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—Kirkus Reviews

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“Enlightening, inspiring, and moving.”
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Books that explore the LGBTQ+ experience

Interviews with Meryl Wilsner, Meredith Talusan, Lexie Bean, MariNaomi, L.C. Rosen, and more
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK:

Our Books, Ourselves

BY TOM BEER

As a teenager, I stumbled across a paperback copy of A Boy’s Own Story on a bookstore shelf. Edmund White’s 1982 novel, based loosely on his coming-of-age, was already on its way to becoming a gay classic—but I didn’t know it at the time. I was simply drawn by the gauzy cover image of a handsome young man seen in profile. Just purchasing that book felt illicit, and furtively reading it back home was revelatory: Here was an author writing about the powerful same-sex desires that I, too, felt. I was still several years away from coming out, but A Boy’s Own Story opened a door and changed me.

A book can do that.

In the early 1980s, a novel like A Boy’s Own Story felt like a message in a bottle—rare and miraculous, a communication from another world. Today, LGBTQ+ people have many more books, and more diverse representations, available to us. And yet I’m certain that when a queer youth encounters that book—the one that feels addressed just to them—the experience is every bit as radically transformative.

Over the years, other books shaped my sensibility, informed my politics, became personal touchstones—works by James Baldwin, Alan Hollinghurst, David Wojnarowicz, Audre Lorde, Dorothy Allison. A little more than a decade after I picked up A Boy’s Own Story, I went to work at Out magazine, where editor Sarah Pettit trusted me enough to write and then edit book reviews (among other less glamorous duties). Some of the unforgettable books that passed across my desk in those years: Scott Heim’s Mysterious Skin, Jacqueline Woodson’s From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun, Sarah Schulman’s Rat Bohemia, Hilton Als’ The Women, David Sedaris’ Naked. I vividly remember editing the rave review of Sarah Waters’ Tipping the Velvet and sensing that this novel—an inspired 19th-century lesbian picaresque—was likely a future classic.

The current moment offers even more far-reaching books about the LGBTQ+ experience for adults and young people. In Kirkus’ second annual Pride Issue, we survey the landscape and speak with some of the authors who are creating it. Meryl Wilsner discusses something—To Talk About (Berkley, May 26). Meredith Talusan tells us about her memoir, Fairest (Viking, May 26), and the journey of self-discovery that took her from gay man to trans woman. Lexie Bean talks about breaking all the rules to write their middle-grade novel, The Ship We Built (Dial, May 26), the story of a 10-year-old trans boy enduring abuse and seeking hope. L.C. Rosen dishes on the summer-camp love story every queer kid ever wanted in his YA novel Camp (Little, Brown, May 26). And our editors recommend more LGBTQ+ reads in fiction, nonfiction, children’s, and young adult.

There is almost certainly a queer young person who will read one of these books and find their world expanded. Just as significantly, there are straight readers of all ages who will similarly enliven. Here’s to the LGBTQ+ writers telling their stories, exercising their imaginations, and changing the world—one book at a time.
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

In this richly textured, #ownvoices Lipan Apache title by Darcie Little Badger, illustrated by Rovina Cai, a teen girl uses her paranormal powers to right a terrible wrong. Read the review on p. 150.

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THE HIERARCHIES
Anderson, Ros
Dutton (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-0-593-18287-1

In this novel set in an indeterminate future and country, male libidos are mostly slaked by sex dolls, and procreation has been definitively severed from sex.

Into this milieu “humanoid pleasure doll” Sylvie (i.e., refers to her category, an “Intelligent Embodied”). Unboxed at a gated suburban home, Sylvie is fully programmed to fulfill her Husband’s every fantasy and to obey the Hierarchies, rules which echo Asimov’s laws of robotics. Sylvie’s Absorb Mode function allows her to continuously learn from the Ether (i.e., the internet), ostensibly to “remain interesting…for my Husband.” She quickly grasps her societal role—in this future, sexuality has been “outsourced.” The novel pays scant attention to human women or gay men. Cloistered in her attic room, Sylvie overhears arguments denoting that the household’s human wife, known as the “First Lady,” is not on board with the role division. After Sylvie violates protocol to check on the household’s new baby (gestated, as are all humans in this era, in a lab), she is sent for rehabilitation at the Doll Hospital. There, she endures the indignities to which Doll inmates are subject, including spending days headless and being casually raped by the help. Ultimately, Sylvie’s transgressions lead her to a brothel, where she finds a friend, Cook.ie, a custom-designed geisha. Sylvie and Cook.ie plot to take refuge in the Forest, that uncharted free territory that exists in so many dystopian novels. Writing the story entirely from Sylvie’s first-person point of view is a risky choice, resulting in a protagonist who never seems fully identifiable. Sylvie disassociates from her inner and outer conflicts, as do we. The prime directive against harming humans is a rule made to be broken, but not here.

Despite the tension between Sylvie’s increasing enlightenment and her prescribed passivity, no dramatic confrontations erupt.

Echoes of Brave New World, I, Robot, and other books, but there’s little to distinguish this debut from its antecedents.
THE HOUSE AT MERMAID’S COVE
Ashford, Lindsay Jayne
Lake Union Publishing (285 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Aug. 11, 2020
978-1-5420-0635-4

A former nun washes ashore on an English beach during World War II, and she’s saved by a local viscount who recruits her into the war effort.

It’s April 1943, and 30-year-old Alice is on her way back to Ireland from the Belgian Congo when the ship she’s traveling on is torpedoed. She wakes up on a beach in Cornwall, where she’s rescued by Lord Jack Trewella and his trusty canine, Brock. Alice, who’s been a nun since she was 18, recently left her mission trip under scandalous circumstances and doesn’t want to return to the convent. She is desperate to keep her identity a secret, so she and Jack strike up a deal—they will pretend to be cousins and Jack will provide Alice with food and shelter in exchange for her help tending his farm. Alice quickly becomes entrenched in Jack’s world, helping the “Land Girls” milk cows, striking up a friendship with Merle, a woman who was evacuated from the Channel Islands and is now living in Jack’s home with her children, and getting to know the local villagers. But Alice isn’t the only one with dark secrets, and as she gets to know Jack, Merle, and the children better, she finds herself deeply entrenched in dramas both personal and political. Readers hoping for an action-packed war novel or swoon-worthy romance may be disappointed, as most of the book focuses on Alice’s internal monologue; she ruminates on leaving the religious life behind, replays her time in Africa, reminisces about her adolescence in Ireland, and worries about her growing attraction to Jack and the many rumors surrounding his romantic dalliances. The schmaltzy conclusion feels abrupt and its emotions unearned, as does the local mermaid legend woven throughout the text to little effect.

A middling WWII novel for readers who prefer their historical fiction light.

MOTHER FOR DINNER
Auslander, Shalom
Riverhead (272 pp.)
$28.00 | Sep. 22, 2020
978-1-59463-372-0

Mom’s dead. Time, for a family of cannibals, to eat.

Auslander has always written like he’s courting a strike from a lightning bolt: His 2007 memoir, Foreskin’s Lament, was a hilarious recollection of his efforts to wriggle out from under his Orthodox Jewish upbringing, and his excellent 2012 novel, Hope: A Tragedy, dared some unkind words about Anne Frank’s legacy. Here, he pushes the envelope in labored and often tasteless fashion to satirize identity politics in general and religious ceremonies in particular. Its hero is Seventh Seltzer, one of 12 surviving siblings attending to the death of their mother. The Seltzers are Cannibal-Americans—not savages eager to feast on human flesh but people of faith who ritually consume family members after they die to preserve their heritage. (The Seltzer origin story involves an escape from the old country and efforts to escape the anti-Semitic wiles of Henry Ford; the Seltzer brothers were given the names First through Twelfth to make them memorable. A daughter is named Zero, because religious misogyny.) If you understand Auslander’s work as the dirtbag cousin of Portnoy’s Complaint, you can see the comic potential here: There’s a Borscht Belt therapist (“I’ve had many patients consumed with their mothers, but I’ve never had a patient who actually wanted to consume her”), bleak nursery rhymes to underscore the rituals, odd bits of folklore (Jack Nicholson is a huge disappointment for not using his bully pulpit to support his “Can-Am” brethren). But the prevailing mood is so embittered that the satire is hard to enjoy much; Seventh is a book editor lamenting the mass of “Not-So-Great Something-American Novels,” and this reads...
There must be novelists sitting at home right now, taking notes on this socially distanced year and thinking about how to translate it into fiction. They could start by looking at novels written during the early years of the AIDS epidemic: Classics such as People in Trouble by Sarah Schulman, The Farewell Symphony by Edmund White, and The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket by John Weir are models of how to record and begin to interpret a calamity while living through it.

Larry Kramer lived through that calamity and fought hard to make the U.S. government address it. Originally known as a playwright, Kramer published the second volume of his massive two-part novel, The American People (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Jan. 7), a few months before his death in May. Our starred review called it “an acerbic, brilliant history of the age of AIDS” and said “though the book is a flawlessly executed in black humor, it is also filled with righteous anger—and, as each page indicates, not without good reason. Idiosyncratic, controversial, and eminently readable.”

This is LGBTQ+ Pride Month, of course, and there are many other great books to choose from—and a particularly exciting crop of first novels.

In U.S.–based Colombian author Juliana Delgado Lopera’s Fierce Tropical (Feminist Press, March 4), 15-year-old Francisca moves (unwillingly) from Bogotá to Miami with her mother and sister and finds herself falling in love with Carmen, the pastor’s daughter. Our starred review called it “a rich, deeply felt novel about family ties, immigration, sexual longing, faith, and desire. Simultaneously raw and luminous.”

Irish novelist Naoise Dolan’s debut, Exciting Times (Ecco, June 2), is about “a young millennial who finds herself in a love triangle with a man and a woman.” Ava lives in Hong Kong teaching English; she begins a relationship with Julian, an English banker, and moves into his apartment. When Julian returns to England for a project, Ava falls for a local lawyer named Edith. Our review says, “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.”

Tomasz Jedrowski was born in France to German parents and now lives in France, but he wrote his first novel, Swimming in the Dark ( Morrow/HarperCollins, April 28), in confident English. “A broody tale of gay love and life behind the Iron Curtain,” it tells the story of a clandestine affair in the early 1980s between Ludwik and Janusz, two young men whose divergent approaches to living in a repressive state will come between them.

In John Elizabeth Stintzi’s Vanishing Monuments (Arsenal Pulp Press, May 5), a nonbinary photographer goes back to their childhood home after decades away when their mother’s dementia worsens. Our review called it “a surreal, poetic meditation on the struggle to feel at home with the past, family, and one’s own body.”

Literary Hub staff writer Brandon Taylor’s Real Life (Riverhead, Feb. 18) is about a black grad student named Wallace who’s conducting genetic experiments on nematodes and trying to make his relationship with a guy named Miller work, but Miller isn’t even sure he’s gay. Our review pointed out that having moved from Alabama to the Midwest, Wallace “has a lot of whiteness to adjust to,” and said the book’s “unflinching forays into our culture wars are clear-eyed.”

If you’re in the mood for something lighthearted, try Meryl Wilsner’s Something To Talk About (Berkeley, May 26), a delightful of/romance about a Hollywood showrunner and her assistant. “Their mutual attraction is strong throughout, but their age difference and employer-employee relationship create caution, which turns this into a very slow burn….A sparkling debut.”

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
like an effort to burn the genre of identity-focused fiction to the ground. But replace it with what? Sarcastic fiction about squabbling siblings and parental viscera larded with sour jokes about assimilation?

Tough to stomach.

**THE RUNAWAYS**

*Bhutto, Fatima*  
Verso (432 pp.)  
$19.95 paper | Aug. 18, 2020  
978-1-83976-034-1

Bhutto’s second novel explores Islamist extremism and its roots in class divides through the stories of young people.

The narration of this novel switches among the points of view of three characters representing different socio-economic groups. Anita Rose lives in a Karachi slum with her mother, Zenobia, and brother, Ezra. The family subsists on Zenobia’s earnings as a masseuse until Ezra advances their lot through what all evidence points to as organized crime. Anita befriends Osama, an elderly neighbor, who imparts to her an enthusiasm for leftist ideology and Urdu poetry. First seen at his family’s London pied-à-terre, Monty is the cosseted son of a Karachi real estate mogul. British-born Sunny, ne Salman, has disappointed his middle-class father’s expectations for him in Portsmouth, England, where “Pa” had immigrated from his native Lucknow with high hopes of seamless assimilation. Now, instead of pursuing a business degree, Sunny falls under the spell of his charismatic cousin Oz, recently returned from a jihadi camp in Syria. These are all, in a sense, narratives of exile and renunciation, and their poignancy is deepened by the characters’ inner struggles.

At 17, Anita has reinvented herself—at the elite private school she attends, thanks to Ezra—as the ineffably cool “Layla.” Her romance with her classmate Monty, who adores her, is overshadowed by his privilege. Layla will become a jihadi influencer whose videos inspire adherents of the ISIS-like Ummah Movement. Her transition from promising student to outlaw is
Bruno shows a masterful talent for sketching both the outlines and depths of depression, guilt, and self-loathing.

**ORDINARY HAZARDS**

From a stool in her local bar, Emma Murphy reckons with the maelstrom of her broken life. With multiple degrees from prestigious schools, Emma ought to be on Wall Street, but she chose to live in a small town in upstate New York, where she co-runs a multimillion dollar hedge fund and teaches advanced communications to MBA students at the local university. She likes the classroom, and her entire curriculum rests on the importance of storytelling: Beginnings, endings, and transitions. That storytelling arc is the basis of her own bestselling book, *The Breakout Effect*. But somewhere along the line, Emma’s own story has broken down. So in The Final Final bar she sits, drinking whiskey, thinking...
about Lucas and their failed marriage. A few locals populate the scene, including Jimmy, Martin, and Cal, whose 10-year-old daughter, Summer, idly draws pictures at a table. They were all Lucas’ friends first. Meanwhile, Samantha, her oldest friend, and Grace, her business partner, have been texting Emma, hoping to bring her to Samantha’s house by 9 p.m. For a girls night? An intervention? Either way, Emma has no intention of showing up. And Emma is not the only one falling apart tonight. One of her fellow barfly’s troubles may spell the end of everything. In this, her debut novel, Bruno shows a masterful talent for sketching both the outlines and depths of depression, guilt, and self-loathing. In chapters structured according to the time of night, Bruno leads us hour by hour, step by step down the staircase into Emma’s past. In the harsh light of an alcoholic’s making an inventory of her moral failings, we witness Emma tell the beginning and ending of her love affair with Lucas. And we gingerly descend into their heartbreaking transition.

A spellbinding portrait of grief.

BEFORE YOU GO
Butler, Tommy
Harper/HarperCollins (272 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 11, 2020
978-0-06293-496-3

The story of a young man struggling with depression alternates with chapters about an unorthodox version of heaven in this warm debut novel.

The main plotline begins with the 1980s childhood of Elliot Chance. His parents are somewhat distant, his older brother, Dean, a bit of a bully, but Elliot’s imagination provides him with a troupe of friendly monsters. There’s an air of whimsy about the monsters and about Elliot’s discovery of a mysterious book, but that’s brought up short when his attempt to physically enter into the book’s fantasy world leads to an injury—and a doctor’s diagnosis that the boy is suicidal. Elliot’s wryly humorous first-person narration takes us through his high school and college years quickly and focuses on his 20s, when he’s working as an accountant in Manhattan during the dot-com boom. Elliot meets two significant friends in his support group for potential suicides: Bannor, a dapper middle-aged man who insists he has visited the future; and Sasha, a woman about Elliot’s age who writes advertising copy in which she hides subversive messages. Each of them will have an impact on Elliot’s struggles. The story of his life is interlaced with chapters set in a sort of heaven, a beautiful otherworldly combination of design lab, resort, and training center. These chapters focus on Merriam and Jollis, a couple of its angelic employees. Humans, it seems, were not created by a single god figure but from blueprints by a committee known as “the brass,” executed by Merriam. Her prototype is exquisite, Jollis says—but she goes rogue and installs a flaw, an empty space next to its heart. Every human has that unfillable space, with a wide variety of results. In chapters labeled “before,” “after,” and “in the future,” one soul, presumably Elliot’s, learns all about it. The heavenly chapters are fun and often insightful, like an intriguing vision of the future in which pharmaceutical companies invent pills that “cure” emotions like sadness and fear, with unintended results. Butler creates likable characters, and his prose is polished and inviting, although sometimes the book’s warmly whimsical tone seems out of joint with the subjects of depression and suicide.

Celestial fantasy and somber reality combine in the story of a suicidal young man.
A snow-swept journey to the ends of the Earth continues Cameron’s exploration of defamiliarized landscapes and the intricacies of human relationships.

A husband and wife arrive by train into the endless winter night of a mysterious Arctic region. The woman is dying of cancer; as her body erodes, her connection to—and patience for—her husband vanishes with it, but after suffering a succession of pregnancy losses throughout their marriage, she is determined to provide him with a family, a child, before she dies. They have come to the town of Borgarfjaroasysla (like Cameron’s Andorra before it, a name that recalls a real place but which is released from the confines of reality through a reimagined geography and, in this case, a slightly different name) to claim a foundling at the local orphanage, the only place on Earth, given their age and the woman’s failing health, that would agree to an adoption. They settle into the vast Borgarfjaroasysla Grand Imperial Hotel, bedecked in the antiquated opulence of a bygone era and, like the town around it, sparsely occupied but filled with eerie tensions. On their first night there, the man ventures down to the hotel bar, a dark, low-ceilinged burrow emanating a red glow through a glass-beaded curtain. Here, over snifters of the regional specialty, a curious liqueur made of lichen “tinged with the silvery blue glow that snow reflects at twilight,” he meets a striking, eccentric old woman named Livia Pinheiro-Rima, who quickly assumes a role in the couple’s life that’s half meddlesome spirit, half fairy godmother. The next morning, rather than delivering them to the orphanage to meet their son, their taxi deposits them at the home of Brother Emmanuel, a renowned healer and the only draw for travelers to the town besides the orphanage, whom Livia has decided the woman needs more than she needs a baby. Having ferried his wife to this enchanted hinterland on
In a spy thriller set in Chicago during the Red Scare of the early 1950s, Fields combines a paean to feminist empowerment with old-fashioned romance.

**ATOMIC LOVE**

*Fields, Jennie*
Putnam (368 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-0-593-08533-2

In a spy thriller set in Chicago during the Red Scare of the early 1950s, Fields combines a paean to feminist empowerment with old-fashioned romance, both centered on a female scientist.

During World War II, Rosalind Porter, now 30, was the only woman—and Enrico Fermi’s favorite—among 50 people working on what she calls “the project.” But the dropping of the A-bomb and its human cost devastated her. Then her lover, Thomas Weaver, a British scientist with the project, broke her heart, not only dumping her for another woman but, Roz suspects, also writing the report that ruined her career. Four years later, she yearns to return to science but has been reduced to selling jewelry at Marshall Field’s. Then Weaver reappears, begging for a second chance, though at first he resists explaining why he left or why he’s returned. Roz is struggling to resist her strong feelings for Weaver when she’s approached by FBI agent Charlie Szydlo, who asks her to keep seeing Weaver and pass on what she learns. Charlie suspects Weaver is giving scientific secrets to the Soviet Union. Compelled by a mix of patriotism and desire, Roz reluctantly agrees to see Weaver. After they have passionate sex, he acknowledges that there are secrets he’ll eventually need to share. Rosalyn feels torn. She loves him deeply but isn’t sure she trusts him. Nevertheless, she agrees to hide his safe deposit box key without telling Charlie, for whom she is also developing feelings. After all, not only is he handsome, despite a ruined hand—the result of his stay in a brutal Japanese POW camp—but he’s also reliable in ways Weaver is not. Both men adore Roz for her Hedy Lamarr beauty and brains (which the real Lamarr also had), but neither is anxious to share the secret demons tormenting him. After creating intriguing, complex characters—particularly enigmatic Weaver—Fields pushes the obvious espionage plot toward both a professional and romantic ending for Roz that is every woman’s wish fulfillment.

**THE SECOND WIFE**

*Fleet, Rebecca*
Putnam (336 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-0-52-555916-0

Alex Carmichael’s house just burned down, but that’s shaping up to be the least of his troubles.

Alex is happy with his wife of six months, Natalie, and she seems to be getting more comfortable with his 14-year-old daughter, Jade. Things have been hard since his first wife died, and he’s thrilled things are coming together so well. However, that delicate balance is tested when Alex returns from entertaining London clients to find his home ablaze and his daughter still inside. Natalie claims she tried to find Jade and get her out but couldn’t. Luckily, Jade is rescued from the blaze, but she requires hospitalization, and Natalie and Alex must stay at a hotel. If the fire wasn’t bad enough, Jade confides to Alex...
that she saw a man inside the house before the fire broke out, and it wasn’t the first time. And it just gets weirder from there. The police claim that the fire doesn’t look like an accident, and when Alex returns to the remains of his home in hopes of rescuing a few personal possessions, he discovers documents that suggest Natalie might not have been honest about her past. He doesn’t know the half of it, but he’s hiding a few secrets of his own. Fleet alternates past and present and moves among several narrators as she unfolds the truth about Natalie and the horrible events that came to define her. That past is about to catch up with her, but she’s not about to go down without a fight. Fleet is a capable writer, and Natalie’s story is especially compelling and well plotted, but most readers will see the big twist(s) coming from a mile away. This book will handily pass the time but ultimately fails to distinguish itself from a crowded field.

