press reports.

Winfrey’s about-face follows her decision to pick Jeanine Cummins’ *American Dirt* for her book club in January. That novel was accused by critics of promoting stereotypes of Mexican people. A spokesperson for Winfrey confirmed the cancellation of the selection, telling AP, “Ultimately we did not end up moving forward with it as a book club selection.”

*My Dark Vanessa*, about a teenage girl in a sexual relationship with her teacher, was embroiled in a Twitter-based controversy in January after author Wendy C. Ortiz pointed out what she says are similarities between Russell’s book and her own memoir, *Excavation*.

Ortiz stopped short of accusing Russell of plagiarism and admitted that she had not read *My Dark Vanessa*.

After the publication of Ortiz’s essay, Russell issued a statement revealing that her novel “was inspired by my own experiences as a teenager.” —Michael Schaub

LIONSGATE TO FILM CLASSIC JUDY BLUME NOVEL

Lionsgate has won an auction for the film rights to the 1970 Judy Blume children’s novel *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret*, according to Deadline. The movie has been greenlit by the studio and will be adapted and directed by Kelly Fremon Craig.

In the novel, sixth grader Margaret Simon’s family moves from New York City to a New Jersey suburb, where she makes new friends. However, she’s deeply anxious about the experience of puberty and how it’s affecting her relationships with other girls and boys. She often talks to God to help her through her difficulties.

Relatively few of Blume’s books have been adapted for the screen over the years, although Deadline reported in February that a Hulu limited series of her 1998 adult novel, *Summer Sisters*, is also currently in development. —David Rapp

COLIN QUINN ROASTS THE 50 STATES IN NEW BOOK

No matter what state you live in, Colin Quinn has something unkind to say about it.

The comedian known for his barbed wit and thick Brooklyn accent is writing a book that will roast every state in the union, *Vulture* reports. *Overstated: A Coast-to-Coast Roast of the 50 States* will be published by St. Martin’s Press on Sept. 22. The publisher says that in the book, Quinn “calls us out and identifies the hypocrisies inherent in what we claim to believe and what we actually do.”

*Vulture* printed some excerpts from the book, including his take on Massachusetts: “[Tocqueville] said the average Massachusetts person’s love of discourse brought to mind ancient Athens. I’m sure he wouldn’t feel that way if he was in the bleachers in Fenway listening to a couple of cockknockers from Everett cursing and throwing their soft serve helmets at a group of kids because they’re wearing Tufts sweatshirts.”

And then there’s this about Texas, home state of Kirkus and of this reporter: “What is it about Texas? I can give you my opinion, but Texas doesn’t care,” Quinn writes. “I understand Texas because I’m from New York. Texas has the same attitude as New York. They think they’re doing you a favor by being part of America. It’s just how we are.”

Michael Schaub is a Texas-based journalist and regular contributor to NPR. David Rapp is the senior Indie editor.
The Japanese have a word for it: *tsundoku*, a blend of the words for reading and letting things pile up. The term refers to the books we buy but somehow never get to, what the economist and deep thinker Nicholas Taleb, writing with respect to Umberto Eco’s famed 30,000-volume library, calls an “antilibrary.”

If we had to guess which book figures most prominently in the antilibraries of the world, Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, which appeared in 1988, might just be it. It was an unlikely bestseller, full of thorny concepts in physics and mathematics along with tentative stabs at presenting the unified theory of everything that his fictional acolyte, Sheldon Cooper of *The Big Bang Theory*, was still beavering away on 30 years later.

Unusually, Hawking also floated ideas about religion in his book, which went on to sell 9 million copies worldwide. He wondered whether there was such a thing as free will given that the presumed unified theory would also determine our actions, meaning, as he writes, that “the theory itself would determine the outcome of our search for it”—and perhaps decide that it would prefer to hide from our prying eyes. Certainly, what Hawking called “the God particle” eluded him even as he made important discoveries about the form and behavior of black holes and other features of space that were conjectural long before they were ever proven.

One of the things that makes my head hurt is the thought that one day, billions of years from now, the nuclear reactions that make the stars burn will come to an end, and when that happens, the universe will simply go dark. Stephen Hawking’s head hurt when he tried to puzzle out the thought that, as he writes, “the universe is not infinite in space, but neither does space have any boundary.” It’s a koan, that finite but borderless structure in which, improbably, we live, and Hawking returns to it at several points in his book.