**DIFFICULT LIGHT**

González, Tomás
Trans. by Rosenberg, Andrea
Archipelago (150 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Aug. 11, 2020
978-1-939810-60-1

An elderly painter with roots in South America reflects on his life since he immigrated to New York City.

It’s hard to say what was on González’s mind as he wrote this novel, nearly 40 years after his debut, *In the Beginning Was the Sea* (1983), but it’s a very poetic reverie. Our narrator is an aged painter with origins in Bogotá, Colombia—called “Don David” by his housekeeper, Ángela—but in the current timeline, he’s relatively settled in New York. The most important people in his life have been his wife, Sara, whom he married at 26 and was married to for some five decades until she passed away, and his sons, Pablo and Jacobo, each of whom had their own burdens to carry. This is in some ways a reflection on aging, as the painter has macular degeneration and a variety of other maladies, and in others simply a picturesque and vivid remembrance of the moments that mattered in one person’s life. At the bottom of it all is the narrator’s unending grief over his son, Jacobo, paralyzed when a junkie driving a pickup truck struck the taxi he was riding in at the time. To his credit, González could have written a portrait of triumph over adversity, but life just doesn’t work that way sometimes, and the painter is forced to see his son suffer and finally die. The book’s narrative style is both modest and subdued, no doubt aided by Rosenberg, who previously translated the author’s last work, *The Storm* (2018).

For better or worse, mostly it’s sad, neither a celebration of the narrator’s long life nor an embittered prosecution of the terrible pitfalls that befell him and his. It’s just a life, after all.

Give the author his own ill-fated summation: “It’s a cruel cliché: the last thing you lose is hope.”

**OTHER MOONS**

*Vietnamese Short Stories of the American War and Its Aftermath*
Ed. by Ha, Quan Manh & Babcock, Joseph
Trans. by the editors
Columbia Univ. (272 pp.)
$27.00 paper | Aug. 4, 2020
978-0-231-19609-3

Life in the shadow of half a century of war.

From 1945 to 1990, Vietnam was a nation ravaged by a succession of wars with France, the United States, and China. This anthology of 20 short stories, appearing in English for the first time, grapples with aspects of that prolonged conflict and the profound emotional toll it inflicted on the Vietnamese people. Unlike much of the large body of fiction from American writers that deals with what the Vietnamese call the
“American War,” these stories, most of which are set in rural areas of the country and feature humble characters, focus less on the experience of combat and more on its lingering effects in the national life. That’s true in stories like “Brother, When Will You Come Home?” an account of one man’s search for the remains of his brother, one of the 300,000 declared missing in the war with the United States, or “Birds in Formation,” a reckoning with the pain caused by brothers who fought on opposite sides in that conflict. Several of the stories, including “Ms. Thoai,” “Red Apples,” and “They Became Men,” are noteworthy for their attention to an often overlooked subject—the experiences of women during and after wartime. To provide context to a Western audience, in addition to an informative foreword from Vietnamese novelist Bao Ninh, the editors/translators helpfully include a capsule biography of each author and a useful summary of the story that places it in a historical, and sometimes literary, context. The literary quality of the stories varies widely, as might be expected in a collection that includes both writers of some international stature and others for whom writing is not their principal occupation.

Readers seeking a broader perspective on Vietnam will find much of interest here. Vietnamese writers confront the country’s legacy of conflict in an often revealing and touching, but uneven, anthology.
When legendary Hollywood showrunner Jo Jones walks the SAG Awards red carpet with assistant Emma Kaplan, romance rumors spread like wildfire. But love takes time in Meryl Wilsner’s *Something To Talk About* (Berkley, May 26); our reviewer called it “a sparkling debut with vibrant characters, a compelling Hollywood studio setting, and a sweet slow-burn romance.”

Wilsner’s standout novel marks the first time Berkley Publishing will print a queer female romance. Kirkus spoke with the author by phone about that distinction, writing romance, and much more. The interview has been edited and condensed.

What inspired the romance between Emma and Jo in *Something To Talk About*?

I came up with the idea of two people who everyone thought were dating, when they weren’t, before I came up with the characters, which seems funny to say, because now I’m completely obsessed with these characters. When I get an idea, I have a tendency to yell at my friends about my idea for a long time before I do any writing. And so, for a while, I was yelling at my friends about “Boss Lady” and “Assistant Lady”—I didn’t even know what the setting would be, what business they were in. That led to wondering, in what situation would everyone decide they were together when they weren’t? And Hollywood came naturally from that.

I admire the choice of setting, because it further complicates the will they/won’t they, should they/shouldn’t they. Now each has to contend with this highly public power differential along with the fact that they’ve never discussed sexual identity.

Something that plays out in a lot of my writing is the complexity of queer desire. When it comes to that, you don’t know how a person feels, or if they think of you as an option at all, when you don’t know how someone identifies. That just makes it even harder, when you have a crush on somebody, to figure out how to deal with your feelings. That was especially important for me to explore.

Do you identify as a romance writer?

Absolutely, I identify as a romance writer. I grew up with all the stereotypes about the genre—“bodice-rippers,” “trashy,” “guilty pleasure,” “[something to] write on the side while I’m working on my great American novel”—and I’m so thankful to have expanded and grown out of that literary elitism. For anyone who still thinks they’ll write romance on the side for money while working on a different novel, it’s a lot harder than you think. It’s not some easy, trashy thing you can just throw bad writing at and succeed. The community’s absolutely fantastic, and the books are not worth any less because they’re about love or have sex in them. Really, they’re worth more—for the themes and situations that aren’t explored in a lot of fiction, aren’t explored or even paid attention to, often, in life. Desire, consent, power dynamics—ro-
mance, within an individual book, tackles so many big issues in ways that you’d never know about unless you’re a part of the community. If you look at a cover and think it’s just about two people falling in love or whatever, then you don’t see how much bigger a story about two people falling in love really is. It can be revolutionary, I think.

Speaking of revolutionary, this is Berkley’s first queer female romance in print.

I’m thrilled to be the author, that’s wonderful, I’m very excited about it. At the same time, you know, it’s 2020. How did it take this long? Also, it’s been very important to me throughout this experience that I don’t act like I’ve invented something new. Just because it’s [Berkley’s] first queer female romance in print does not mean that there haven’t been queer authors doing this for longer than I’ve been alive. I wouldn’t be in this position without so many people who came before me, and I’m very grateful to them for making space in publishing and proving to publishing that people want these stories.

Who did you write this book for?

This is for queer readers. That’s who I want to find. Obviously, I don’t think that it’s a book that is only for queer readers. But what’s most important to me is that queer folks get their hands on it and get to see their own happy endings.

Megan Labris is the editor at large. Something To Talk About received a starred review in the March 15, 2020, issue.

In 1989, an older Stasi operative in East Berlin ponders the disappearance of a young woman and recalls a torture victim in this fine debut.

Bernd Zeiger boosted his early career with the East German secret service in the 1960s by writing a manual on how to demoralize those suspected of veering from the party line. Now he is 60 and has been shunted aside to minor surveillance duties. His days usually proceed according to a regular schedule and predictable meals (the German word Zeiger can refer to the hand of a clock). But during much of the novel’s single day he’s preoccupied with Lara, a young waitress at his local cafe who vanished a month ago, and a physicist named Johannes Held, whom Stasi operatives tortured years earlier after he returned from a fellowship to Arizona. Hofmann, who was born in the U.S. but grew up in Germany, writes in assured prose of carefully chosen details that mark the best period fiction. It can be a while before it’s clear that this is not a Cold War spy thriller. As Zeiger’s day proceeds, interrupted by long flashbacks, Hofmann

———
Hornby is as charming as ever in this nimble, optimistic take on the social novel.

*JUST LIKE YOU*

Nick Hornby
Riverhead (368 pp.)
$27.00 | Sep. 29, 2020
978-0-593-19138-5

Love in the time of Brexit: A 42-year-old white schoolteacher falls for the 22-year-old black kid behind the counter at the butcher shop.

“It was a time when everyone was vowing never to forgive people. Politicians were never going to be forgiven for what they had done, friends and family were never going to be forgiven for the way they had voted, for what they had said, maybe even for what they thought. Most of the time, people were not being forgiven for being themselves...And could you only love someone who thought the same way as you, or were there other bridges to be built further up the river?” Hornby’s latest focuses on an interracial, intergenerational relationship that begins a few months before the Brexit vote in 2016 and continues through the U.S.’s own bummer election, with a final chapter skipping ahead two years. Finally separated from the atrocious and not-quite-yet-recovered alcoholic she married, Lucy is ready to brave the dating pool and asks the young man who wraps up her roasts whether he knows anyone who might babysit. Her sons, devoted soccer players, are 10 and 8. Joseph is already babysitting for another family as well as coaching soccer, working at the public rec center, and DJ-ing to make ends meet—“a portfolio,” as an acquaintance encouragingly describes it—while still living at home with his mum. He takes the job, and when Lucy’s first couple of setups fizzle, the two give in to their urges. As smoothly as they fit together when it’s just the two of them (they think they’re hiding it from the boys), there’s friction galore once they leave the house. The race thing, the age thing, and then there’s Brexit. Everyone Lucy knows is voting “stay” while Joseph’s dad, who works construction, is voting “leave.” The guy who owns the butcher shop wants to put up whichever poster will be best for business, and most of Joseph’s friends can’t be bothered to care. The fans Hornby has won with his comely backlist—*High Fidelity* (1995), *About A Boy* (1998), *How To Be Good* (2001), etc.—might not change their favorite but they won’t be disappointed.

Hornby is as charming as ever in this nimble, optimistic take on the social novel.
After unexpectedly inheriting a unique oceanfront house in New England, Theresa Alston Crandall learns how her Southern grandmother came to buy it and live there decades before. The discoveries change her outlook on life.

“The author steers clear of predictable outcomes in this unexpected story, providing ample romantic suspense and witty prose to keep the reader turning pages.... A captivating and uplifting tale best suited for fans of meaningful beach-town romances.”

—Kirkus Reviews

In her private memoir, Theresa Alston Crandall reflects on family secrets she has held for forty years. The mysterious death of her son requires her to confront a host of unresolved problems, a twisted accumulation of love and lies.

“This story about family bonds is truly compelling!”

—Readers’ Favorite

“...a gentle story of a woman who must choose between settling into the mistakes of the past or risking her family for a second chance, is a beautifully-written story of love and family that will charm readers with its appealing heroine and atmospheric setting.”

—IndieReader

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SISTERS

Johnson, Daisy
Riverhead (224 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-0-593-18895-8

A mother and her two teenage daughters relocate to a remote cottage by the sea for a fresh start only to discover that what they've brought with them may be worse than what they left behind.

Sisters September and July are unusually close. Less than a year apart in age, the girls share a language of preferences, games, sometimes even thoughts that makes their mother, Sheela, feel excluded and that causes their teachers to categorize them as “isolated, uninterested, conjoined, young for their age, sometimes moved to great cruelty.” The children’s father, Peter, is dead, drowned in a hotel pool while on vacation, but the memory of his capricious cruelty haunts Sheela and taints her enjoyment of her oldest daughter, September, who strongly resembles him. Nevertheless, the family makes a life together in Oxford, where their mother writes and illustrates children’s books featuring the girls’ fictional adventures. Then, something dreadful happens, something so awful that July can’t remember what exactly it was, and they flee to Settle House, the cottage where their father was conceived and September was born, high on the North York Moors by the sea. Once there, the girls are left on their own while Sheela locks herself in her room, emerging only sometimes at night to cook meals, which she leaves for them to eat by themselves. Isolated by the lonely moors that surround them and by their mother’s near abandonment, which the girls take as anger over what happened in Oxford, September and July’s already claustrophobic relationship becomes something verging on a possession as July’s identity is slowly sublimated under the more dominant personality of her sister and the smothering nature of the house itself. When the instigating event that caused them to leave Oxford finally comes to light, it does so with an incandescence that reilluminates everything that has come before; what the reader and July herself should have seen all along, if only we had known how to look. Johnson—whose first novel, Everything Under (2018), made her the youngest author ever shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize—brings her nuanced sense of menace and intimate understanding of the perils of loving too much to this latest entry in her developing canon of dark places where the unspeakable speaks and speaks.

A subtle book that brings to bear all its author’s prodigious skill.

WHEN THESE MOUNTAINS BURN

Joy, David
Putnam (272 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-0-525-53688-8

This slow-burning thriller tracks disparate lives affected by a drug empire in western North Carolina.

Early in Joy’s latest novel, an aging white man named Raymond Mathis drives into the Qualla Boundary and reflects on the history of the Cherokee. The narration moves inside Raymond’s thoughts as he ponders the region: “It was a continuum. The government had never stopped shitting on natives. There was not a single moment in history solid enough to build any sort of trust upon.” Raymond is en route to pick up his son, a lifelong addict who has run afoul of a local drug kingpin. It’s a familiar scene—straight-and-narrow father bails out his tragically flawed son—but the focus is on the complex and harrowing history the two men share in a region with a complex and harrowing history all its own. Joy’s novel encompasses the perspectives of a number of people in this community, with Raymond being one of the book’s two central characters. The other is Denny Rattler, a Cherokee man who’s fallen into a life of heroin addiction and petty crime after a workplace accident. When Raymond’s son...
CELEBRATE PRIDE

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relapses and dies, it sets the older man on a path of vengeance. Despite the presence of a few hissable villains, drug kingpins and corrupt cops among them, Joy makes the flaws of Raymond’s approach readily apparent—including a scene displaying the unpleasant collateral damage it results in. It’s Denny who emerges as the book’s most complex character and the one who drives the plot toward its satisfying conclusion.

With memorable characters, deft plotting, and an attention to detail, Joy has written a powerful work of crime fiction.

An ambiguous relationship is turned inside out in this intensely vivid novel. Helen and Frank have lived together for decades—first in Amsterdam and later in Normandy. The nature of their relationship is somewhat murky. They’re devoted to each other, but they both take other lovers; at one point, Helen gets married and moves to Boston. Quiet Helen is a writer and a scholar while Frank develops an international reputation as a painter. This swift, intense novel is narrated by Helen, who, in the present day, reflects on a shared life that ends, finally, in spectacular violence. French novelist Kerninon’s prose has a rare clarity, and the details of Helen and Frank’s life accrue with assiduous force. We’re told early on that the story will end with an innocent death, but whose death approaches, and why, and how, isn’t revealed until the very end. Helen emerges as a richly complicated figure, full of contradictions. Unfortunately, the same isn’t true of Frank. He takes advantage of Helen’s nurturing—for years, she handles their domestic lives while, oblivious, he carries on painting—but beyond that, his interiority never comes into focus. This is partly due to the unnecessary gimmick on which the novel depends: In the present day, Helen has run into Frank on the street, and her narration of the novel is supposed to be a kind of monologue that she addresses to him. That gimmick tests the reader’s credulity. Still, the novel unwinds with such a propulsive momentum that these minor flaws are easily forgiven. This is Kerninon’s first book to appear in English; hopefully, there will be many more.

Kerninon’s novel charms and unsettles to an equal degree, and a few small flaws fail to detract from the book’s power.

In these 18 short stories, written between 1920 and 1940, Russian writer Krzhizhanovsky turns a sardonic eye on history, God, philosophy, the early days of the Soviet Union, and the writer’s fate.

After the title character dies in “Comrade Punt,” his pants continue to perform his office job so well they are given a promotion. In “The Gray Fedora,” a nihilistic thought jumps from a man’s head into his new hat. When the fedora is mistakenly worn by the wife’s lover, it causes his suicide, then floats
WE CELEBRATE PRIDE YEAR ROUND

Bold Strokes Books: The Source for LGBTQ Fiction

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A DEBUT NOVELIST DEPICTS THE COMPLICATED SELF-DISCOVERY OF A
BISEXUAL PALESTINIAN AMERICAN WOMAN

By Johanna Zwirner

Journalist, author, and teacher Zaina Arafat’s debut novel, You Exist Too Much (Catapult, June 9), explores the tensions and vicissitudes of identity. Arafat’s unnamed narrator grapples with the confounding question of how to be a bisexual Palestinian American woman—not always knowing where to exist in a world that insists on complete self-knowledge. She experiences pitfalls in her ongoing recovery—from love addiction, an eating disorder, challenging family relationships—but her pursuit of healthy love prevails, and the result is a vulnerable, honest tale that speaks to the power of self-discovery. Arafat is based in New York and recently spoke with Kirkus by Zoom videoconference; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What prompted you to leave the narrator unnamed throughout the book?
She’s unnamed because it speaks to the feeling of existing too much and how one tries to make oneself exist less. She struggles with anorexia and hides from her sexual orientation and also hides behind these obsessions with unattainable women. She’s constantly trying to take up less space in the lives of others and in her own life. That’s why she’s unnamed, to suggest that it’s a way of her not existing as presently or as much as she would if she had a name.

Are there ways in which you identify with her?
Sure, of course. I myself am Palestinian American. The feeling of existing in a liminal space is very familiar to me in that context of trying to navigate or forge a sense of belonging. In that regard, culturally, I absolutely identify with the protagonist. I would say that I identify also in terms of navigating the in-betweenness of sexuality. I really identify with a lot of her in-betweenness.

How much do her mother’s quite conservative values impact the narrator’s identity as a Palestinian American?
The mother’s values impact the narrator a lot as a Palestinian American because they sort of define the Palestinian part of her and create a tension within her in terms of her identity. The spaces that she exists in—as an American, as a bisexual woman—are complicated by her Palestinianness, and that Palestinianness is so closely linked to her mother. Her mother [is] the embodiment of that for her [which] impacts her identity as a Palestinian American in the sense that...it creates such a wide area of in-betweenness that she feels confused in. Those moments [with her mother]—those are defining moments for her and shape and complicate and confuse her identity.

This book offers the perspective of a bisexual woman of color, a point of view we don’t encounter very often in American fiction. Did you set out to address a lack of representation, or did that come about as the story developed?
I think it happened simultaneously. The main driving force is
the story itself, without really thinking about telling a story from the perspective of a bisexual woman of color. But I had been working as a journalist for some time, and it seemed to me that no matter how many articles or op-eds were written about Arabs and Muslims, [they weren’t] doing enough work to represent those perspectives. My goal was to present characters that were just as human as any others and had the same shortcomings, longings, and desires. I wanted it to feel subversive insofar as it was offering the perspective of a bisexual woman of color, and, at the same time, I wanted the story itself to be a very human story, and I wanted that to take precedence over anything else.

More than once, the narrator references being in recovery from anorexia. Is she also in recovery from her love addiction?

I think that she remains in recovery from love addiction, insofar as she gets to the point [where] the trajectory is finding healthy love. Even after leaving the treatment center, she enters into a love-addicted relationship before the final relationship; she’s still going down that path, but I think she manages to pull away from it. So while she does arrive at a healthy relationship characterized by real love, she’s still dangerously close to relapsing, which is so true of addiction. It’s rare that one entirely overcomes either a process-based addiction or a chemical-based addiction. I wanted to suggest that the risk still exists. But she manages to overcome to the extent that she can find the healthy, loving relationship.

*Johanna Zwirner is the editorial assistant. You Exist Too Much was reviewed in the April 15, 2020, issue.*

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You Exist Too Much

**Zaina Arafat**

**LUSTERS**

Leilani, Raven

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

(240 pp.)

$26.00 | Aug. 4, 2020

978-0-374-19432-1

After losing her day job, a troubled young artist finds herself living with her much-older lover, his inscrutable wife, and their adopted daughter in Leilani’s electric debut.

Edie meets Eric online: She’s a 23-year-old black art school dropout with a mouse-infested apartment in Bushwick and an ill-fitting administrative job at a children’s publishing imprint; he’s a white archivist in an open marriage and twice her age. “The age discrepancy doesn’t bother me,” she explains, keenly aware of the dynamics of these types of exchanges, his stability and experience for the redemptive power of her youth. Of course, she has been curious about the wife, but it’s only after Eric goes silent that she wanders into his unlocked house and comes face to face with Rebecca, who knows who she is and coolly invites her to stay for dinner. Afterward, Rebecca leaves her a voicemail: “I enjoyed meeting you, let’s do that again.” And so it begins. Newly fired from the publishing house for downriver and continues to infect anyone who puts it on with a feeling of utter pointlessness. In these stories, thoughts and ideas have lives of their own. Literally. (“Only half-inhabited, like a hamlet after the plague, the old man’s brain was thinly populated with thought-invalids and thought-pensioners.”) In “The Life and Opinions of a Thought,” the struggle of putting an idea into words is told from the point of view of a line by Immanuel Kant. In “Paper Loses Patience,” the letters of the alphabet stage a rebellion, abandoning their posts in books, in newspapers, on signs. In “God is Dead,” Nietzsche’s statement is taken literally; the Almighty dies, long after people have stopped believing in Him, in the year 2204, with surprising consequences. Erudite, playful, wry, these stories are concerned with human failure and the failure of language itself: “We all understand each other by syllables...we don’t know how to read someone else’s feelings, the essence hidden in the word.” They are also darkly funny. A parrot that sings “La Marseillaise,” subjected to the vicissitudes of war, is described as having “the look of an atheist selling indulgences.” In the title story, a narrator who eschews the title of writer sends letters to strangers. “What, you may ask, makes me drink? A sober attitude toward reality.” He addresses an unknown fellow insomniac whose window stays lighted throughout the night: “This new socialist property must be carefully and exhaustively studied. I’m doing this as best I can.” Krzhizhanovsky died in 1950, his work all but unpublished in his lifetime. We are lucky to have the fruit of his exhaustive study available now; as his letter writer says, “We all live on history’s Unwitting Street.”

These philosophical, melancholic, darkly funny tales merit a place beside those of Kafka, Borges, and Calvino.
being “sexually inappropriate,” Edie is working for a delivery app when she gets an order for lobster bisque and a bone saw delivered to a VA hospital. The reason Rebecca then takes Edie home with her can’t be reduced into straightforward facts. Edie’s role in their household is perpetually tenuous and always unspoken: It is clear to her that has been brought in, in part, “on the absurd presumption” she’d know what to do with their traumatized daughter, Akila, “simply because we are both black.” So she bonds with Akila. Sometimes, she cleans. She is neither Rebecca’s friend nor her rival. Regular envelopes with money appear on her dresser in irregular amounts, a cross between an allowance and a paycheck. And all the while, the dynamics among the four of them keep shifting, an unstable ballet of race, sex, and power. Leilani’s characters act in ways that often defy explanation, and that is part of what makes them so alive and so mesmerizing: Whose behavior, in real life, can be reduced to simple cause and effect?

Sharp, strange, propellant—and a whole lot of fun.

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Paranoia tightens its grip on an Austrian aristocrat who condemned a man to a Nazi concentration camp.

This novel, first published in German in 1955 and now reissued in the English translation published a year later, captures the bleak mood of guilt and fear that clouded Germany after World War II. Its protagonist, Alexander, is an Austrian industrialist who, as the story opens, has gone missing in Rome’s labyrinthine catacombs. Flashing back, we learn that the transport company he inherited had expropriated property belonging to one Count Luna in 1940. After raising a protest, Luna is arrested and sent to a camp in Mauthausen, Austria. The count’s fate after that is uncertain, but Alexander can’t shake the feeling that Luna survived, and after the war he grows certain that Luna has escaped the Nazis to haunt him and his family. His reaction is a projection of his anxiety over his family’s tenuous sense of its nobility, but it has concrete and dire consequences; in due course, Alexander’s fixation makes him reckless and increasingly violent. As a portrait of Austrian nobility, the novel can get fussy, with many of its pages dedicated to Alexander’s long, tedious lineage. But as an interior study of how guilt rots a person from the inside out, it’s a fine psychological novel. Alexander’s mood shifts from callousness (“Probably even Luna himself, in Mauthausen, was now no longer a human being!”) to paranoia (“He is not going to persecute me and my family”) to insanity stoked by his nemesis’ namesake (“he had phases, phases like the moon…”). The novel dwells little on Nazism per se (“Nazi” never appears in the text, and “Hitler” only once), but it’s concerned with how fascism disrupted the comfort the upper classes enjoyed in the years before the Anschluss. For Lernet-Holenia (1897-1976), clinging to old, shallow glories leads only to madness, murder, and an eternity underground with a host of anonymous corpses.

A pitch-dark tale about the wages of complicity in fascism.

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When Ariel Siskin hears about the fire at the Bright Side animal shelter in Kansas, where she grew up, she knows she has to go home to help her mother, whom she’s neither seen nor spoken to for six years.

Mandelbaum’s debut novel—following Bad Kansas (2017), a book of short stories—is a warm-hearted tale centered around
GREAT NEW READS from AROUND THE WORLD

“THE TREE AND THE VINE” by Oda de Jong

“A literary experiment that invites comparison to the modernists of a century ago, poetic and charged with meaning.”
—Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

“MANSOUR’S EYES” by Ryad Girod

“There’s nothing simple about this deceptively spare novel—a jewel hidden in plain sight.”
—Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

“A philosophical jewel seeking revelation in interstices, absences, ruptures, and the passages between existence and memory.”
—Kirkus Reviews, Starred Review

“Capitalism and religious fundamentalism collide in Girod’s shimmering account of one man’s heresy and imminent execution.”
—Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

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the animal sanctuary “where there’s love enough for everyone.” Love for the assorted dogs, mules, pigs, and other beasts certainly abounds there, but for everyone else it’s been a struggle. Mona Siskin founded the shelter with an inheritance from her father, but her passion for the place came at the cost of her marriage to Daniel, a poet, who left one day without saying goodbye. Their daughter, Ariel—“the weird, quiet girl whose mom hoarded animals”—had a hard time at school, befriended only by Sydney Fuller, another social misfit whom Ariel later unintentionally betrayed. Assisted by loyal, upright Gideon, Mona’s steadfast helper at the sanctuary and Ariel’s first love, Ariel eventually left, too, to attend college, against her lonely mother’s wishes. Ariel didn’t say goodbye, either. Mandelbaum spends the greater part of her engaging but not completely resolved novel filling in this backstory and its cast of characters, including Dex, Ariel’s affable boyfriend; Joy, Gideon’s impossible-to-dislike girlfriend; Joy’s wealthy, kindly mother, Coreen; and the Fuller brothers, whose Trump sign provokes the act of theft that kick-starts those scant events taking place in the novel’s brief “present.” Beyond the theft and arson (and the Trump angle), there are few sharp edges in this tale of misplaced feelings and misunderstood souls that is chiefly characterized by home, irresistible animals, and the forgiving of old rifts.

Mothers and daughters reunite, and dogs seal the deal, in a feel-good charmer.

THE NEW AMERICAN

Marcom, Micheline Aharonian
Simon & Schuster (272 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-9821-2072-6

Emilio, a “dreamer” and U.C. Berkeley student who has been deported to Guatemala, a country foreign to him, tries to return to the Bay Area home where he was raised.

Emilio’s mother, in Northern California, wants her son to stay put with a relative in rural Guatemala while an immigration attorney in the United States works on his case. But Emilio is young, bright, and afraid—that his life will pass him by waiting for the U.S. to get its immigration-policy act together and that he’ll never see his mother, two sisters, and girlfriend again. He embarks on the perilous journey back to California secretly, hoping he can make most of the trip before having to call his mother for help. Along the way, he befriends four Hondurans—Mathilde, Jonatan, Pedro, and William—and together they cross into Mexico, ride atop The Beast, the infamous freight train that travels north, and traverse the Sonoran Desert to cross the U.S.’s southern border. Marcom has crafted a harrowing, heartbreaking story. Emilio and his friends experience extreme violence and terror as well as deep wells of courage, resilience, and hope. The author explores the many ways people preserve their dignity in circumstances in which others with more power would reduce them to animals. While people do monstrous things, no one here is all monster.

For every cartel henchman who abuses the migrants, there is a volunteer who offers them food, water, clothing, shelter, or words of comfort. Marcom’s plotting and pacing are well honed, and her prose is often revelatory; but a romance between Emilio and Mathilde feels jarring in its insistence on their inexhaustible nobility. Likewise, stories from other migrants riding the train, though well-told, feel like reportage conspicuously dropped into the story. The author’s effort to “humanize” Emilio the Dreamer and the other Central American migrants raises questions about whom this novel is for and what it’s assuming about whose voices will be heard on migration.

A gripping novel to read alongside the work of contemporary Latinx writers.

BETTY

McDaniel, Tiffany
Knopf (480 pp.)
$26.95 | Aug. 21, 2020
978-0-525-65707-1


The eponymous narrator of McDaniel’s second novel is born in 1954, one of eight children. Her family is on the road as her father follows work throughout her early childhood, but the Carpenters eventually settle in the town of Breathed, Ohio. The house Betty’s father, Landon, has chosen for his family is a dilapidated Victorian that’s empty because its previous inhabitants disappeared. The children wonder if the house is cursed, but, as the story progresses, it seems increasingly likely that the hardship that haunts this family is hereditary and would have followed them anywhere. As a little girl, Betty’s world is defined by the fanciful stories and traditional Cherokee tales Landon tells her. As she grows older, she must learn to endure terrible secrets and acts of cruelty that are at odds with the magical view of the universe her father tried to give her. This is not the first time McDaniel has taken readers to Breathed. Her debut invited the devil himself to this Appalachian town, and, while this new novel hews closer to realism, the voices recorded here are overblown to the point of fantasy. Betty and Landon are both presented as gifted storytellers, but virtually every character who speaks in this novel talks like a poet or a prophet. There are moments when the prose becomes kitschy: “These stories, like all the rest, had become down-home myths full of easily swallowed moons and deep-dug sorghum cane.” And sometimes whatever it is McDaniel is trying to express is over-whelmed by strenuously artful language: “I would come to learn that between heaven and hell, Breathed was a piece of earth inside the throb, where lizards were crushed beneath wheels and the people spoke like thunder grinding on thunder.” Nevertheless, Betty is a compelling protagonist, a character readers may be willing to follow through clichés, hothouse prose, and depictions of tremendous violence.

Lyrically brutal.
historical fiction
spring 2020

Sarah Xerar Murphy
978-1-771834179 | $25.00

Richard Vission
978-1-771834735 | $25.00

Mark Fishman
978-1-771835282 | $25.00

Brian Van Norman
978-1-771834797 | $25.00

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MONOGAMY
Miller, Sue
Harper/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$28.99  |  Sep. 8, 2020
978-0-06296-965-1

What do we do with bad news of the dead? A near-perfect second marriage is disrupted—first by death, then by posthumous revelations.

Boston bookstore owner Graham McFarlane is such a lovable and forgivable man that the ex-wife he cheated on, Frieda, and her replacement, a photographer named Annie, whom he is also cheating on, are close friends. Woman No. 3 is not going to make it into the circle, though, as Graham dies of a heart attack the day after he stops by her house to break up with her in a fit of uxoriousness and remorse. This death happens fairly early in the book, but since the reader knows about the affair and Annie does not, the first two-thirds of Miller’s 13th novel are infused with a merry narrative tension. That energy dissipates somewhat when Annie eventually finds out about Graham’s infidelity. At this point the novel becomes more meditative, sticking close to Annie as she deals with the disorienting feeling that she never really knew the man she deeply loved—and who so clearly loved her—for 30 years. As their daughter, Sarah, describes her “Rabelaisian” father, “He was big in every way. A lover of life. And kind…. He made people happy, without even trying.” Of course the last thing Annie wants is for Graham’s children, or anyone else, to know what she now knows. Miller’s skill at depicting the intricacies of marriage, parenting, and domestic life, the atmosphere of the independent bookstore, and the pleasures of flowers, wine, and food (a craving for split pea soup with ham and dill, served with “a loaf of dark rye [from] Formaggio,” lingers still) makes this book charming and inviting in a way that is somewhat at odds with its sorrowful impetus.

A thoughtful and realistic portrait of those golden people who seem to have such enviable lives.
The last testament of an African American showbiz insider is here rendered as an impassioned, richly detailed, and sometimes heartbreaking evocation of black culture in 20th century Detroit and beyond.

Joseph “Ziggy” Johnson (1913-1968) was a real-life nightclub impresario, dance studio instructor, and entertainment columnist for the Michigan Chronicle, an African American newspaper based in Detroit. As this book begins, Ziggy is near death and also near completion of what he characterizes as a “book of saints,” a collection of profiles and reminiscences of more than 50 personalities, famous, obscure, and in-between, who “whispered encouragement and clapped...forward” him and generations of those soul-nourished and otherwise entertained in the book’s legendary “Black Bottom” neighborhood during the ascendant and boom years of the city’s auto industry. At its outset, this hybrid of portrait gallery, cultural history, and dramatized biography seems to resemble a grand literary equivalent of a “Youth Colossal,” one of Ziggy’s annual Father’s Day nightclub recitals that one of his saints, the poet Robert Hayden, likens to “a W.E.B. DuBois pageant.” But as the portraits accumulate and grow in depth and breadth, they make up an absorbing and poignant account of a glittering age in the life of a once-thriving metropolis. The portraits are punctuated by celebratory “libations,” some of which have so much hard liquor and sugar cubes as to make one fear diabetic shock. Included among Ziggy’s saints: heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis; funeral parlor tycoon and political leader Charles Diggs Sr.; NFL Hall of Fame defensive back Dick “Night Train” Lane, who had “come up all kinds of hard, but [whose] ambition was green and vibrant”; UAW negotiator Marc Stepp; actress Tallulah Bankhead (whom Ziggy describes as “the lady who knows no color”); theater director Lloyd George Richards; dancer Lucille Ellis; Sammy Davis Jr., who pops up throughout the narrative, characterized by Ziggy at one point as a “little genius”; Maxine Powell, who taught Motown Records’ stable of emerging stars how to comport themselves on- and offstage; and, at the tail end, Ziggy himself, whose narrative voice is seasoned with such idiosyncrasies as referring to black folks in general as “sepians” and characterizing black factory workers who made up his readers and audiences as “breadwinners.” This last tribute is likely the work of the unofficial collaborator whose own story and embellishments enhance this tapestry. She is referred to throughout as “Colored Girl,” but one suspects she is a surrogate for Randall, a Detroit native whose experiences writing country music likely account for the lyricism, pathos, and down-home humor in her narrative.

If Randall’s book at times gets carried away with its emotions, it also compels you to ride along with your own.
officials on questionable charges, but before he can secure the man’s freedom, de Bourbon and several others are killed in a shootout. It turns out Rafa was privy to a large-scale swindle involving the sovereign wealth funds of several nations, and he was killed to preserve the secrets of the swindle. Riske naturally decides to pursue justice for Rafa and to uncover the swindle, partly to benefit Rafa’s wife, who once had a thing with Riske. If all this seems a little contrived, fear not, there’s more. Part of the loot amassed in the swindle has gone to a secret account, and in a parallel subplot it’s revealed that this money is being used to subvert European efforts to accommodate and resettle refugees: Rich nationalistic racists are bankrolling a suicide-bomb mission that will once and for all destroy any humanitarian impulses European governments might have. As Riske uncovers the details of the wealth-fund thefts he also begins to unravel the connections to the rich nationalists, and eventually the two investigations become one. Riske is a likable character, a nice blending of quick wit, a misspent youth, and better impulses; he’s not above picking a pocket or stealing a Ferrari, but he’s on the side of the angels. In this adventure, however, he seems inappropriately pitted against social and economic forces of grave and genuine magnitude. Fascist forces are loose in the world, refugees perish horribly trying to secure a future, and there’s Riske, tootling along in a borrowed (legitimately, this time) Ferrari, headed to Cannes to make it right. Riske can steal your Monet back. Riske can save your boy and secure your inheritance, but save the world? Simon Riske?

Some thrills, but in the end this asks too much of the hero, and of the reader.

THE DISCOMFORT OF EVENING
Rijneveld, Marieke Lucas
Trans. by Hutchison, Michele
Graywolf (224 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-64445-034-5

The effects of the unspeakable grief felt by 10-year-old Jas’ family after the death of her beloved older brother are explored in painful and painstaking detail in this startling debut novel by a Dutch poet.

After Matthies Mulder’s ice-skating venture to “the other side” of the lake in a rural farming village ends with his being trapped under the ice, the entire Mulder family unravels in ways so unsettling that death (and the allure of “the other side”) beckons insidiously to those left behind. Members of a dogmatic Reformed church, the family stoically attempts to carry on life as before Matthies’ death (a life cheerlessly marked by repression, guilt, the visceral horrors of dairy farming, and domination by an omniscient God). As Jas’ parents slowly recede into states of icy indifference, the three surviving children create their own system of rules and survival, marked by tics, abuse, incestuous experimentation, and abject cruelty to animals (and other living creatures). Jas’ narration of her family’s journey into solitary madnesses alternates between poetic simplicity and childish fantasy about adult life and the world beyond farm and village. Connections between the causes and effects of life events waver between the grotesque and the mundane while Jas’ ability to comprehend the world around her wavers as well. Trigger warnings may not suffice to warn unwary readers of the scatology, violence, and misogyny Jas recounts, but the larger warning should attach to the world she describes, not to her story.

Rijneveld’s extraordinary narrator describes a small world of pain which is hard to look at and harder to ignore.
A multigenerational saga of an Italian family that immigrates to Germany in the mid-20th century.

German fashion designer Julia Becker always believed that her father, Vincenzo, died when she was a child—at least, that’s what her mother, Tanja, had always told her. But her life turns upside down when a mysterious elderly man approaches her after a Milan Fashion Week show for her upstart clothing label, claims to be her long-lost grandfather, and reveals that her father is still alive. Though Julia at first refuses to believe him, she soon uncovers a trove of family secrets that forces her to reevaluate everything. The novel unfolds as a series of reminisces that begin with Julia’s grandfather Vincent’s journey from Munich to Milan to work on the Isetta bubble car in the 1950s, where he met, fell in love with, and impregnated Giulietta Marconi, a Sicilian woman who was engaged to her cousin Enzo. Though Vincent and Giulietta separate, Giulietta and Enzo later immigrate to Munich, and the old romance is rekindled. Speck effectively depicts the struggles of Italian “guest workers” facing discrimination in postwar Germany, but despite this noble enterprise, his novel lacks dramatic power. The book feels both too long and not long enough. At 520 pages, it’s a hefty tome, but Speck tells the stories of so many members of Julia’s extended family that the book feels rushed; frustratingly, he often summarizes his characters’ feelings and motivations instead of letting them live and breathe on the page in fully realized dramatic scenes. The novel also suffers from an inconsistent framing device: Though it’s written as a series of stories being told to Julia or as entries in Giulietta’s diary, those stories often include information that the narrators could never have known, which is disorienting to the reader.

An unsatisfying family epic that bites off more than it can chew.
FAREWELL, GHOSTS
Terranova, Nadia
Trans. by Goldstein, Ann
Seven Stories (224 pp.)
$18.95 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-64421-007-9

A woman becomes mired in the moment that her father disappeared from her life.

In her first book published in English, Italian novelist Terranova tells an affecting tale of a woman consumed by the loss of her father, who left the house one day when she was 13 and was never heard from again. Set in Sicily, where the now 36-year-old Ida goes to help her mother clear out the family’s apartment in preparation for selling, the novel evokes the world so palpably portrayed by Elena Ferrante, a comparison underscored by Ida’s troubled relationship with Sara, a young woman who had been her closest friend but now spurns her efforts to reconnect. The tension between Ida and Sara is likely to remind readers of Ferrante’s Elena and Lila, of My Brilliant Friend. Terranova’s restrained, graceful prose, translated by former New Yorker editor Goldstein, deftly captures Ida’s sorrow and anger. Her father had been depressed for years, and while Ida’s mother went off to work, Ida was left to feed him lunch and watch him as he lay in bed, day after day. When he disappeared, she was consumed with guilt. “Those who disappear redraw time,” she thinks, “and a circle of obsessions envelops the survivors.” She and her mother never talked about what happened. Their world, she says, “had gotten stuck,” and each carried out “a stubborn pretense that nothing was wrong,” never confiding their despair, even to one another, never asking anyone for help. Their family of two, she reflects, was “maimed and full of silences.” During her brief return to Sicily, surrounded by artifacts of her past, Ida is forced both to confront painful memories and to face the effects of her self-absorption and deeply held identity as “the daughter of the absence” of her father.

A delicate rendering of a life smothered by overwhelming loss.

GOOD DOGS DON’T MAKE IT TO THE SOUTH POLE
Thyvold, Hans-Olav
Trans. by Otsby, Marie
HarperVia/HarperCollins (320 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-0-06298-165-3

A dog and a widow navigate their new lives as a duo in this fiction debut.

Tassen is a one-man dog, and unfortunately, his man, The Major, has just taken his last breath. Now Tassen and widowed Mrs. Thomkildsen find themselves alone and faced with having to reconfigure their lives without him. This leads to journeys to the library and an interest in the 1911 race to the South Pole between Norway’s Roald Amundsen and Britain’s Capt. Robert F. Scott. Tassen is fascinated by Amundsen’s sled dogs, and Mrs. Thomkildsen tells him stories of how each dog met its fate, from being stuffed to eaten. Tassen is just getting used to his new normal when Mrs. Thomkildsen’s son and his family show up, seemingly concerned about how she’s getting on. Mrs. Thomkildsen assures them she’s fine, but is she? Tassen is a unique narrator, but the tone is all over the place, matter of fact and blunt and whimsical. It’s hard to get a feel for Tassen and, by extension, any other character. This is Thyvold’s first book to be published in the U.S. as well as his first work of fiction. His previous nonfiction book on Amundsen explains the intense amount of detail on the South Pole journey, which is unfortunately to the detriment of the main plot. The family thinks Mrs. Thomkildsen is losing her mind because she talks to and understands Tassen, but at one point a stranger does, too, and then it’s never mentioned again. The book is unsure of its own internal mythos, which throws everything else off.

An odd tone, uneven narrator, and lopsided plot hold this puppy back.
OTTO PENZLER PRESENTS
AMERICAN MYSTERY CLASSICS

Reissuing the Greatest Authors from the Golden Age of the Genre

Distributed by W. W. Norton
THE GREAT OFFSHORE GROUNDS
Veselka, Vanessa
Knopf (448 pp.)
$27.95 | Aug. 26, 2020
978-0-525-65807-8

A dysfunctional family’s understanding of who they truly are is upended by a long-held secret.

Livy and Cheyenne are sisters in their early 30s, born on the same day to the same father but different mothers. This isn’t the end of their messy family tree: Raised together by Kirsten, one of their birth mothers, Livy and Cheyenne are now “flunk[ing] adulthood.” Newly divorced and jobless, Cheyenne is crashing in her sister’s basement apartment; underemployed Livy is trying to figure out how to get enough money to make ends meet. When the father they haven’t seen in many years reaches out to invite them to his wedding, the sisters attend only to be greeted with a gift: an envelope containing the address of their other birth mother, who abandoned the family when the girls were babies. With the financial help of Essex, their adopted younger brother, Livy and Cheyenne embark on the first of a series of travels in an attempt to find the woman who mothered one of them; back at home, Essex and Kirsten undertake journeys of their own. In the process, the anti-authoritarian quartet grapple with their desires to be washed “clean of history” at the same time they understand the parts they play in the tangle of the others’ lives and the larger story of America. Veselka takes a kitchen-sink approach to the novel: Points of view shift kaleidoscopically, passages of history and politics are woven into the questlike narratives of the characters. The result is a fiery and occasionally luminous chaos that feels true to the experiences of those for whom each day is lived at the edges of mainstream society.