Arthur Eddington, the great mathematician, once remarked that he did not consider any of his proofs complete until he had written them out in plain English. He was inspired by an Indian autodidact named Srinivasa Ramanujan. Another mathematician once visited him in hospital and remarked that he had taken taxi 1729 to get there. Ramanujan replied, “It is a very interesting number. It is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways.” (The cubes in question are $13 + 123$ and $93 + 103$.)

Stephen Hawking wrote in the same plainspoken spirit, difficult though his ideas were. While Ramanujan died at only 32, Hawking lived an unexpectedly long life considering that a motor neuron disease confined him to a wheelchair for 55 years. He died two years ago, at the age of 76, having received just about every award science had to offer—all, that is, except the Nobel, for the “God particle” about which he theorized was discovered, in the form of a boson, by another scientist. Hawking is gone, but *A Brief History of Time* remains in print three decades after its first appearance, waiting to be read.
Jen’s Staff Pick

Megha Majumdar
A Burning: A Novel
After a fiery attack on a train leaves 104 people dead, the fates of three people become inextricably entangled. This urgent and powerful debut novel will haunt you long after you finish the final pages. Perfect for readers of Yaa Gyasi, Tommy Orange, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.
978-0-525-65869-6 $25.95 100,000
Knopf / HC / June
978-0-770-59834-4 $29.95C: McClelland & Stewart
eBook: 978-0-525-65870-2 AD: 978-0-593-21211-0
LP: 978-0-593-21475-3

Elizabeth’s Staff Pick

JP Delaney
Playing Nice: A Novel
The bestselling author of The Girl Before returns with a gripping new psychological thriller. Pete Riley answers the door one morning and lets in a parent’s worst nightmare: a stranger breaks the devastating news that Pete’s son, Theo, isn’t actually his son. What follows is a tale of secrets, lies, and obsessions that is perfect for fans of The Silent Patient and Something in the Water.
978-1-9848-2731-8 $21.00 50,000
Ballantine Books / HC / July
978-0-385-69383-7 $16.95C: Doubleday Canada TR
eBook: 978-1-9848-2735-5 AD: 978-0-593-23052-9
CD: 978-0-593-21050-5 LP: 978-0-593-21333-9

Erica’s Staff Pick

Brit Bennett
The Vanishing Half: A Novel
From The New York Times bestselling author of The Mothers, a stunning new novel about twin sisters, inseparable as children, who ultimately choose to live in two very different worlds, one black and one white. Brit Bennett combines a riveting page-turner of love, abandonment, and betrayal with deep social and cultural insights about race and identity. Recommended for readers of The Female Persuasion and Americanah.
978-0-525-53629-1 $27.00/$36.00C 100,000
Riverhead Books / HC / June
eBook: 978-0-525-53697-0 AD: 978-0-525-63716-5
LP: 978-0-593-28810-4

Chelsea’s Staff Pick

Sarah Stewart Johnson
The Sirens of Mars: Searching for Life on Another World
A young planetary scientist intimately details the search for life on Mars, tracing our centuries-old obsession with this seemingly desolate planet. The Sirens of Mars offers an unlikely natural history of a place where no human has ever set foot, while providing a vivid portrait of our quest to defy our isolation in the cosmos.
978-1-01-90481-7 $28.99/$38.99C 40,000
Crown / HC / June
eBook: 978-1-01-90481-7 AD: 978-0-593-21029-1

Miriam’s Staff Pick

Inès Bayard; Translated by Adriana Hunter
This Little Family: A Novel
Marie and Laurent, a young, affluent couple, have settled into their large Paris apartment and decide to start trying for a baby. This picture-perfect existence is shattered when Marie is assaulted by her new boss. Deeply shaken by the attack, she discovers she is pregnant, and is convinced her rapist is the father. Marie closes herself off in a destructive silence, ultimately leading her to commit an irreparable act.
978-1-922745-87-0 $15.99/$21.99C 40,000
Other Press / TR / June
eBook: 978-1-922745-67-2

Maureen’s Staff Pick

M. O. Walsh
The Big Door Prize
The New York Times bestselling author of My Sunshine Away returns with another instant Southern classic: a gripping and heartfelt novel about a mysterious machine that upends a small Louisiana town, asking us all to wonder if we truly are who we truly could be.
978-0-7352-1848-2 $27.00/$36.00C 100,000
Putnam / HC / July
eBook: 978-0-7352-1849-9 AD: 978-0-593-21195-3
LP: 978-0-593-28806-7

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