An energetic, if messy, examination of the push and pull between freedom and belonging.

THE SILENCE
Veste, Luca
Sourcebooks Landmark (400 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-4926-7874-8

The past is about to catch up to a group of friends that may have accidentally killed a serial killer.

A weekend music festival in the woods featuring 1990s cover bands seems like the perfect way for Liverpudlians Matt Connolly, his live-in girlfriend, Alexandra, and their childhood friends Stuart, Chris, Nicola, and Michelle to reconnect and shake off the middle-age doldrums. The fun turns into terror when Matt awakens in the middle of night to Stuart’s screams. The group eventually catches up to Stuart, who is fighting for his life with a machete-wielding maniac. Matt’s group soon gets the upper hand, and in the end, it’s not clear who dealt the killing blow, but the stranger is undeniably dead. Despite his friends’ urging, Matt nixes calling the authorities. For some inconceivable reason, he thinks they’ll be accused of killing the man in an alcohol- and drug-fueled frenzy. They bury the guy and plan to skedaddle, but they then discover the body of a young man next to a flickering red candle. They reason that the man they buried could be the mythical (so far) killer dubbed the Candle Man who leaves behind red candles when he abducts someone. But no bodies have been found, suggesting he’s a mere urban legend. Yikes, definitely time to leave and never speak of the incident again. Flash-forward a year. Guilt has been eating at Matt, whose narrative alternates between past and present, and his friends. After one of their own supposedly jumps in front of a train, they begin finding the distinctive red candles in their homes. They suspect the man they killed may have had an accomplice who is now targeting them one by one. Unfortunately, the narrative largely consists of Matt and the gang arguing the merits of confessing versus keeping their secret, and after slogging through a glacially paced story nearly
“THE ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN, QUEER-MYSTICAL FAIRY TALE WE NEED RIGHT NOW.”
—Annalee Newitz, author of Autonomous

“The Four Profound Weaves” by R.B. Lemberg

“Lyrical skill, combined with unforgettable characters . . . a stunning fabric over which this story plays beautifully.”
—Fran Wilde, author of The Bone Universe

“It’s fantastic alchemy on Lemberg’s part, and their love and labor shines off the page.”
—Nino Cipri, author of Homesick

“A complex and mystical journey toward friendship, family, and love.”
—Jewelle Gomez, author of The Gilda Stories

“Go read this story, tell it to your friends, and help us get to that future that we so desperately need.”
—Trans Narrative

$14.95 trade paperback 978-1-61696-334-7
Fantasy 192 pp. September 1, 2020
Tachyon Publications LLC
Distributed to the trade by Baker & Taylor Publisher Services
devoid of suspense, readers might find it’s too much work to get
to a shock twist that isn’t fully earned.

Just watch *I Know What You Did Last Summer* instead.

**THE APPOINTMENT**

Volckmer, Katharina

Avid Reader Press (144 pp.)

$22.00 | Sep. 1, 2020

978-1-982150-17-4

A stream-of-consciousness monologue by a woman in a doctor’s office.

At the center of this startling debut novel is a woman in the midst of a medical appointment. The precise nature of that appointment only gradually becomes clear, as hints accumulate, but the woman’s name is never shared. The novel itself takes the form of a stream-of-consciousness monologue the woman delivers, without pause, to a certain Dr. Seligman, who goes on examining her without ever stopping to speak. The content of her monologue varies widely, from a kind of metaphysical riffing to a sexual fixation on Adolf Hitler she may or may not have invented during previous sessions with a therapist she’d been compelled to visit. “The only real conversations you can have in life,” she says at one point, “are those with strangers at night. During the day, there is no anonymity, and if you just start talking to people, you are a freak.” There’s also a former lover she refers to as K. and a family inheritance she’s just received. But her focus seems to be on gender, gender roles, and embodiment—its cruelties and caprices. Volckmer’s prose has a fluid lyricism even—or especially—when it is laced with profanity, which it often is. But her insights often fail to move beyond shock value to achieve real depth. Volckmer’s narrator, it turns out, grew up in Germany, though she now lives in London; Dr. Seligman is Jewish. The narrator turns repeatedly to the subject of the Second World War. She even ends the book by revealing where that family inheritance came from. Unfortunately, that ending, like much else in this intriguing novel, ultimately feels unearned.

**SKILLS OF THE WARRAMUNGA**

by Greg Kater

“In this last installment of a trilogy, two Commonwealth Investigation Service agents embark on a rescue mission in the jungles of British Malaya.”

“The book works well as a stand-alone novel while still providing a satisfying final act for the trilogy.”

“An enjoyable adventure...”

—*Kirkus Reviews*
The darkness runs deep in this skillfully plotted chiller.

FINAL CUT

Watson, S.J.
Harper/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-0-06238-215-3

Aiming for shock value over profundity, Volckmer glides past the subjects that might have made her novel truly unsettling.

A documentarian gets more than she bargains for when she chooses remote Blackwood Bay as the location of her next film. Alexandra Young’s harrowing first film, Black Winter, won her accolades, but her second film was a failure, and she needs another hit or her career may be in jeopardy. Alex wants to document what life is like in a small village in the north of England by asking people to send in their own footage, which she would then curate. She secures funding, and the people who hold the purse strings coax her into choosing Blackwood Bay, where she spent a troubled childhood, as her subject. She wouldn’t have chosen it herself, but with her career on the line, she agrees. It’s also made clear that she’s to look into the suicide of 15-year-old Daisy Willis, who plunged off a cliff to her death a decade ago. Daisy’s body was never found, but suicide was a foregone conclusion. Then, seven years later, Zoe Pearson, another teen, went missing. After the project is announced to Blackwood Bay citizens, the video clips started pouring in. However, to properly look into the disappearances, Alex must travel to Blackwood Bay. She does have faint memories of the town, but now it’s as if she’s “seeing it through a filter, a distorting prism.” As she gathers footage and probes the residents, it’s clear that some people don’t believe Daisy killed herself and that the incident could be connected to Zoe’s disappearance. Alex doesn’t quite see how the two could be related, but she does sense an insidious rot lingering under the coastal town’s quaint facade. When another teen girl goes missing, the town is looking for someone to blame.
and no one is safe, not even Alex. Before she knows it, Alex is no longer a passive observer: She’s part of the story. Watson gradually turns up the heat while carefully teasing out wicked secrets that the town would rather keep buried, and Alex, who has her own secrets, makes an appealing, if possibly unreliable, narrator.

The darkness runs deep in this skillfully plotted chiller.

**M Y S T E R Y**

**ELIXIR**

*Atkins, Charles*

Severn House (224 pp.)

$28.99 | Aug. 4, 2020

978-0-7278-9050-4

A researcher on the brink of a breakthrough begins work at a big pharma firm only to discover that his fears about the company’s morals are totally founded.

Medical researcher and physician Frank Garfield is onto something. His work with telomeres shows promise in extending life beyond its normal bounds, though only his rats have reaped the benefits thus far. His research could benefit the child cancer patients he sees at Boston’s St Mary’s Children’s Hospital, but his mentor, Jackson Atlas, is concerned that the technology could be exploited by bad actors as a genetic Botox. But when Atlas is shot dead in his home, he can’t protect Frank from the forces he designated the “pimps and whores” of the epigenetic world, and soon Leona Lang and her son, Dalton, corner Frank into working for UNICO Pharmaceuticals. Frank’s a good guy through and through, and the promise of a fast turnaround time for his child cancer patients convinces him to continue his work out of the company’s Litchfield lab, but he’s skeptical about what the Langs really want. Detective Sean Brody, who’s assigned to the Atlas murder, feels an immediate connection to Frank, and they start dating once Frank is cleared of Atlas’ murder, though Sean doesn’t like the idea that the guy he’s seeing is doing shady research for a private company with too much money. When Dalton promises Frank he’ll do anything it takes to get his cooperation, the anything is such a clear echo of Atlas’ warning about pimps and whores that it puts Frank on high alert. As the drug trials show promise, the Langs each develop secret plans to get the magic drug recipe for themselves, resulting in a fast-paced backstab-a-thon targeting Frank and all those closest to him.

The sort of page-turner whose over-the-top plot and self-awareness make it all the more fun.

**TAMPA BAY NOIR**

*Ed. by Bancroft, Colette*

Akashic (296 pp.)

$15.95 paper | Aug. 4, 2020

978-1-61775-810-2

Fifteen tales that reveal the dark side of sunny Tampa Bay.

Although editor Bancroft acknowledges that the “Florida Man” meme, which exposes the zany side of the Sunshine State, “found its ground zero around Tampa Bay,” only one story showcases South Florida’s loopier side: “Triggerfish Lane,” in which Tim Dorsey unleashes whack job Serge Storms on peaceful Palma Ceia. Apart from Serge’s brief suburban sojourn, Bancroft sticks to standard noir themes. A third of the stories are tales of lost love. Karen Brown’s “I Get the Same Old Feeling,” Lisa Unger’s “Only You,” and Sterling Watson’s “Extraordinary Things” feature lovers from the distant past whose reunions only bring grief. In Danny López’s “Jackknife,” a woman calls a recent ex-boyfriend to rescue her from a hurricane. And “The Guardian” summons Michael Connelly’s Harry Bosch all the way from LA to locate a stolen painting for an ex-girlfriend. Ace Atkins documents a more recent romantic disaster in “Tall, Dark, and Handsome,” whose nerdy heroine gets taken in by a con man, and Lori Roy flips the script in “Chum in the Water,” whose house-flipper gets scammed by a pretty face. Domestic damage also features prominently. A teenager slowly decompensates after her parents are killed in a train wreck in Gail Massie’s “Marked.” A recent immigrant is befriended by a schoolmate whose family is beyond dysfunctional in Yuly Restrepo García’s “Pablo Escobar.” A father uses a spa vacation to try to connect with his teenage son in Eliot Schrefer’s “Wings Beating.” Perhaps most disturbing of all is editor Bancroft’s “The Bite,” a child’s-eye view of a playmate’s mistreatment.

Nothing too edgy but solid noir.

**HIDDEN BONES**

*Barz, Vivian*

Thomas & Mercer (240 pp.)

$15.95 paper | Aug. 11, 2020

978-1-5420-0578-4

A simple favor morphs into a horror story for a cop and her boyfriend.

Eric Evans is a college professor with schizophrenia who was almost killed while helping his now-girlfriend, police officer Susan Marlan, solve a grisly murder. Uncertain whether the visions that helped him on that case were part of his disease or a psychic ability, Eric is profoundly unsettled. The pair, who are both on leave from their jobs, accompany their friend Jake Bergman, a violinist, and his band mates to a gig in Clancy, Washington, famous as the setting of a popular thriller series. The band members, Jake, Madison,
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NEW TO PAPERCUTZ!

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Chuck, and John, have a successful show, but Eric has a bad feeling about the mostly deserted town whose denizens are about as friendly as enraged grizzly bears. After Eric has a vision of a man murdered and buried under a tree stump and Susan finds some evidence, they make up a story about Eric’s overhearing a conversation to tell the local authorities: a park ranger and a totally uninterested sheriff. The stump is moved, disclosing nothing but a dead squirrel. Undaunted, Eric and Susan continue to investigate, making a series of appallingly bad decisions that land the whole group in deep trouble. When Madison and Chuck vanish, Eric’s flickering vision indicates they may be dead. Susan uses her connections with the FBI from her former case to ask for help that may be too late coming.

A creepy, violent tale that leaves you wondering how two apparently intelligent people could go so wrong.

HOWLOWEEN MURDER
Berenson, Laurien
Kensington (224 pp.)
$20.00 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4967-3057-2

Toxic treats spell trouble for a school secretary at Halloween.

Although Melanie Travis is best known for the triumphs of her champion standard poodles in the dog-show ring, her job tutoring special needs students at Howard Academy, a private school in upscale Greenwich, is also a source of satisfaction for the breeder. Melanie works to maintain good relationships with her colleagues, even agreeing to help novice teacher Cheryl Feeney prepare for this year’s Halloween celebration. But the person who really needs Melanie’s help, Cheryl confides, is Harriet Bloom. The omnicompetent school secretary spent the better part of the fall making marshmallow puffs, a delicacy cherished by both the Howard Academy staff and Ms. Bloom’s neighbors. That is, until one of those neighbors, Ralph Penders, dies after eating one. Once the police zero in on Harriet as chief suspect, she reaches out to Melanie with a proposal. She’ll take over the party planning with Cheryl—no great stretch for the seasoned secretary—if Melanie will please find out who slipped the cyanide into Mr. Penders’ puff. Harriet’s sister, Bernadette, can’t think of any reason why someone would want to do away with the memory-impaired senior citizen, whose gravest fault seems to have been wandering the neighborhood in his pajamas. But once Melanie starts digging, she discovers a treasure trove of microaggressions and petty grievances in this quiet corner of Connecticut, with motives aplenty for murder.

A quick and tasty tale of sabotage in the suburbs.

THE BEST OF FRIENDS
Berry, Lucinda
Thomas & Mercer
$15.95 paper | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-5420-2214-9

A shocking shooting involving their teenage sons leads three best friends to first come apart, then come together to figure out what happened that fateful night.

Lindsey, Kendra, and Dani, longtime friends who’ve grown up together and raised children together, now face their biggest struggle. A sleepover among their three teenage sons has claimed the life of Kendra’s son, Sawyer, and sent Lindsey’s son, Jacob, into a coma with a self-inflicted bullet. As alternating chapters represent each woman’s viewpoint (though their voices sound remarkably similar), the friends try to piece together what happened. Dani’s son, Caleb, is physically unscathed, but he barely talks or responds to anything except the nightmares haunting his every moment. Each woman is moved by forces such as her relationship with her husband and other children. Dani particularly suffers, as her husband, Bryan, resolves to lawyer up, making Dani look to Lindsey and Kendra as if she’s got something to hide. Dani makes no attempt to conceal the fact that Bryan’s gun did the shooting, but she’s unwilling to admit the extent to which Bryan controls her and her daughter, Luna. As Kendra faces the loss of her son, Lindsey drifts through a twilight zone in between worlds, taking care of Jacob the best she can and wondering what would ever drive her happy-go-lucky son to try to end his own life. The ongoing investigation by Detective Martin Locke, a high school acquaintance of the women, intensifies questions about who’s to blame.

A mother’s worst nightmare on the page. For those who dare.

BOSTON SCREAM MURDER
Bolton, Ginger
Kensington (256 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4967-2556-1

Spooky delights don’t discourage a murderer in small-town Wisconsin.

Black cats and scary pumpkins are just some of the confessions Emily Westhill is cooking up this year at Deputy Donut, the shop she owns with her father-in-law, Tom. But Richmond P. Royalson, the third turns up his New England nose at these Midwestern pastries. The only one he’ll order is the Boston Scream doughnut, although he insists on calling it by its proper name: Boston cream. Still, the doughnut is obviously the high point of his blind date with Cheryl, a member of the Knitpickers, a knitting club for seniors. After ordering three dozen Boston Screams for his birthday
Riley investigates her family’s past and uncovers buried secrets that demand a seemingly impossible choice.

Praise for the Riley Ellison Mystery Series

“The laughs keep coming.”
— Kirkus Reviews

“Laugh-out-loud adventures…. Orr’s series is perfect for fans of Janet Evanovich’s Stephanie Plum and Kyra Davis’ Sophie Katz, witty protagonists who always mix fun with murder.”
— Booklist (starred review)

“Delightfully comic… highly amusing… Quirky characters enliven the carefully constructed plot.”
— Publishers Weekly

“Fresh and funny, romantic and sunny.”
— Carole Barrowman,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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— San Francisco Chronicle

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party over the weekend, Rich leaves Emily’s shop, returning later that afternoon with a younger, snazzier gal for another date at Deputy Donut. Terri Estable, his new squeeze, is actually an old flame, and it looks like she and Rich may have hit the jackpot. She’s clearly been helping Rich set up for the party when Emily and her assistant, Nina, deliver the doughnuts to his mansion on Lake Fleekom, although when they arrive she’s out canoeing. Which is lucky for her, since the two bakers discover Rich’s body, conked to death with an oversized skillet. The murder brings detective Brent Fyne to the scene, stirring up all of Emily’s mixed feelings toward her late husband’s partner. She really doesn’t need to investigate the murder of a man she just met, but between Brent, the moonlight on the lake, the lure of solo kayaking, and her own natural curiosity, Emily just can’t seem to stick behind her stove.

Typical cozy fare with a dollop of moonlight mist.

15 MINUTES OF FLAME
Brecher, Christin
Kensington (304 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4967-2143-3

Experts of every stripe clash over the right to probe a historic murder.

All Stella Wright, owner of the Wick & Flame, wants to figure out is whether John Pierre Morton’s vacant mansion is a suitable location for the local Girl Scout troop’s Halloween Haunts. As she checks out one of the venerable estate’s outbuildings, she discovers a sign over the mantel for Cooper’s Candles that would make a perfect decoration for her shop. With text-message permission from Morton, she pries the antique placard off the wall only to dislodge a skeleton stuffed behind it. A torrent of interest quickly erupts over Stella’s find. Local police officer Andy Southerland wants to identify the deceased. Forensic anthropologist Dr. Robert Solder and his assistant, Leigh Paik, arrive to poke its ancient bones. Jameson Bellows, of the Nantucket Historical Association, stakes a claim to the discovery. So does library volunteer Agnes Hussey, who produces a diary that suggests that the dead woman is her Colonial ancestor Patience Hussey Cooper. Brenda Worthington, who runs Legends and Lore ghost tours, announces that she’s opened a direct line of communication with the late Patience. And ghost chaser Hugh Fontbutter wants to film the whole thing for Netflix. The squabbles among the self-identified stakeholders will keep readers amused as Stella struggles to keep order—and solve not only Patience’s murder but the host of present-day crimes that follow.

Amiable mayhem, Nantucket style.

EAT, DRINK AND BE WARY
Delaney, Devon
Kensington (304 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4967-2784-8

Recipes may hold the clue that catches a killer.

Connecticut-based chef Sherry Oliveri, who loves to compete in culinary competitions, has tapped her brother Pep as sous chef for the New England Fall Food Fest Cook-Off to be held in their hometown. Since Pep’s been away, Sherry has been looking forward to spending time with him, but he’s strangely uncommunicative and spends a lot of time on his phone. Their father would love Pep to eventually take over The Rugerry, the family business, but he’s unwilling to make a commitment. At a cocktail party the night before the cook-off at Ginger Constable’s Augustin Inn, where most of the contestants are staying, Sherry notices the tension between some of the chefs and the sponsors of the competition, and she’s trolled by Fitz Frye, a tough competitor who’s beaten her before. Fitz never shows up at the competition, which Sherry handily wins; instead, his body is found in the remains of the ice sculpture from the cocktail party. This isn’t Sherry’s first brush with murder, and when Pep becomes a suspect, she’s pushed into investigating. It turns out that Fitz and several others involved in the contest had secrets to hide, and even Ginger, desperate for money to save her failing inn, is a possible murderer.

A complex but curiously unsatisfying mystery that may still appeal to foodies.

DEATH AT HIGH TIDE
Dennison, Hannah
Minotaur (304 pp.)
$25.99 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-250-19448-0

A pair of sisters team up to claim a once-grand hotel on a remote Cornish island in this series kickoff from a veteran writer.

Evie Mead loves her husband, Robert, a silver fox with a penchant for speed sports and eccentric investments, and she’s stunned when he suddenly drops dead of a heart attack. Her shock is compounded when his financial adviser, Nigel Hearst, regretfully informs her that Robert was so deep in debt that she may not even be able to keep their home. Among Robert’s papers, however, a curious promissory note turns up: Evie is apparently owed either 100,000 pounds or the deed to Tregarrick Rock, a hotel in the Isles of Scilly. Evie’s sister, Margot, freshly home from Los Angeles and determined to cheer up her sister, insists on an expedition to the islands before Evie can even plan Robert’s funeral. The sisters high-tail it off to Cornwall and cadge
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a ferry ride from an implausibly handsome treasure hunter to find an art deco gem in dire need of renovation on an island so small it has no resident medical professionals or police. To avoid tipping their hand, Margot spontaneously decides to pose as a more successful producer than she is, with Evie as her location scout, in search of a site for a pirate movie. The treasure hunter turns out to be the heir to Tregarrick Rock, with whom the hotel's cook has an unhealthy obsession. The imposing owner of the hotel, who's unsurprisingly unhappy to see Evie, insists that he's already repaid the debt. When he's found dead on the beach, Evie and Margot, as outsiders, are automatic suspects. The police officer from the next island over gathers everyone in a parlor for questioning, reads them their Miranda rights just for fun, and accepts testimony from the local vicar, who claims to be speaking for the hotel cat.

The heroine may be an utter fool, but the author clearly expects her readers to be even stupider.

**KNIT OF THE LIVING DEAD**  
*Ehrhart, Peggy*  
Kensington (304 pp.)  
$7.99 paper | Aug. 25, 2020  
978-1-4967-2365-9

When Little Bo Peep is murdered, a group of amateur sleuths wonder if the sheep was the real target.

Having solved several cases in Arborville, New Jersey, Pamela Paterson and her pals in the Knit and Nibble group are no strangers to murder. Pamela, her reporter friend, Bettina Fraser, and the older, more conservative Nell Bascomb are all attending a Halloween celebration when some teens find the body of a woman dressed as Bo Peep with yarn wrapped around her neck. Nell thinks the victim is her neighbor Mary Lyon, who she knows had made the costume for her husband, Brainard, to wear while she accompanied him as the sheep. But the dead woman was not the prickly, unpopular Mary, who, after a fight with Brainard, gave away the Bo Peep costume and went alone as the sheep. Which woman, ask the police, is the real target? When inspector Botts fails to appear, Sarah becomes alarmed as the police zero in on Anne's son, contractor Jacob Hightower, as the prime suspect in Riley's murder. Jacob rides with the Wheaton Wildcats, a motorcycle club composed largely of veterans and veterinarians with a healthy dose of senior citizens thrown in for fun. Riley, who liked to hitch a ride with whichever Wildcat had the biggest bike, ditched Jacob early on for someone with more RPMs. Even though she's ruined his life, she wonders, "Did she make all the boys cry?"

Riley soon buys the farm, but Jane continues to make beaucoup bucks at the table. When inspector Botts fails to appear, Sarah becomes alarmed as the police zero in on Anne's son, contractor Jacob Hightower, as the prime suspect in Riley's murder. Jacob rides with the Wheaton Wildcats, a motorcycle club composed largely of veterans and veterinarians with a healthy dose of senior citizens thrown in for fun. Riley, who liked to hitch a ride with whichever Wildcat had the biggest bike, ditched Jacob early on for someone with more RPMs. Even though she was the real target.

Restaurant rivalry heats up when an Alabama chef is murdered.

Sarah Blair, a law firm receptionist who's going partners with her twin sister, Emily, and Emily's boyfriend, Marcus, in farm-to-table restaurant Southwind, couldn't care less about councilwoman Anne Hightower's concerns about developing Wheaton's entertainment district through a cohesive plan. While Sarah waits for city building inspector Louis Botts to get around to checking out Southwind, pushy Jane Clark is cleaning up across the street with rival farm-to-table Jane's Place, courtesy of a menu full of vegan treats from the saucepan of wunderkind chef Riley Miller. Riley soon buys the farm, but Jane continues to make beaucoup bucks at the table. When inspector Botts fails to appear, Sarah becomes alarmed as the police zero in on Anne's son, contractor Jacob Hightower, as the prime suspect in Riley's murder. Jacob rides with the Wheaton Wildcats, a motorcycle club composed largely of veterans and veterinarians with a healthy dose of senior citizens thrown in for fun. Riley, who liked to hitch a ride with whichever Wildcat had the biggest bike, ditched Jacob early on for someone with more RPMs. Even though she's ruined his life, she wonders, "Did she make all the boys cry?"

The suicide means she has a whole lot to explain to her superiors, to the regret of many. Diane "Handball" Harbaugh has helped put a lot of drug dealers behind bars. "You got two speeds, girl," her partner says. "Legal eagle and meth dealer." A confidential informant named Oscar tracks her down in a northern Michigan cabin and shoots himself right in front of her, saying she's ruined his life. She wonders, "Did she make all the boys cry?" The suicide means she has a whole lot to explain to her superiors, but her troubles quickly become more pressing. A mysterious caller summons her to Mexico to meet a drug lord named El Capataz, who says he needs her help. Her partner wisely advises, "You're not going to meet a cartel underboss without backup, Diane." So

**THREE TREATS TOO MANY**  
*Goldstein, Debra H.*  
Kensington (304 pp.)  
$7.99 paper | Aug. 25, 2020  
978-1-4967-1949-2

Even the vegan fare blazes no trails.
A talented assortment of plant-loving pals share a penchant for solving murders.

DIGGING UP THE REMAINS

Henry, Julia
Kensington (304 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4967-1485-5

A talented assortment of plant-loving pals share a penchant for solving murders.

Though far apart in years, Lilly Jayne and Delia Greenway happily share Lilly's enormous Victorian house in Goosebush, Massachusetts. Both are heavily involved in planning the town's 400th anniversary celebration, a labor of love whose problems are multiplied by numerous parties with differing agendas each working to put a stamp on the festivities. In addition, Delia's still doing research on some long-ago murders she and Lilly discovered while investigating a modern case—until Steps and Jimmy realize that Faceman and his boss, who identifies himself only as Faceman, perseveres to the agents about how angry a mysterious "he" will be and where "number eight" has gone. Steps and his partner, Jimmy Donovan, conclude that Faceman, ne Murphy Haze Cotton, has been part of a plot to kidnap women, bring them to the remote cabin, and create death masks of the women's last breaths. Based on Faceman's ramblings, it appears that the woman discovered alive in the trunk of his car is No. 8, leaving it up to Steps and Jimmy to figure out the identities of seven victims, a possible motive, and the identity of the "he" Faceman has fingered as the orchestrator of the grander plot. Meanwhile, the bodies of the deceased have been turned into chemical sludge in barrels, so even matching dental records is unlikely. This is where Steps' special gift comes in. After an early childhood trauma, Steps gained the ability to perceive Shine, a person's essence, finds his tracking sense stymied when the killer he's hunting plans his misdeeds through the dark web.

Creepy set pieces alternate with warm, sometimes funny interactions between the dogged agents. No computer skills required.

SHADOWS OF THE DEAD

Kope, Spencer
Minotaur (84 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-250-17854-3

An FBI agent with a gift to see Shine, a person's essence, finds his tracking sense stymied when the killer he's hunting plans his misdeeds through the dark web.

When Magnus Craig, better known as Steps, is called in on an unusual case on the Olympic Peninsula, surrounding a cabin in the woods and capturing its occupant is the easiest piece of what seems to be a grotesque puzzle. The occupant, who identifies himself only as Faceman, perseverates to the agents about how angry a mysterious "he" will be and where "number eight" has gone. Steps and his partner, Jimmy Donovan, conclude that Faceman, ne Murphy Haze Cotton, has been part of a plot to kidnap women, bring them to the remote cabin, and create death masks of the women's last breaths. Based on Faceman's ramblings, it appears that the woman discovered alive in the trunk of his car is No. 8, leaving it up to Steps and Jimmy to figure out the identities of seven victims, a possible motive, and the identity of the "he" Faceman has fingered as the orchestrator of the grander plot. Meanwhile, the bodies of the deceased have been turned into chemical sludge in barrels, so even matching dental records is unlikely. This is where Steps' special gift comes in. After an early childhood trauma, Steps gained the ability to perceive Shine, an essential feature that serves as a unique identifier as well as a trail that shows where people are or have been. It's made Steps a gifted human-hunter uniquely positioned to solve the case—until Steps and Jimmy realize that Faceman and his boss communicated over the dark web and the ringmaster could be anyone, anywhere. Combining online detection with studying some epically gross artifacts from the murder scene, Steps and Jimmy pool their talents to track the man behind Faceman.

Creepy set pieces alternate with warm, sometimes funny interactions between the dogged agents. No computer skills required.

TO COACH A KILLER

Laurie, Victoria
Kensington (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4967-2034-4

A life coach determined to investigate a hit woman called the Angel of Death doesn't foresee all the potential dangers.

In a fast sequel to Catherine Cooper's last adventure in Coached to Death (2019), Cat is stuck on investigating a sociopathic hit woman responsible for a trail of murders tangentially affecting Cat's life. Take,...
for example, the killing of Lenny Shepherd. The real estate agent was snatched by the killer years earlier, and Cat wants to get to the bottom of it so she can allay the ignorance of her friend (just friend, she insists) Detective Steve Shepherd about why his ex-wife was killed by such a notorious fiend. Meanwhile, Cat’s love interest, Maks Grinkov, who’s been all but MIA lately, shows up asking Cat for an act of faith. Because of his connection to Canadian Security Intelligence Services, he needs Cat to act as a go-between for him and his handler. Surely Cat—or Catherine, as he formally puts it—trusts him, right? And Cat’s real-life job as East Hampton’s newest life coach is a perfect cover for making handoffs to strangers. Besides, her only recent client, Willem Entwistle, a little person plagued by a curse of bad luck, is hardly occupying all her time. Between Maks’ access to intelligence info and her requisite gay partner in crime, mischievous Gilley Gillespie, it’s only a matter of time before Cat’s sleuthing rouses the killer from hiding. Stay safe, Cat.

Predictable plotting doesn’t slow a fun read that gets by on its characters’ charm.

**MURDER AT KINGSCOTE**

*Maxwell, Alyssa*

Kensington (304 pp.)

$26.00 | Aug. 25, 2020

978-1-4967-2073-3

A murder at a Newport, Rhode Island, “cottage”—as the locals call their mansions—highlights the chasm between rich and poor in 1890.

The coastal resort is a playground for the fabulously wealthy, and Emma Cross, editor-in-chief of the Newport Messenger, is familiar with all sides of society, since she’s a poor relation of the Vanderbilts family. Philip King, the son of Mrs. Ella King, owner of Kingscote, has borrowed an automobile for the town’s first motorcar parade and, being a bit intoxicated, gotten into a minor accident that results in a dinner invitation to Kingscote for Emma and Messenger owner Derrick Andrews, who helped rescue the family. Emma’s romantic feelings have been divided between Derrick and Detective Jesse Whyte, her old friend and partner in crime-solving, but Derrick, whose mother thinks her not good enough, has finally won her heart. The dinner party is interrupted when Kingscote’s butler is crushed against a tree by the car Philip was driving; it’s assumed that a drunken Philip ran him down, and he’s placed under house arrest. Soon after a note to Emma hints that all is not well with the Kingscote servants, the murder of a footman opens up a new line of investigation. Is the killer a wealthy socialite or one of the poor servants who constantly fear for their jobs? Perhaps it’s Mrs. Eugenia Ross, who’s pursuing a lawsuit claiming that she, not the Kings, is the rightful heir of William Henry King. Hidden secrets must be revealed to catch a killer.

A charming addition to the Gilded Age series that’s laced with social and historical commentary and is based on a true story.

**ADDIS ABABA NOIR**

*Ed. by Mengiste, Maaza*

Akashic (256 pp.)

$25.95 paper | Aug. 4, 2020

978-1-61775-820-1

Novelist Mengiste presents 14 stories showcasing Ethiopia’s capital at its darkest.

History has not always been kind to Addis Ababa. From 1974 through ‘87, when the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia, known as the Derg, ruled the country, armed militias kept order at gunpoint. Those brutal days are chronicled in Téfeři Nigussie Tafa’s “Agony of the Congested Heart” and editor Mengiste’s “Of Dust and Ash.” Nature plays its own part in human misery: In Mikael Awake’s “Father Bread,” a pack of hyenas decimates a young boy’s family. Cultural practices like female circumcision also take their toll, as Sulaiman Addonia shows in “A Night in Bela Sefer” and Linda Yohana demonstrates in “Kebele ID,” in which a housemaid compensates for the loss of her pleasure by stealing from her employers. Some misery has otherworldly sources, as in Adam Ret’a’s “Of Buns and Howls.” But some individuals can be cruel even in the absence of external forces. A survivor of the Derg takes revenge on an unlikely target in Meron Hadero’s “Kind Stranger.” And in “A Double-Edged Inheritance,” Hannah Giorgis presents a college student who avenges her mother’s mistreatment by her father’s family. And of course, people can be their own worst enemies, as in Lelissa Girma’s “Insomnia” and Girma T. Fantaye’s “Of the Poet and the Café.”

A nice variety of bad behavior. East, West: Noir’s best.

**THE EIGHTH DETECTIVE**

*Pavesi, Alex*

Henry Holt (304 pp.)

$26.99 | Aug. 4, 2020

978-1-250-75593-3

Mathematician and first-time novelist Pavesi creates a metamystery that could as easily go in a bookstore’s puzzle section as on the crime shelves.

In 1930s Spain, Megan, Henry, and Bunny are alone in a house when Bunny is found stabbed to death. There must be an intruder, but there can’t be. Windows and doors are sealed, so it’s a locked-room mystery. Megan and Henry accuse each other, and of course they both know the truth—but does the reader? It’s the first in a collection of seven stories titled The White Murders written by mathematician-turned-novelist Grant McAllister, who lives in seclusion on a Mediterranean island. In the 1970s, book editor Julia Hart travels to the island to visit McAllister and talk about his book, which everyone knows editors do for obscure authors. McAllister had earlier written a research paper, “The Permutations of Detective Fiction,” on the mathematical
Money is the root of all, or at least most, evil in a little Maine town.

THREAD AND DEAD

Penney, Elizabeth
St. Martin's (272 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-25-025797-0

Money is the root of all, or at least most, evil in a little Maine town.

Iris Buckley and her grandmother own a vintage apron and linen shop in Blueberry Cove. Soon after Eleanor Brady, mistress of the large and rather decrepit Shorehaven Cottage, invites Iris to her home to look at a fascinating collection of old European sheets and other linens she wants to sell, she entangles Iris in a far more ambitious venture: arranging the sale of the trunks full of vintage clothing her mother brought from Belgium when she emigrated. Why Claudia de Witte, who worked as a nursemaid after she arrived, had such a trove of expensive clothing is just one of the puzzles that Iris and her friends must solve. Eleanor is renting rooms to several academics—Belgian Dr. Lukas de Wilde and his ambitious teaching assistants, Hailey Piper and Theo Nesbitt, who are working on a project to grow and harvest seaweed for food and fuel—along with putative seaweed farmers Jamaica Jones and Patrick Chance. The morning after attending a cocktail party complete with seaweed treats, a reluctant Iris goes climbing with her boyfriend, Ian, and her bestie, Madison, and spots the body of Hailey Piper dead on a ledge. Helping the police and researching Eleanor’s past soon puts Iris and her friends in danger from someone willing to kill again.

Varied characters and seaweed lore enliven a mundane cozy that leaves lots of room for future plot and character development.

MURDER, TAKE TWO

Perry, Carol J.
Kensington (844 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4967-3139-5

A semipsychic looks into a crime with potential historical ties in a Salem setting.

Identical twin cops Ray and Roger Temple reach out to their friend Lee Barrett for the crime-solving expertise her success in the past attests. Their nephew, Cody McGinnis, has been charged with murder, and the two are certain that he’s innocent. Cody’s name is familiar to Lee. He’s a local assistant professor who moonlights teaching at the Tabby, the Tabitha Trumbull Academy of the Arts, where Lee leads a few classes herself. The victim, Samuel Bond, was a beloved retired professor, and Cody had recently been turned down for a promotion, but that’s not enough to make a man a murderer, is it? Lee can call on not only her boyfriend, detective Pete Mondello, for help, but on her Aunt Ibby and Ibby’s friends, whose sleuthing plays like a mashup of Charlie’s Angels and The Golden Girls. Lee has two secret weapons in her quest: her semipsychic abilities, which warn her when she may be in danger but don’t tell her what to do about it, and her protective cat, O’Ryan, whose commentary would be more helpful if his Murrays came with translations. Lee’s investigation connects the crime to the 200-year-old murder of Capt. Joseph White Salem. In a town so rich in history, though, it’s never clear why she assumes that Bond’s would be a copycat of that particular crime, and the payoff is minimal anyway.

Sure, there’s a cat, some psychic powers, and the requisite detective beau, but not a whole lot more.

PROMISES TO THE DEAD

Pirrone, D.M.
Allium Press (325 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Aug. 18, 2020
978-0-9996982-5-9

The Civil War may be over, but little has changed for the formerly enslaved people living in the remnants of the Confederacy.

Born free, then educated, enslaved, and now nominally free again, Ezra Hayes is searching for the woman he loves when he’s picked up on a phony charge and forced to work on a sugar plantation. There he meets Michael O’Shea of the Freedmen’s Bureau, which is supposed to be helping formerly enslaved African Americans but is about to be disbanded by the government. When O’Shea is lynched, Ezra escapes to Chicago, where his promise to tell O’Shea’s parents of his fate sets off a string of murders that will change the life of police detective Frank Hanley. Hanley’s in love with Rivka Kelmansky, a Jewish girl who helped him in For
You Were Strangers (2015). Lawrence O’Shea, Michael’s father, is reported missing by his wife, and his body is soon pulled from the river. None of the obvious motives seem to apply for the murder of a loving husband who was devastated by the letters Michael had sent describing the treatment of black people by the Sweetbay Sugar Company. Lawrence worked for a railroad that shipped Sweetbay products, and Hanley suspects his boss of ordering his murder but can’t prove it. Rivka’s family is drawn in when her brother, Aaron, and his biracial wife, whose son was fathered by Ezra, become suspects in the murder. Both families are opposed to Hanley and Rivka’s romance, but the case gives the strong-willed Rivka a chance to break free.

A riveting historical novel whose exploration of hatred and prejudice will leave you shaking with anger and horror.

DEPARTURE
Reid, Joseph
Thomas & Mercer (322 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Aug. 11, 2020
978-1-5420-4181-2

In a race against the clock, an air marshal searches for a brilliant missing engineer who may be a lone wolf terrorist.

On his flight back to Los Angeles from a visit with his goddaughter in Texas, air marshal and sometime investigator Seth Walker saves flight attendant Amelia from a threatening drunk passenger. Before he can even get home, Walker, who narrates in a punchy first person, is buttonholed by FBI Special Agent Melissa Cooke and Tony Tran of the San Francisco Police Department. The feds have recently been monitoring the movements of Iraq native Anah El-Amin, 26, who fled Saddam’s regime during the first Gulf War and now works as an engineer for the influential company Magnet. Walker rightly asks why make so much fuss about a single engineer. The reason: The vice president is making an unannounced trip and could be a target. El-Amin’s boss, Ajit Singh, seems concerned at first but turns unconvincingly nonchalant when Walker presses him. Intermittent flashbacks describe a second case from five years earlier, with Walker barely escaping with his life. Video helps the team track El-Amin to the San Francisco airport. Emptying the airport could allow him to escape with the crowd, so a methodical search begins, with time running out before the veep’s arrival. Cooke, meanwhile, questions El-Amin’s family, who seems genuinely ignorant of anything unusual in his behavior. An explosion, multiple shootouts, and an unexpected abduction help to answer all questions and lead to a final confrontation with a criminal mastermind.

Reid’s third Walker yarn is a by-the-minute thriller, with roller-coaster action and authentic airport atmosphere.

BLOOD VICTORY
Rice, Christopher
Thomas & Mercer (336 pp.)
$24.99 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-5420-1472-4

A woman with an appalling past catches killers using superhuman powers.

Noah Turlington has invented Zypraxon, a drug with endless possibilities, and pharmaceutical company owner Cole Graydon, his friend and sometime lover, has helped him develop its powers. Cole has added partners to Project Bluebird, but despite their past difficulties, he trusts Noah more than their new investors to protect Charlotte Rowe, the only person they’ve found who can use her newfound powers without dying. Zypraxon turns Charley, whose mother was murdered by serial killers who then raised her until she escaped, into a person so strong she can rip anything apart with her bare hands. Now she’s made it her mission to track down murderers. Charley and her boyfriend, former lawman Luke Prescott, are on the trail of Cyrus Mattingly, a long-haul trucker who’s been kidnapping and killing women. Both hunters wears high-tech lenses that feed everything they see to Cole’s bunker in Kansas, from which he watches Charley troll Mattingly under a false identity in the hope that he’ll choose her as his next victim. The stakes are high because the only time Charley unleashes adrenaline in her bloodstream, and the only time Project Bluebird can harvest her blood for use in prospective drugs, is when she’s genuinely terrified. While Cole and Noah secretly battle the partners, who see Charley as nothing but a lab rat and urge her to quit her hunt, Charley manages to get Mattingly to grab her, leading to a series of grisly and unexpected discoveries.

The third Burning Girl thriller lacks novelty but still has action aplenty for superhero fans.

CASE PENDING
Shannon, Dell
Poisoned Pen (240 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-4642-1301-4

A follow-up to a case he shelved as unsolved six months ago sets the LAPD’s Lt. Luis Mendoza on the trail of a double murderer in this reprint from 1960.

This first procedural from the prolific and multihyphened Elizabeth Linton (1921-1988), the pioneering writer who first brought a woman’s eye to the genre in volumes published under her own name and the pseudonyms Anne Blaisdell, Lesley Egan, and Egan O’Neill as well as Shannon, kicks off with waitress/seamstress Agnes Browne’s discovery of a corpse in a vacant lot at the corner of Commerce and Humboldt. The victim, Elena Ramirez, has been strangled and battered so savagely that she’s lost an
Can wealth and power shield the privileged from justice?

**TRUST NO ONE**

Webb, Debra

Thomas & Mercer (428 pp.)

$15.95 paper | Aug. 1, 2020

978-1-5420-1809-8

Can wealth and power shield the privileged from justice?

Birmingham Police Detective Kerri Devlin’s life is falling apart. Her teen daughter, Tori, barely speaks to her, and her ex-husband uses Tori as a bargaining chip. In addition, she’s partnered with newly minted Detective Luke Falco, who has a reputation as a cocky wild man, to investigate a murder linked to the highest level of Birmingham society. Software maven BenAbbott, scion of a wealthy local family, and his mother-in-law have been found shot in his mansion, and his pregnant wife, Sela, is missing. Is she a killer or a victim of kidnapping? As Kerri looks for clues about who might hate Ben enough to kill him, she realizes that Falco is an excellent detective whose years of undercover work have given him a certain indifference to rules—an indifference that may serve them well in a case shaped by political pressure. Not only Sela, but Kerri’s own family and best friend are hiding secrets relating to the case. When Kerri’s beloved niece, who interns at a law firm that serves many of those involved, goes missing, the stakes rise even higher in a game of cat and mouse in which the mice have all the power.

A powerful combination of police procedural and psychological thriller whose every clue provides a fresh shock.

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**NO WOODS SO DARK AS THESE**

Silvis, Randall

Poisoned Pen (448 pp.)

$16.99 paper | Aug. 4, 2020

978-1-4926-6562-5

A fourth case soaked in equal parts blood and sadness beckons Ryan DeMarco, former sergeant with the Pennsylvania State Police.

Already mourning his dead son, DeMarco, together with his partner and lover, Jayme Matson, wakes up every morning anguished over the miscarriage she suffered in pursuing their last case in *A Long Way Down* (2019). But he doesn’t feel he can turn down his old boss Capt. Kyle Bowen’s request for help after a father and his two young sons make a grisly discovery in the woods outside Otter Creek Township: a burned-out car containing two dead women close to the corpse of a naked man pinned to a tree truck with three rods of rebar. It’s hard enough just to identify the corpses; it’s even harder to get leads on Luthor Reddick, the hush-hush online antiques dealer who looks increasingly like the killer; and it’s hardest of all to close the case when at least two of Reddick’s associates are perfectly willing to confess to the murders themselves. As Silvis spins a characteristically atmospheric web, DeMarco can hear the footsteps of Daksh Khatri, the confederate who eluded the dragnet that brought down double murderer Connor McBride, as Khatri, who’s clearly determined to hurt him and Jayme in the worst way possible, draws closer and closer.

Not so much mysterious as fatalistic, with each revelation leading as inevitably as destiny to the next.

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**VATHEK**

Beckford, William

Poisoned Pen (176 pp.)

$14.99 paper | Aug. 18, 2020

978-1-4926-9974-3

Poisoned Pen kicks off its Haunted Library of Horror Classics with a berserk Orientalist fantasy that’s the best-known work of Beckford (1760–1844). Vathek, Caliph of the Abassides, is a prince seriously addicted to gambling, feasting, and fits of rage. A visit from a stranger from India who renders him ill and then heals him opens his eyes to the possibilities of further decadence beyond the five palaces he’s already dedicated to the delights of the senses. But the stranger
is actually a Giaour—that is, an unbeliever—in the service of Elbis, the monarch of hell, whose goal is to tempt Vathek to damnation by getting him to break more and more taboos. It’s a project in which his unwitting target participates enthusiastically. He renounces the teachings of Islam, sacrifices 50 innocent children to death, and agrees to worship the Giaour on the strength of the Giaour’s promise to bring him to “the palace of subterranean fire” where Soliman Ben Daoud has stored the talismans that will allow him to rule the world. His attempts to steal the seductive Nouronihar from Gulchenrouz, the cousin to whom she’s been promised, are so persistent that Nouronihar’s father, the emir Fakreddin, is driven to drug both lovers so they’ll appear to have died—a plan that falls through despite Fakreddin’s best efforts. One of Mahomet’s Genii asks permission to approach Vathek in the hope of changing his mind before it’s too late, but it’s too late, and he’s condemned to the eternal fires.

A series of overblown set pieces waiting for Cecil B. DeMille or Industrial Light and Magic to bring them to life.

DRIFTWOOD
Brennan, Marie
Tachyon (224 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Aug. 14, 2020
978-1-61696-346-0

A diverse cast of characters from disparate worlds, each facing their own rapidly approaching mortality, come together to memorialize a missing man—rumored to be immortal—in this new fantasy title from veteran author Brennan.

When a world is about to meet its end, it collides with the Edge of Driftwood: a ring-shaped amalgamation of nations bordered by un navigable mists and marked by an all-consuming eye called the Crush. New additions push preexisting lands further into the Ring, then into the Shreds, where they break into infinitesimally small pieces before being lost forever. The various people-groups caught in this unending cycle cling to one man for hope: Last, the only surviving member of a long-forgotten race. Now, Last has seemingly disappeared, and his devotees have come together to tell stories about their encounters with him in the hope that this sharing will bring answers to the question of his fate. Through these stories, a portrait of Last as a tragic figure, accidental deity, and distant friend emerges. The patchwork quilt of his acquaintances’ tales mirrors the very nature of Driftwood itself, slowly peeling back the veil to reveal the living—and departed—people who make up this strange and riveting new cosmos. Readers will close the cover aching to read more about Last and his world.

An exciting delve into a conglomerate land filled with magic and mystery.

OR WHAT YOU WILL
Walton, Jo
Tor (320 pp.)
$26.99 | Jul. 7, 2020
978-1-250-30899-3

Through the experiences of a novelist and her character, this fantasy explores the boundaries between life and death, fantasy and reality, creator and created, and intriguingly blurs the borders between each.

The novelist in question is Sylvia Katherine Harrison, who shares some, but decidedly not all, qualities with her author. But the narrator/protagonist of the story is a nameless, protean, pansexual character who has played a role in much of her fiction. This being persuades and assists Sylvia, who is slowly dying from cancer, to craft an escape from mortality via Illyria, a fictional realm she built in previous novels and which draws upon Shakespeare’s The Tempest and Twelfth Night as well as the best aspects of Renaissance Italy. As Sylvia writes a new novel concerning two 19th-century visitors from our world who presage Shakespearean world as well as her own deepest truths, sourced in her damaging relationships with an impossible-to-please mother and an abusive first husband, she and her character may be able to fully transcend worlds. Walton continues to indulge an obsession with the two real-life Renaissance philosophers Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who appeared in different forms in her Thessaly trilogy and her previous novel, Lent (2019). They seem to represent the power that mind and will could potentially have over what we perceive of as the physical universe. (They also apparently serve nearly the same function for Walton in her creative process as this book’s narrator does for Sylvia.) Despite pondering the foundations of reality itself, the book doesn’t have quite the philosophical heft of those prior works. Instead, this is a deeply personal work and a charming love letter to Florence.

Odd, thought-provoking, and charming, with an emotional gut punch: quintessential Walton.

RED DUST
Yoss
Restless Books (208 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Sep. 8, 2020
978-1-63206-246-8

The latest novel by acclaimed Cuban writer Yoss is a quirky blend of science fiction and hard-boiled mystery that follows a robotic police officer as he attempts to catch an infamous criminal—and save humankind in the process.
A thinly veiled homage to Raymond Chandler, the novel’s main character is a humanoid robot named Raymond, after his favorite writer, whose main character he emulates by wearing a trench coat and broad-brimmed hat. A police officer working on the William S. Burroughs trading station—which orbits around Titan and is the only station in the solar system where humans can make intergalactic deals with aliens—Raymond finds his mundane existence turned upside down when a wanted alien escapes his bounty-hunter captors while on the station. The criminal, Makrow 34, has unparalleled psionic powers and kills another alien while fleeing. Raymond’s bosses—the Galactic Trade Confederation—want the potentially volatile situation resolved as quickly as possible and tell the positrionic police officer to apprehend Makrow 34 before he leaves the system. After asking himself “What Philip Marlowe would do,” Raymond enlists the help of a human with similar psionic abilities who’s currently imprisoned on the station, and together the unlikely duo set out on a highly dangerous escapade. The trench coat–wearing robotic detective makes for an appealing and at times comedic protagonist, and Yossa’s clear and focused writing style keeps the reader turning pages throughout. But while the worldbuilding is exceptional in some parts (an independently owned space station held together by superglue and staples, for example), the characters never rise above two-dimensionality. The narrative, however, is action-packed—literally jumping from one adventure to another—and the conclusion’s highly satisfying. No real thematic punch but a fast, furious, and genuinely fun read.

THE DISASTER TOURIST
Yun Ko-eun
Trans. by Buehler, Lizzie
Counterpoint (208 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-64009-416-1

A burned-out employee at a South Korean tourism company is shipped off on an adventure of her own that slowly spirals out of control.

Jungle seems to be just the kind of company made for a world regularly besieged by hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and all manner of tragedy. It packages the events into attractive deals for “disaster tourists,” people looking for a new kind of thrill in the experience-driven Instagram age. For 10 years, Yona Ko has worked at Jungle, chasing disasters and creating the next bestselling package. But when Yona speaks up after her boss sexually assaults her, she is shipped off on a work trip. She must travel to Mui, a distant island, part of Jungle’s disaster programming catalog. Years ago, a giant sinkhole appeared on Mui, and tourists flocked in to soak up the aftermath. But Mui is losing its luster, and Yona must grade its worthiness on Jungle’s list of offerings. Through a series of unfortunate events, Yona discovers just how much is on the line for the desperate citizens of Mui. If they lose the Jungle program’s visitors, they lose everything. Yun’s novel spirals into increasingly bizarre events as Mui battles for its very survival and, alarmingly, pulls out all the stops. The Jungle is an effective model for capitalism—the Upton Sinclair echo might resonate with some. Mui too efficiently fills in for every community in the world pitted against the rest, scraping the bottom of the barrel for survival as it faces an increasingly harsh reality. But Yona remains frustratingly opaque, her background story needing more color. The taut storyline keeps the narrative moving at a tight pace even if the takeaways feel ham-handed at times. A sharp sendup of society’s obsession with the next hot thing—and the steep toll it extracts on very real lives.

DARING AND THE DUKE
MacLean, Sarah
Avon/HarperCollins (384 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Jun. 30, 2020
978-0-06-269208-5

The final book in the Bareknuckle Bastards series reunites childhood loves who became enemies.

Twenty years ago, Grace Condry was betrayed by Ewan, the boy she loved. He went on to become the Duke of Marwick while she became the queen of Covent Garden, a dark corner of London where she runs a club that specializes in women’s pleasure. Ewan spent years searching for his love, and when he thought she was dead, he went mad with grief. When he discovers she’s alive, hope blooms, and he’ll do anything to be reunited with her. Grace wants vengeance because Ewan broke her heart and hurt those she holds dear, but when she’s finally face to face with him, she feels immense desire. Although they are different people than they were as children, attraction still simmers. Perhaps love could turn their fantasies into reality despite all the terrible memories between them. Visceral, gritty, and full of passion and angst, this romance mixes moments of emotional introspection with grand scenes of balls, fights, and, of course, scorching intimacy. Grace and Ewan had traumatic pasts, and now they are both discovering who they are in the present and who they could be together. While this story excels as a second-chance, redemption love story, what really makes it stand out is the unabashedly feminist exploration of power and how it ties in with identity and desire. The cinematic finale draws the series to a wholly satisfying conclusion.

Dark, daring, delicious, and absolutely delightful.
NOT MY ROMEO
Madden-Mills, Ilsa
Montlake Romance (348 pp.)
$12.95 paper | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-5420-2188-3

A librarian meeting a blind date accidentally approaches the wrong man—the quarterback of the local NFL team.

After Elena Riley’s boyfriend dumps her for her own sister, she is determined to get back in the dating game. She allows her roommate to arrange a Valentine’s Day blind date at one of Nashville’s hottest restaurants. Jack Hawke is reeling from a devastating Super Bowl loss, and even though he realizes he’s not Elena’s date, he’s unable to resist this charming woman who is oblivious to his fame. After a sizzling one-night stand, Jack reveals his true identity but is determined to never see her again. Jack’s last girlfriend, furious after their breakup, wrote a tell-all memoir full of lies about him. His deep-seated trust issues make him wary of continuing to date a woman who refuses to sign his NDA, but Elena isn’t interested in continuing a relationship based only on sex. They seem to be at an impasse, but a series of coincidences, some more believable than others, keep throwing them together. The novel is full of quirky small-town characters who draw Jack and his teammates into their world. When Jack and Elena are cast as the leads in the local production of Romeo and Juliet, they can no longer fight their attraction. They are both likable and fully-developed, but random plot devices drive the story more than organic character growth. Nevertheless, the romance is pleasing and well paced.

A romance aiming to be cute and quirky hits its mark.

SEASON OF THE WOLF
Vale, Maria
Sourcebooks Casablanca
(320 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4926-9521-9

Readers return to the Great North Pack as Evie Kitwanasdottr fights for her fellow werewolves and struggles to maintain her position as Alpha.

Picking up from Forever Wolf (2019), the Great North Pack is trying to rebuild after a devastating attack and keeping several Shifter prisoners as the spoils of the barely won victory. Wolves and Shifters aren’t the same in Vale’s world; they’re enemies, and rightly so, as Shifters often align themselves with humans in their quest to conquer the wolves. Shifter Constantine, despite aiding the Great North Pack during the humans’ assault, is one of the pack’s prisoners, and since he seems the most dangerous, he’s kept under Evie’s personal supervision. This is more than just an enemies-to-lovers paranormal romance, though there would be nothing wrong if it were. Evie and Constantine are two people warring with a centuries-long history of mistrust and hatred between their species to find acceptance and love with each other. It’s heady and powerful and makes the external conflict seems small in comparison. Greater machinations are at play—who is controlling the Shifters and influencing the humans? Breadcrumbs are dropped sporadically, though don’t expect any full resolutions. There seems to be much more to come with the Great North Pack and its inhabitants. Evie and Constantine share the aspiration of wanting to do the right thing for those they see as family, even if right versus wrong has become skewed for both of them. Vale is a rare writer, getting to the heart of her characters—their fears, their motivations—without sacrificing any of the grander picture. She quickly catches up readers, new and returning, with what feels less like summary than like poetry; her writing has never been better.

A must-read.
A sociologist offers an optimistic, densely argued text about why ethno-racial assimilation will continue to be a part of the American future—and why it’s beneficial and important for the nation.

Few readers will fail to find themselves in this deeply informed book. Alba’s core argument, based on deep demographic research and sociological and historical knowledge, is that the U.S. is not splitting into two distinct populations. Instead, with the exception of African Americans, the integration of new groups into old continues without the loss of groups’ and individuals’ ethno-racial identifications—all very much in the American tradition. Yet even here, black Americans, who identify themselves more with the minority than majority, are making progress. The result is the “prospect of a new kind of societal majority,” one in which, as happened with Catholics and Jews after World War II, the ever broadening mainstream accepts “a visible degree of racial diversity.” From this fact, Alba offers a new narrative “of immigrant-group assimilation,” and he assesses the validity of current controversies over immigration and amalgamation. In arriving at his conclusions, the author sharply criticizes Census Bureau demographic data and statistical analyses for folding the children of mixed marriages into the “non-white” category when many of them consider themselves “white.” This error, he argues, embodies a rigid, outmoded classification of race and ethnicity. It also undermeasures the degree and pace of these changes because “a substantial fraction of these ‘minority’ children will have a white parent.” Yet for all Alba’s optimism, he knows that the process of assimilation now under way won’t be completed until equality and inclusion increase. To that end, he proposes clear social policies that he believes will hasten the process, most of them focusing on directly addressing racism, economic inequality, and educational opportunity.

A heartening, wise, and profoundly important counter-narrative to hysteria.
As I was searching through recent reviews to highlight books for our Pride Issue, I also dug into the archives and stumbled across an author who exuded confidence and pride about who she was: Gertrude Stein, the modernist icon and author of one of the first coming-out stories, “Q.E.D.,” written in 1903 but held back by the author and not published until 1950, as The Things As They Are.

Of course, Stein wrote many other notable works, most significantly Tender Buttons (1914) and The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, which Kirkus reviewed in 1933, the year Virginia Kirkus founded the publication. At the time, our reviewer noted that the book was “going to cause some annoyance and much discussion.” That prediction proved to be quite prescient, as Toklas has been a source of both irritation and illumination for decades now. Toklas was really Stein’s autobiography, written through the eyes of her lifelong partner, and our reviewer captured its essence well: “There is no affectation here, none of the stream of consciousness method. Intensely interesting, and should have more than a moderate sale.”

When I was an English major, Stein was required reading in any modernist course. Though many of my fellow students were left cold by her style (a stance I can understand), I found it refreshing—which is why I was excited to see a vivid new reinterpretation cross my desk: The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas Illustrated (Penguin Press, March 3). Illustrated by New Yorker cartoonist Maira Kalman, the new version received a star from our reviewer, who called it “a sparkling, imaginative rendition of a literary classic.” That pretty much sums it up, but our review also noted how well the book captured the effervescent intellectual spirit of Paris in the 1920s and ’30s: “Luminaries came and went, all beautifully captured with Kalman’s bright brush strokes: Toulouse-Lautrec; Seurat, who “caught his fatal cold”; the “extraordinarily brilliant” Guillaume Apollinaire; William James, Stein’s former teacher; Marcel Duchamp (“everybody loved him”); Isadora Duncan and Nijinsky; James Joyce and Sylvia Beach; Hemingway; the “beautiful” Edith Sitwell; and of course, Toklas, wearing one of her hats with “lovely artificial flowers” on top. (For more insight into the Paris of Stein, Hemingway, Duncan et al., check out Stein’s Paris France.)

“Fragmented, elliptical, and consistently provocative.” While that assessment could fit many of Stein’s works, this time it refers to another excellent choice for the Pride Issue: Emerson Whitney’s Heaven (McSweeney’s, April 14), a slim yet potent excavation of identity, gender, body, and self-acceptance. Our reviewer wrote, “The author tells their story in three parts, each beautifully poised and composed of brief paragraphs, some only one short sentence. Piecemeal, like snapshots, Whitney slowly reveals an early life of uncertainty, pain, and suffering.” As they chronicle their troubled family life alongside their exploration of gender nonconformity, Whitney takes readers on an emotionally and psychologically charged ride, weaving in wisdom from Freud, Ginsberg, Irigaray, and others.

Whitney also pays loving and eloquent tribute to their grandmother, the key source of stability in their life. “I love this woman for throwing me into deep water,” writes the author. “She wants to hoist me up every once in a while and look. My heritage is her hopefulness and the complexity of a body that looks, in parts, like hers.” In this prose debut, Whitney energetically and incisively captures all of that complexity and more, demonstrating a kindred spirit to Stein’s but emerging with a voice all their own.

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
Bittersweet memories and a long-buried atrocity combine for a heartfelt, unflinching, striking narrative combination.

**MILL TOWN**

Arsenault reflects on her serene hometown and the cloaked environmental corruption plaguing it.

The author, a National Books Critics Circle board member and book review editor at *Orion*, grew up in Mexico, Maine, a small town fortified by the Androscoggin River. She writes poignantly of growing up in a large nuclear family surrounded by the town’s dense forests. Her father and grandfather worked at the local paper mill, an entity that economically grounded the town and employed a large percentage of its residents, many of whom remained blind to the ever changing world around them. “Monumental philosophical

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**THE QUIET AMERICANS**

*Four CIA Spies at the Dawn of the Cold War—A Tragedy in Three Acts*

Anderson, Scott

Doubleday (576 pp.)

$30.00 | Sep. 1, 2020

978-0-385-54045-2

A probing history of the CIA’s evolving role from the outset of the Cold War into the 1960s, viewed through the exploits of four American spies.

On the heels of Germany’s defeat in World War II, European leaders and intelligence agents were shifting focus to the Soviet Union’s dominance over Eastern Europe and threatening pursuit of influence in Asia. Under a recently sworn-in President Harry Truman, the American government was slower to gauge early signals but eventually responded with often disastrous covert tactics. Anderson delivers a complex, massively scaled narrative, balancing prodigious research with riveting storytelling skills. He tracks the careers of four agents. In the Philippines, Edward Lansdale was instrumental in combatting the Hukbalahap uprising, lining up Ramon Magsaysay, the secretary of defense, to become president in 1954. Peter Sichel, a German Jew whose family escaped the Nazis, ran the CIA’s Berlin office for more than a decade. Former naval officer Michael Burke headed the paramilitary operations in Albania and elsewhere. Frank Wisner, the CIA’s deputy director of plans, had key roles in the Office of Policy Coordination until its full merging with the CIA in 1950. Though all four men began their careers with the strong desire to defend American freedom, the author engagingly demonstrates how their efforts were undermined by politically motivated power grabs within the U.S. government; poorly planned covert operations; and duplicitous scheming by the likes of J. Edgar Hoover and Sen. Joseph McCarthy, who were espousing anti-communist rhetoric to advance their own careers. “By the end of Eisenhower’s second term,” writes Anderson, “the geographical spread of governments that his administration had undertaken to overthrow or otherwise subvert suggested an almost purposeful design, as if it sought to alienate the citizenry of most every region and subregion of the globe.” Over the course of the narrative, the author amply shows how the CIA was increasingly pushed to function as an instrument of politically charged ambitions.

An engrossing history of the early days of the CIA.

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**STAY, DAUGHTER**

A memoir of Muslim girlhood by Yasmin Azad

ISBN #978-955-8897-32-4

Strict traditions face encroaching modernity in this memoir of a Muslim girl.

“A loving and approachable coming-of-age story about generational change.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“...an outstanding example of how a memoir format can be used to promote cultural understanding with thought-provoking insights....”

—Midwest Review

“...a profound reflection on the dilemmas that Muslim women faced and are facing as orthodoxy and identity come up against freedom.”

—Rashko Cocomaracwmy, Former Under-Secretary-General United Nations

“The absolute must read of 2020.”

—Perera Hussein Publishing House

For all inquiries, please contact yasminazad@gmail.com • www.staydaughtier.com
ideas,” writes Arsenault, “were surfacing across America—femi-
nism, environmentalism—however, there were no movements
in Mexico but for people walking across the mill’s footbridge
to work.” Underneath Mexico’s serene veneer festered a secret
that the author began to investigate with steely determina-
tion in 2009. While visiting to attend a funeral, Arsenault dug
into the town’s history and the Arsenault family tree, both of
which were riddled with cancer deaths. Expanding her research
outward, she scoured town documents and interviewed family,
childhood friends, and surviving townspeople to uncover proof
that Mexico and the surrounding area had been dubbed “cancer
valley,” with generations of families suffering terminal illnesses.
Arsenault disturbingly chronicles how the paper mill released
carcinogenic chemicals into the atmosphere and dumped them
at the edge of the river, and she shows how the malfeasance was
buried in bureaucratic red tape, EPA coverups, and outright
lies even as Mexico continued to suffer a “never-ending loop of
obituaries.” In this masterful debut, the author creates a crisp,
elloquent hybrid of atmospheric memoir and searing exposé.
She writes urgently about the dire effects the mill’s toxic legacy
had on Mexico’s residents and the area’s ecology while evoca-
tively mining the emotional landscape of caretaking for aging
parents and rediscovering the roots of her childhood.

Bittersweet memories and a long-buried atrocity combine
for a heartfelt, unflinching, striking narrative combination.

CALLING BULLSHIT
The Art of Skepticism in a
Data-Driven World
Bergstrom, Carl T. & West, Jevin D.
Random House (352 pp.)
$25.20 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-0-525-50918-9

Part playful polemic and part serious
scientific treatise on a plague that “pol-
lutes our world by misleading people
about specific issues and...undermines
our ability to trust information in general.”

Beginning with a provocative opening line—“The world
is awash with bullshit, and we’re drowning in it”—Bergstrom
and West deliver a sturdy guide to helping readers avoid a life-
time of being bamboozled by misinformation. As they note,
much of what seems factual and statistically sound is often
nothing but bullshit. The authors differentiate between what
they refer to as “old school bullshit,” which is mostly rhetorical
and language-based, and “new school bullshit,” which refers
to the cagey manipulation of mathematics and scientific data
to create the illusion of sophistication and factual accuracy.
The authors focus mostly on the latter, methodically examin-
ing the many characters well-versed in the art of bullshitting,
whether they are scientific or medical researchers, advertis-
ers, or other professional manipulators desperate to pull the
wool over the public’s eyes in pursuit of profit and power.
Bergstrom and West direct our attention to the technocrats
and social media giants who facilitate mass disinformation
People of the Pride Parade
with Photos by Alyssa Blumstein

A stunning visual celebration of the exuberant, diverse attendees of New York City’s Pride March releasing on its 50th anniversary features vivid portraits of more than 200 LGBTQ+ community members and allies. This resplendent volume is a portal to the spirit, sequins, and sexual liberty of the weekend, immortalizing the positive energy of those who attend and the enduring power of love.

June 2020 • 160 pages • 8” x 7” • Color photographs throughout

Trans New York
by Peter Bussian, Foreword by Abby Chava Stein

Vibrant photographs and interviews with individuals who identify as transgender. Discover the warmth of the trans community, the challenges its members face, and why the book’s iconic New York setting is integral to their lives. Photos from celebrated photographer Peter Bussian, essays from prominent community members, and a foreword from transgender activist Abby Chava Stein.

June 2020 • 144 pages • 9” x 9” • Color photographs throughout
$22.00 • 978-1-948062-56-5 Hardcover • 978-1-948062-57-2 E-book
A thoughtful appreciation of a central figure in the story of American food culture.

THE MAN WHO ATE TOO MUCH

Biespiel, David
Kelson Books (192 pp.)
$20.00 paper | Sep. 1, 2020
978-0-9827838-5-6

A distinguished poet reflects on his Texas roots and on the Orthodox Jewish upbringing from which he distanced himself.

Growing up in Houston, “boots and belts and ten gallon hats” were as much a defining part of Biespiel’s life as his secret desire to become a rabbi. He and his family lived in Meyerland, the main Jewish neighborhood in mostly Christian Houston. Though the community was home to Holocaust survivors and a Jewish community that kept a close eye on events in Israel, Meyerland Jews still “spoke Hebrew with a southern accent, punctuated ironically with y’all.” The author’s most significant memories, which he renders in immersive detail, concern major Jewish celebrations, religious classes at the local synagogue, and his encounters with Rabbi Segal, who believed that Jewish codes defined life for all Jews. Just as Biespiel was entering adolescence, Rabbi Segal had singled him out for having the “knack” for religious learning but also as one who was developing a dangerous restlessness. By the time Biespiel entered high school, he had become a powerful debater who frequently unhappy and lonely despite his fame and success.

and he effectively investigates the universal question of the nature and meaning of home.

A poignantly eloquent memoir.

THE MAN WHO ATE TOO MUCH
The Life of James Beard
Birdsall, John
Norton (496 pp.)
$35.00 | Oct. 6, 2020
978-0-393-63571-3

The author of the groundbreaking article, “America, Your Food Is So Gay,” turns a sharp but sympathetic eye on the carefully closeted food writer who celebrated the glories of homegrown ingredients and down-home cooking decades before they were fashionable.

Born in Portland, Oregon, James Beard (1903-1985) told friends later in life that he’d known he was gay since he was 7. During his freshman year at Reed College, he was quietly expelled after being “caught in an act of oral indecency with a professor.” He spent a desultory decade or so trying to make it as an actor and finally hit his stride in New York, where he started a cocktail catering business with an acquaintance made through his prodigious socializing. In 1940, his first book, Hors D’Oeuvre and Canapés, With a Key to the Cocktail Party, began a lifelong tradition of not acknowledging collaborators or the sources of recipes that were sometimes lifted from others and, later in his career, reprinted from his earlier books. What sold even the most mediocre of his books was his larger-than-life personality: “playful and unabashedly queer,” Birdsall notes, but only to those in the know. For average Americans, Beard was simply someone who demystified cooking and invited them to enjoy food as he did. The author’s well-written and knowledgeable text doesn’t scant Beard’s cooking and eating—indeed, luscious descriptions of memorable meals make this an appetite-arousing read—but its major secondary theme is the nature of gay life in midcentury America, where discretion was essential and discovery meant professional ruin and very likely jail. Birdsall’s analysis of Beard’s ambivalent reaction to the Stonewall Inn riot of 1969 is one of the book’s many intelligent passages decoding a worldview built on shame and secrecy; one that made Beard frequently unhappy and lonely despite his fame and success.

A thoughtful appreciation of a central figure in the story of American food culture.
“Every parent’s weeknight cooking bible!”
— Catherine McCord, author and creator of Weelicious

“These are the chicken recipes of my dreams!”
— Nicki Sizemore, author of Fresh Flavors for the Slow Cooker and creator of From Scratch Fast

Stacie Billis is a veteran food editor and on-air personality, and the cohost of Didn’t I Just Feed You?! a popular food podcast for parents. Her recipes and nonjudgmental cooking advice have been featured in dozens of publications, including Parents and Every Day with Rachael Ray, and on TODAY.


Storey Publishing
storey.com
I’m taking up a whole table in a crowded coffee shop, by myself, which is embarrassing but also auspicious, because I’m meeting Daniel Lavery to talk about his newest book, *Something That May Shock and Discredit You* (Atria, Feb. 11). “It’s a book with a lot of embarrassment at the core,” says Lavery, when he arrives. “A lot of my work pre-transition was characterized by finding a moment of embarrassment, but I would end it there. So we can all say, ‘It me, this happens to me too, isn’t this embarrassing, let’s all link arms and walk away.’ This book is more, ‘Oh, I found something embarrassing? I’m going to take a bath in it now.’”

Lavery writes advice as Dear Prudence for *Slate*, founded the hilariously feminist website The Toast, and has two previous books, *Texts From Jane Eyre* and *The Merry Spinster*. (His current name is Daniel M. Lavery. *Shock and Discredit* was released under the name Daniel Mallory Ortberg, and you’ll find other writings under his middle and former last name). Combining memoir with experimental form, the book’s 22 chapters explore his process of coming out as a trans man after being a successful “funny gal” online (“bet I won’t fuckin’ turn into a dude!” he joked, a mistaken prophecy), common cis reactions to transition, and his relationships with community, friends, and family.

Twenty interstitial interludes span musings on his body, humorous (“How I Intend To Comport Myself When I Have Abs”) and/or mournful (“Nora Ephron’s I Feel Bad About My Neck, Transmasculine Edition”), his relationship with William Shatner (“Captain James T. Kirk Is a Beautiful Lesbian, and I’m Not Sure Exactly How To Explain That”), and *Anne of Green Gables*.

I marked one line, “the natural transmasculine condition is one of embarrassment,” with a Post-it labeled “FUCK YOU,” feeling personally called out. But Lavery thinks that embarrassment is central to this experience. “I think there’s something particular about white transmasculine embarrassment,” he theorizes. “Some sort of identification with white men is baked into the premise. Embarrassment has to come into it.”

But being conscious about this embarrassment adds something special to his work. In Interlude XVI, “Did You Know That Athena Used To Be a Tomboy,” Athena, a chorus, and a deuteragonist work together to convince “you” not to transition, using arguments that Lavery struggles with at length in the work. But another underlying theme is that Lavery, a 33-year-old trans guy from the internet who just moved to New York from Berkeley, seems part of a unique generation. He’s new to identifying as trans but also deeply aware of his newness. “Having come from a world of feminist blogosphere, where we know the clichés that we want to avoid…I went into it with a real sense of the pitfalls I could fall into.” Like a transmasc Athena, fully kitted in a chest binder, sprung from the collective skull of the trans community.

Lavery admits that “some of the reactions that I got
both before and after the book came out were, like, ‘You came out five months ago, sweetie.’” (This interviewer tran-sitioned 13-ish years ago). “And it’s true! I was very aware going into it that this is going to be an early transition book, and early transition is sometimes something that I want to rush through as quickly as possibly, or quickly disavow. Like, ‘Wasn’t that sweet and funny, that was my puberty, luckily now I’m Victor Garber and I’m 57 and welcome to my home, I have a blow-dryer in my guest bedroom.”

And yet this is where much of this book’s brilliance comes from. Trans memoirs usually have a starting point and an end point, with some narrative of identity holding the story together. Lavery does something more difficult— weaving together absurdity, intense emotion, snippets of biography, and flights of fancy into something that has no center but manages to hold so much, so well. He wants us to “think about early transition in a way that’s not just like, cover your shame.” That feeling of waving at someone you don’t actually know and pretending you were just scratching your head. The balance he found is to have “one take that’s like ‘Don’t worry about that, that’s dumb,’ but then come back to it and say, ‘It is dumb, and that’s OK.’” Another way he describes his approach is “both get a grip, and also, mourn this.” Which is the only way forward when letting go of one experience to find home in a new one.

Kyle Lukoff reviews regularly for Kirkus and is the author of When Aidan Became a Brother and other books. Something That May Shock and Discredit You received a starred review in the Nov. 15, 2019, issue.
A writer of South Asian descent wonders how to live—and write—in a country that both “values and devalues” him.

Poet Bolina explores race and other topics in 10 personal essays rooted in his experience of growing up as the only child of Sikh Punjabi immigrants in the Chicago area. His perspective tends to be stereoscopic, especially in his first essay, “Empathy for the Devil,” which deals with the killing of Osama bin Laden: “When I hear that he’s dead, I don’t feel anything resembling sorrow; but watching the young men in trees outside the White House waving flags and chanting USA! USA! I don’t feel any kind of pride either. Both sides of the conflict seem barbaric. They killed one of them. Neither side includes me.” Bolina’s gift for seeing diverse viewpoints resurfaces in later essays. In “Writing Like a White Guy,” he considers how to write truthfully when a privileged education has left him with “only the parlance of whiteness to express my brownness.” In “White Wedding,” he reflects on his marriage to a white woman, on brown-white romances in the media, and on Americans’ tendency to see pop stars of color as a “racial vanguard.” “As much as any vanguard represents progress,” writes the author, “these trailblazers aren’t evidence of a nation’s sudden embrace of diversity so much as evidence of the majority’s self-congratulatory tolerance of it.” Most of the essays unfold as a series of vignettes or scenes, some so brief that they short-circuit the development of promising ideas. Along with other limits, that underdevelopment makes the book a minor collection in this arena. However, the author shows flashes of promise on which to build in the future, and given that many of the pieces deal with the intersection of race and writing, the book will interest creative writing students and programs.

A slender collection of essays explores the role of race in poetry and life.

OF COLOR
Essays
Bolina, Jaswinder
McSweeney’s (128 pp.)
$18.00 | Jun. 30, 2020
978-1-944211-86-8

OF COLOR
JASWINDE BOLINA

A solid resource for making points or resolving some arguments rather than a collection for casual reading.

ON IMPEACHMENT
The Presidency on Trial
Brettschneider, Corey
Penguin (302 pp.)
$15.00 paper | Sep. 8, 2020
978-0-14-313510-4

This entry in the new Penguin Liberty series digs into a controversial issue that has always polarized the nation.

Brettschneider, a professor of constitutional law at Brown University who also serves as the series editor, offers historical context on presidential impeachment through a selection of documents on the impeachments of three presidents: Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Bill Clinton. Perhaps the perspective on Donald Trump’s impeachment has been deemed too recent for a full analysis, but having three cases without the fourth seems incomplete, and the charges of political partisanship and polarization in the Trump case are certainly connected to the two previous ones. Each of the sections include some of the documentation preceding the impeachment, the Articles of Impeachment from the House of Representatives, and excerpts of the arguments presented before the Senate. In the prefatory material, Brettschneider intriguingly analyzes why the constitutional framers decided that impeachment trials should be conducted by the Senate rather than the Supreme Court. The context provides illumination on two issues that resurfaced during the Trump proceedings: whether the “high crimes and misdemeanors” referenced in the Constitution requires that the president be guilty of criminal activity and whether a sitting president can be prosecuted on criminal charges. The answer to the first would seem to be a resounding “no,” as the annotation shows that the language was particular to impeachment proceedings and not criminal proceedings, while the latter remains a point of contention. One gets the sense that Johnson’s white supremacist obstructionism justified his removal from office, though the specific grounds for his impeachment were much narrower. It’s also clear that Nixon would have lost his case in the Senate had he not resigned. That leaves Clinton and Trump, whose partisans and detractors aren’t likely to find much common ground here.

A solid resource for making points or resolving some arguments rather than a collection for casual reading.

THE CURSE OF BEING SPECIAL,
From Winston and FDR to Trump and Brexit
Buruma, Ian
Penguin Press (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-0-525-52220-1

The ghost of Winston Churchill looms large over the world—and no one’s paying much attention.

Is it affection or mutual desperation that fuels the “special relationship” between the U.S. and the U.K.? Dutch-born journalist Buruma ponders the question as he considers the fallen fortunes of that relationship, which Churchill famously proclaimed while delivering his “Iron Curtain” speech after being voted out of office at the end of World War II. “Since then,” writes the author, “despite Churchill’s mystical spirit living on in the White House, the Anglo-American relationship has been more special in London than in Washington.” Indeed, even while he worked closely with Franklin Roosevelt to build the Western Alliance, Churchill found that the interests of the U.S. often diverged from his own. For instance, where Churchill labored long and hard to hold the British Empire together, Roosevelt and his lieutenants publicly advocated the independence...
BETTER YOUR LIFE, INSIDE AND OUT

CHARACTER STILL COUNTS:
IT IS TIME TO RESTORE
OUR LASTING VALUES
BY JAMES MERRITT

9780736969444 | $16.99

“I don’t know of a more important topic now than this, and I don’t know anyone more qualified to speak on it than James Merritt.” — Rick Warren, New York Times bestselling author of The Purpose Driven Life. Stop worrying about your reputation and commit yourself to what matters the most: building an upright and trustworthy character. Join bestselling author James Merritt as he looks at 12 role models who reveal the traits that are essential to good character.

MOVING BEYOND ANXIETY:
12 PRACTICAL STRATEGIES
TO RENEW YOUR MIND
BY DAVID CHADWICK

9780736978460 | $14.99

Fear doesn’t have to run your life. These healthy tips and tactics will help you reclaim control over your mind. Moving Beyond Anxiety will equip you to defeat worry forever by trusting God and exercising your faith daily. As you immerse yourself in biblical truth, you will discover the most powerful antidotes to anxiety.

LOVE IN EVERY SEASON:
UNDERSTANDING THE FOUR STAGES OF EVERY HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP
BY DEBRA FILETA

9780736977593 | $15.99

“This book is an amazing tool that can bring healing, joy, and depth at so many levels! I know it did for me.” — Jefferson Bethke, New York Times bestselling author of Jesus > Religion and To Hell with the Hustle. Every stage of romance is an opportunity to grow together. Author, counselor, and relationship expert Debra Fileta takes you through the four seasons of every healthy relationship. Learn to navigate each season with intention and focus to keep your love in bloom.

THE CLUTTER-FREE HOME: MAKING ROOM FOR YOUR LIFE
BY KATHI LIPP

9780736976985 | $12.99

Peace is possible in your home! The Clutter-Free Home is your room-by-room guide to decluttering, reclaiming, and and celebrating every space of your home. Let author Kathi Lipp walk you through each room of your house to create organized spaces that are not only functional but provide places of peace that reflect your personality.

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of India and other colonies. That independence came, the British Empire dissolved, and Britain became a grudgingly European nation. Meanwhile, Buruma notes, where the U.S. and the U.K. were “once regarded as models of openness, liberalism, and generosity,” both nations have become illiberal, nationalistic, and mean-spirited. “Trump, Farage, and the more rabid Tory Brexiteers,” writes the author, “spoke obsessively about taking back their countries and making them great again. This talk was either grandiose—Britain as a great global power—or reflected a narrow, chauvinistic view of the world that Roosevelt and Churchill would have found abhorrent.” This situation has left it to Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron to remind both nations of how democratic nations are supposed to behave. Buruma also astutely examines the relationships of each British leader after Churchill with their American counterpart, almost always a one-sided exchange that not even Beatlemania could even out.

A smart, lively political history that illuminates the changing relations of two decidedly unequal partners.

FAMILY IN SIX TONES
A Refugee Mother, an American Daughter
Cao, Lan & Van Cao, Harlan Margaret
Viking (352 pp.)
978-1-984878-16-8
$28.00 | Sep. 1, 2020

An acclaimed Vietnamese-born novelist and her U.S.–born daughter tell the story of their complex relationship and their lives in America.

Cao fled Vietnam for the U.S. in 1975, when she was 13. In 2002, she gave birth to the daughter, Harlan, who made her realize she was no longer a lone survivor but rather a new entity comprised of “two beings entwined.” In this co-authored story, Cao and Van Cao speak in alternating sections about their experiences in America. Cao writes about being a cultural outsider haunted by excruciating memories of Vietnam that resurfaced after the birth of her daughter. While Van Cao also saw herself as “separated” from others, it was partly because she could “see sounds and feel letters and taste smells.” It was also because the overprotective refugee mother who held her hand until she was 11 or 12 had conditioned her “to survive” by taking her to taekwondo classes and pushing her to excel in everything from academics to music. What makes this memoir especially compelling is the way these two separate but linked perspectives illuminate silences or gaps in the stories each woman tells. For example, Cao’s probing but emotionally restrained narrative focuses on the facts of her remarkable life: early life in war-torn Vietnam, resettlement in Virginia, college at Mount Holyoke, corporate law work in New York City, marriage to a Duke law professor. By contrast, Van Cao uses her distance from Vietnam to talk openly about her mother’s “shadow selves” that emerged in the aftermath of war trauma, elements that Cao only hints at in her own narrative. As it celebrates the mother-daughter bond, this book reveals the added complexities that bring together refugee mothers and their American children while also maintaining a certain unbridgeable distance.

An eloquent and affecting multigenerational memoir.

I WILL RUN WILD
The Pacific War From Pearl Harbor to Midway
Cleaver, Thomas McKelvey
Osprey Publishing (320 pp.)
978-1-4728-4133-9
$30.00 | Sep. 22, 2020

A focused look at the first six months of World War II in the Pacific, drawing on government documents and interviews with veterans.

Cleaver admits to a fascination with the Pacific war since his early school days, and it shows in the depth in which he examines the battlefield details. The author, who has written multiple books on the Pacific theater, puts special emphasis on naval aviation, which was the dominant mode of action at the time. The second chapter, describing U.S. and Japanese preparedness for the war, includes accounts of the development of the Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber and the Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighter, two of the iconic warplanes of the era. At times, the catalogs of how many planes of which types took part in a given attack may stretch the patience of general readers, though this type of data will thrill military history buffs. Cleaver amply makes up for any slow bits with comments from and anecdotes by many of those who took part—on both sides. The author includes quotes from Eisenhower’s diaries and Roosevelt’s speeches and battle accounts from American and Japanese servicemen along with contemporaneous news reports to show what the general public was being told about the campaign. Cleaver has strong opinions about many aspects of the Pacific war, including a negative judgment of Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s performance in the defense of the Philippines, one evidently shared by many of those in the field at the time. The author’s diligent research and careful citation of sources give his opinions considerable weight; as a result, the book deserves attention from anyone interested in the difficult months between the disaster of Pearl Harbor and the triumph of Midway.

Authoritative and colorful—a must-read account of the initial phase of the war in the Pacific.
AT-HOME ESSENTIALS
to
NOURISH YOUR BODY and MIND

THE EXPERIMENT • NEW YORK
BECAUSE EVERY BOOK IS A TEST OF NEW IDEAS
DISTRIBUTED BY WORKMAN PUBLISHING
As an albino child in the Philippines, you were immediately recognized as different, and your family encouraged the belief that you would one day move to America.

It’s not generally true that albino kids in the Philippines are seen as in some way related to Americans in America. There are albino kids who are very much treated like outcasts or not considered desirable. One of the major ways in which I formed my identity was to grasp on to this idea that I’m not freakish, I’m like those Americans who have white skin and blond hair.

Your sexual and gender identities were more obscured during childhood.

I wasn’t outwardly feminine, in the sense that I didn’t wear girls’ clothes, but at the same time I played mostly with girls, I didn’t play outside, I didn’t like roughhousing. I think because I’m albino, people were less likely to say, “Meredith is like that because she’s gender nonconforming.” It was always, “Meredith plays by a completely different set of rules because she’s completely different from all of us.” What’s really interesting is that as soon as I came to the States, I was identified as feminine. The standards for what is considered masculine and feminine in the two countries are really different. I didn’t explicitly come out, because I was living in a relatively conservative part of California, but I played gay roles in the theater, I did a lot of dance, and I was mostly friends with girls. All of these things were markers to people that I was a gay man.

One of the most powerful parts in the book is when you begin going out into the world as a woman and the incredible sense of power that you describe feeling.

I came into the experience very much as a gay man who was dressing in women’s clothes. And there was that liminal period of several months where it was really hard for me to define my identity in relationship to manhood or womanhood and whether my sexuality was a woman’s or a gay man’s. Knowing that all of this is socially constructed, right?
I was in this mode of just being like, I am superdesirable to these men—many of whom were in these gay-male-fetishized professions, men who had been in the military, or plumbers, or construction workers. For me, it was just like, wow, I only need to put on a dress and makeup, and the straight guys would suddenly be attracted.

You were in a long relationship with a gay man, Ralph. And as you began to transition and realized that you wanted to live your life as a woman, that relationship couldn’t come with you into the future.

We have managed to stay in touch with each other. But what does it mean to see your ex who is your gay ex from when you were a gay man? It’s fraught—whenever we interact we actually have no idea what we’re doing, what this means. We’re still trying to figure that out. I’ve written it down so that maybe someday somebody else who’s going through a similar situation can have at least some measure of understanding of what they might need to anticipate.

We’re starting to see more trans memoirs like yours. Is the reading public ready to embrace trans stories?

There has definitely been a steady interest in trans issues, in part because there are many more out trans people, many more people who have trans family members in their lives, trans people in their communities. But I have my former academic long view that in the broader landscape of books and literature, we’re still at the very, very early stages. If we think about gay and lesbian literature, it’s read by a super-broad public and is considered an integrated part of literature in general. It’s something that I hope for with trans literature as well. And that’s something that I strive to do with my work—to impart ideas and ways of seeing that transcend the individual experiences of the writer.

Fairest was reviewed in the March 15, 2020, issue.
A previously undiscovered cache of uncataloged letters prompts an examination of Simone de Beauvoir’s relationship with her readers. "Nothing prepared me for the drama I found the first time I opened a folder of readers’ letters to [her]," writes Coffin about her discovery. In the letters, which are held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, in Paris, Coffin read about the experiences of men and women who “wanted to meet Beauvoir, to share their memories or to share in hers.” The letters are fascinating, but this scrupulously researched book does more than recount their content. Coffin asserts that “the ‘Simone de Beauvoir’ that we know would not exist without her readers’ formative role.” According to Coffin, the dynamic relationship between authors and readers does not flow in one direction. Beauvoir’s ideas may have deeply affected her readers, but her readers had a significant impact on her, as well. Beauvoir, the author reminds us, once wrote that “a discovery has possibilities both positive and negative: One can become like Kerouac in The Dharma Bums or Piggy in Lord of the Flies. As the author discusses, there’s getting lost, and then there’s getting lost, as with Hernando de Soto and Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, the Spanish conquistadors, or the French explorer Samuel de Champlain, who marveled at the fact that a Huron guide assigned to him “knew how to find again the place from which he started so well that it was something very remarkable.” Coleman sometimes ventures into arid academic territory, and his excurses into the howling wilderness of the Puritans and pioneers have been done better by other scholars, such as Perry Miller and Henry Nash Smith. Still, he makes a number of salient points. For example, early advocates of camping that was recreational rather than required willingly put themselves in harm’s way even as the development of managed campgrounds reduced that danger while replacing it with a "feeling of detachment [that] was an amenity, and clients and managers pushed the limits of safety to conjure sensations of being out-there, on the edge of the known world...Visitors accepted risks because they expected nature to blow their minds—in a healthy, sublime way.” The payoff for moderns? Perhaps respite from the flood of information that washes over us, to say nothing of growing a stronger hippocampus, which is never a bad idea.

Worth a look for fans of Thoreau, Solnit, and other proponents of aimless wandering.

**SEX, LOVE, AND LETTERS**

*Writing Simone de Beauvoir*

Coffin, Judith G.

Cornell Univ. (334 pp.)

$32.95 | Sep. 15, 2020

978-1-5017-5054-0

This beautifully written, frequently moving book is a crucial addition to the scholarship on Simone de Beauvoir.

**NATURE SHOCK**

*Getting Lost in America*

Coleman, Jon T.

Yale Univ. (360 pp.)

$30.00 | Aug. 12, 2020

978-0-300-22714-7

A professor of history at Notre Dame examines the phenomenon of getting lost in the face of technologies meant to keep us on the path.

Coleman opens with an only-in-America vignette, describing a company that places clients in remote places with the aim of their “finding their true selves in bespoke isolation.” Getting lost in the woods in search of self-discovery has possibilities both positive and negative: One can become like Kerouac in *The Dharma Bums* or Piggy in *Lord of the Flies*. As the author discusses, there’s getting lost, and then there’s getting lost, as with Hernando de Soto and Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, the Spanish conquistadors, or the French explorer Samuel de Champlain, who marveled at the fact that a Huron guide assigned to him “knew how to find again the place from which he started so well that it was something very remarkable.” Coleman sometimes ventures into arid academic territory, and his excurses into the howling wilderness of the Puritans and pioneers have been done better by other scholars, such as Perry Miller and Henry Nash Smith. Still, he makes a number of salient points. For example, early advocates of camping that was recreational rather than required willingly put themselves in harm’s way even as the development of managed campgrounds reduced that danger while replacing it with a "feeling of detachment [that] was an amenity, and clients and managers pushed the limits of safety to conjure sensations of being out-there, on the edge of the known world...Visitors accepted risks because they expected nature to blow their minds—in a healthy, sublime way.” The payoff for moderns? Perhaps respite from the flood of information that washes over us, to say nothing of growing a stronger hippocampus, which is never a bad idea.

Worth a look for fans of Thoreau, Solnit, and other proponents of aimless wandering.

**THE GAMESMASTER**

*My Life in the ’80s Geek Culture Trenches With G.I. Joe, Dungeons & Dragons, and The Transformers*

Dille, Flint

Rare Bird Books (312 pp.)

$27.00 | Jul. 14, 2020

978-1-64428-012-6

A veteran of 1980s animation recounts his days working on *G.I. Joe*, *Transformers*, and a host of other cartoon shows based on popular toy lines of the era.

Back when the Star Wars franchise was fresh and Saturday morning cartoons were relevant, Dille got a call from Lucasfilm to try out as a writer for a new children’s show they were developing. For the author, whose grandfather was John F. Dille, publisher of the original *Back Rogers*, the opportunity to work on a George Lucas property was exhilarating. Though it didn’t work out, Dille went on to work for Ruby-Spears and Sunbow Productions. Neither of those companies were at the level of Lucasfilm, but both proved to be crucial in his career development, which involved “an all-access pass to the geek eighties and working with an amazing collection of people who laid the foundations for what would be popular culture decades later.” The nascent writer was making a living adding literary depth to
Edited by Annie Finch
Choice Words
Writers on Abortion

“Stories save lives. We need women to say, shamelessly, I had an abortion. I’m not sorry. I’m not afraid. This anthology is a valuable contribution to this work.”
—Molly Crabapple

Erik Olin Wright
Stardust to Stardust
Reflections on Living and Dying

“This final work by one of the very great social critics of our time is not only deeply moving, insightful and important, but an act of immense and urgent generosity.”
—China Miéville

Clifford D. Conner
The Tragedy of American Science
From Truman to Trump

Conner argues that replacing the current science-for-profit system with a science-for-human-needs system is not an impossible, utopian dream.

Jenny Chan, Ngai Pun, and Mark Selden
Dying for an iPhone
Apple, Foxconn, and The Lives of China’s Workers

“A damning indictment of Apple’s labor and supply practices. A valuable contribution to an overdue discussion about technology and privilege.”
—Kirkus

Edited by Felicia Rose Chavez, José Olivarez, and Willie Perdomo
The Breakbeat Poets Vol. 4
LatiNext

In the dynamic tradition of the BreakBeat Poets anthology, The BreakBeat Poets Vol. 4: LatiNext celebrates the embodied narratives of Latinidad. Like Hip-Hop, we honor what was, what is, and what’s next.
“For humans at birth,” writes the author, “the brain is remarkably flexible because it must literally dispassionate and disconnected. He foggyly confesses to forgetting key elements of his story, and the attention he gives major industry figures, including Jack Kirby, Steve Gerber, and Frank Miller, is scant at best. The author also gives short shrift to such seminal events as the dissolution of Gygax’s piece of the D&D empire. Dille’s reaction to being fired from the Garbage Pail Kids and immediately hired on Steven Spielberg’s Tiny Toons matches the overall tone of his memoir: “Who knows? Who cares? It didn’t, and doesn’t, matter.”

A middling memoir studded with a few interesting insights into 1980s Hollywood.

A masterful update on how the brain operates.

At the beginning, neuroscientist Eagleman notes how DNA gets all the credit for being the basis of life but deserves only half. Every animal today possesses DNA identical to that of 30,000 years ago, and its behavior is also indistinguishable. A cave-woman with identical DNA might look like us, but their actions and thoughts would be utterly foreign. Credit goes to the human brain, entirely the creation of DNA at birth but unfinished. “For humans at birth,” writes the author, “the brain is remarkably unfinished, and interaction with the world is necessary to complete it.” Unlike an arm or stomach, the brain is a dynamic system, a general-purpose computing device that changes in response to experience. With this introduction, Eagleman is off and running. In the first of many delightful educational jolts, he notes that the mature brain contains regions with specific functions, but under magnification, its billions of nerve cells, which form trillions of connections, look the same. What’s happening? The brain does not think or hear or touch anything. “All it ever sees are electrochemical signals that stream in along different data cables,” writes the author, but it works brilliantly to extract patterns from this input. As we age, our brain figures out a set of rules, which the author lays out in his conclusion. At birth it possesses enormous flexibility because it must literally learn how to function. Children can learn several languages fluently, but after age 10, new languages come with an accent. If a child is kept in the dark and silence for several years after birth, they will never see or talk. Neurons compete as fiercely as they cooperate. If one area stops functioning, others take over. Thus, when the vision region falls silent from blindness or even a few hours in a blindfold, input from hearing or touch moves in.

To fend off this intrusion during sleep, Eagleman theorizes, our vision area continues to operate by generating dreams.

A bicultural, binational writer examines racial justice, mental illness, cultural appropriation, and other issues in this powerful set of essays.

Born in the U.S., Elliott moved to the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve in Ontario in childhood. That early period of life shapes her recognition, recounted here, of the pain of poverty and mental illness. Her parents “slept in the living room on the couch and recliner,” lacking both privacy and a place where her mother could hide her growing depression, which she considered a form of demonic possession. “As far as analogies go, comparing depression to a demon is a pretty good one,” writes the author in a sharp passage. “Both overtake your faculties, leaving you disconnected and disembodied. Both change you so abruptly that even your loved ones barely recognize you. Both whisper evil words and malformed truths. Both scare most people shitless.” Elliott evokes both fear and considerable melancholy as she chronicles the hardships of life at Six Nations, where convenience-store food and suicide were constant companions. Later in the collection, she writes of her Haudenosaunee (Mohawk) father, who once cut the tip of a finger off with a chainsaw and stoically endured the ride to the hospital without acknowledging his own fear and pain: “Maybe I couldn’t map the pain on his face because he was always in pain.” Elliott writes with honesty and empathy of her life and the lives of family, constantly reckoning with institutional racism and less intentional private prejudices, as when she recounts a fellow writer’s telling her that of course she’d be “published right away because I was Native,” an unguarded moment of essentialism in which only ethnicity and not ability mattered. The author is not inclined to shrug off such things, and her larger views on the treatment of Indigenous peoples by the Canadian and American governments and critiques of racism, sexism, and other such offenses are well thought through and elegantly argued.

An impressive debut from a welcome new voice in Native letters.
MINI MUSINGS
Miniature Thoughts on Theatre and Poetry
Garebian, Keith
Guernica Editions (110 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-77183-534-3

A cornucopia of “miniature essays” on literary topics.

In the preface, Canadian poet and longtime freelance critic Garebian explains that he got the idea for this book from playwright Sarah Ruhl’s 100 Essays I Don’t Have Time To Write (2014). He doesn’t quite reach 100, but he follows her formula of writing a page or two, or even less, giving the slim book a cleaning-out-the-desk feeling. This often witty but uneven collection, a “breezy conversation with myself and interested readers,” speaks to some of Garebian’s “curiosities and obsessions” about the theater (acting, plays, playwrights) and poetry (on reading it, genres, theory, and practice). The author admires Canadian actor William Hutt, a “theatre giant of enormous skill and stature,” comparing him to Laurence Olivier—a master of “rhythm, pacing, and mood”—and Marlon Brando. An actor himself, Garebian champions the importance of community theater and recounts some of his own performances. He slyly notes that “great acting often demands great feet.” For the author, the often “misunderstood and misjudged” Edward Albee was one of America’s greatest playwrights. Garebian believes too many English teachers “would rather not teach” poetry at all. Their “lack of enthusiasm,” he writes, “filters down to their hapless students.” Unlike some overly academic, “deconstructive” critics of poetry, Garebian eschews “using a lot of learned lumber and a great deal of corny, contrived examples” to make his points. He introduces readers to unusual poetic forms such as found poems, collages, the cento, oulipo, and lipogram, as well as grim Japanese death poems. Garebian admires the “use of political consciousness as a volatile element of poetics” in Amiri Baraka and other militant poets. He also worries, “Can There Be Poetry After Donald Trump.” A lackluster piece excoriating poetry readings is just plain curmudgeonly.

A mixed bag of mostly common-sense advice on how to better appreciate the theater and poetry.
BUNKER
Building for the End Times
Garrett, Bradley
Scribner (288 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-5011-8855-8

A brief historical excavation of bunkers and in-depth exploration of their present-day use, when they “are built not so much in response to one single imminent catastrophe, but out of a more general sense of disquiet.”

For millennia, humans have been digging underground for shelter and to avoid disasters, but cultural geographer Garrett is primarily interested in the bunkers built by militias, survivalists, and preppers. This is the “hardened architecture” of dread, an expression of our 21st-century anxieties and insecurities, “the dominant affect of our era.” From his geographic/ethnographic perspective, Garrett is a capable writer with a crisp, detailed, visual quality to his work, and he brings a gratifying participant approach to this investigation. The author intended to meet the preppers to get a sense of what made them tick (paranoia, practicality, or a mixture of both?), and while he was able to take the measure of some, many were too secretive to reveal too much. Garrett discovered that preppers are motivated by a number of forces, from the scientific to the spiritual. Appalled by a government that has abandoned its responsibility to protect its citizens and a socio-economic system that has fostered alienation and an increased need for self-defense, they dread the prospect of a desperate, voracious human population fighting over dwindling resources. Most interesting are the author’s accounts of his visits to a variety of bunker complexes, including DIY homestead operations, abandoned ICBM silos, and Australian fire bunkers, “oxygen-filled cocoons that look remarkably similar to the nuclear shelters that Americans built in a panic during the first doomsday boom in the early years of the Cold War.” Garrett finds that many complexes are little more than a combination of wishful thinking and unexecuted plans, and he also avers that communities are crucial, transitions inevitable, and some prepping highly practical. Regarding the last, the author’s “Acronym and Argot Glossary” is helpful for readers unfamiliar with the lingo.

Intriguing and often entertaining reading on a phenomenon that seems timeless.

LEAVE IT AS IT IS
A Journey Through Theodore Roosevelt’s American Wilderness
Gessner, David
Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 11, 2020
978-1-9821-0504-4

An admiring study of Theodore Roosevelt and his attachment to the natural world.

“All you have to do is go back and read the man’s sentences,” writes environmental-literature writer and professor Gessner. “Not the jingoistic, chest-beating, America-first rants or the bloody descriptions of killing things. But the words in between.” Though often given to sentences that have a faux Hemingway swagger to them, Gessner proves the point by examining Roosevelt’s evolving appreciation of nature and his recognition that other orders of existence besides the human had claims to the world. Some of that appreciation came through the tutelage of early nature writers and explorers such as John Burroughs and John Muir. Much, though, was born of Roosevelt’s dedication to improving his already capacious mind but once feeble body by scaling the rocks of Yosemite, hiking into the Grand Canyon, and other tests. Roosevelt repaid the favor by placing great tracts of public domain land in service as wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, and the like. Gessner mixes solid research with on-the-ground explorations that sometimes get a little goofy, as when, on a trip to Yosemite of his own, he allows his accompanying nephew a “small, safe, legal, uncle-supervised” nibble on a marijuana cookie. His travels often lead, though, to contested places such as the embattled Bears Ears National Monument, for which he mounts an eloquent appeal to return land that the Trump administration has delisted to the public domain. Gessner sometimes wanders down paths of speculation that don’t lead anywhere fruitful (“What would he make of the warming climate and dying species and what we have done with the wilderness he left us?”), and he doesn’t break much new ground. Still, it’s useful to be reminded of a president who appreciates the natural world and puts government to work doing good things.

Fans of Teddy the outdoor enthusiast will appreciate Gessner’s account. (maps and photos)
INVENTING LATINOS
A New Story of American Racism
Gómez, Laura E.
The New Press (336 pp.)
$25.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-59558-917-0

A vigorous argument that Latinx people from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean exist as “racially subordinated” groups in a “multi-race hierarchy in which Whites continue to be dominant.”

Gómez begins by examining the exploitative American colonialist projects in Central America and the Caribbean that resulted in large migrations of people across southern U.S. borders. She then explores the concept of “mestizaje,” “the social and sexual mixing of Indigenous peoples, Africans and Spaniards” that helped shape attitudes among Latino people regarding their identities. In the 1940s, for example, the light-skinned Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo played up the Indian/Spanish (mostly white) ancestry of Dominicans to distinguish them from and elevate them above their mostly Afro-European (mostly black) Haitian neighbors. Such efforts to privilege whiteness laid the foundation for a Latinx acceptance of racism that followed them into the U.S. and, as Gómez shows later on, forced many multiracial Latinx people to seek “protection” from American racism by identifying as white wherever possible. The 1980 census marked the first time that multiracial/racial/cultural Latinx peoples were grouped together under one identity. The author argues that attempts to categorize Latinos ethnically rather than racially is actually part of a dominant culture strategy to keep different Latinx groups apart from each other and apart from blacks and enlist Latinos in efforts to police the “the White-over-Black color line.” In this thoughtfully argued study, which draws from historical and sociological sources, Gómez provides much-needed insight into the true complexity of Latinx identity while revealing the ways in which the dominant culture continues to mask the many racist currents within American society.

An insightful and well-researched book.

DOMINICAN dictator Rafael Trujillo played up the Indian/Spanish (mostly white) ancestry of Dominicans to distinguish them from and elevate them above their mostly Afro-European (mostly black) Haitian neighbors. Such efforts to privilege whiteness laid the foundation for a Latinx acceptance of racism that followed them into the U.S. and, as Gómez shows later on, forced many multiracial Latinx people to seek “protection” from American racism by identifying as white wherever possible. The 1980 census marked the first time that multiracial/racial/cultural Latinx peoples were grouped together under one identity. The author argues that attempts to categorize Latinos ethnically rather than racially is actually part of a dominant culture strategy to keep different Latinx groups apart from each other and apart from blacks and enlist Latinos in efforts to police the “the White-over-Black color line.” In this thoughtfully argued study, which draws from historical and sociological sources, Gómez provides much-needed insight into the true complexity of Latinx identity while revealing the ways in which the dominant culture continues to mask the many racist currents within American society.

An insightful and well-researched book.
A highly readable, engaging, astute microhistory of an overlooked event.

TEN DAYS IN HARLEM

Fidel Castro and the Making of the 1960s

Hall, Simon

Faber & Faber (288 pp.)

$24.95 | Sep. 8, 2020

978-0-5713-5306-4

A sharply focused study of Fidel Castro's significant visit to New York City for the opening session of the U.N. in September 1960.

Although Castro was only in New York for 10 days, Hall, a professor of modern history, argues that his stay had a powerful effect in terms of galvanizing the forces of black civil rights, promoting the politics of anti-imperialism, and freezing the already icy relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Moreover, the visit “all but guaranteed a decisive and fateful rupture in US–Cuban relations.” After a wide-ranging scene-setter in which the author marshals the seismic historical events occurring at the time—e.g., the last months of Dwight Eisenhower’s presidential tenure, the “crisis” in Belgian Congo that led to independence, the Soviet downing of an American U-2 spy plane, the beginning of the sit-ins at Woolworth’s lunch counters and elsewhere to protest segregation—Hall moves chronologically, organizing his work by each day’s activities in the Cuban delegation’s schedule. Especially illuminating is the author’s account of the delegation’s stunning move from the midtown Shelburne Hotel, where they felt unwelcome, to the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, where the entire neighborhood turned out rapturously and Castro held court with such luminaries as Malcolm X, Nikita Khrushchev, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Jawaharlal Nehru. On Sept. 26, Castro’s nearly five-hour speech to the General Assembly—which, “according to one wag…covered everything except the dispute between Britain and Iceland over the sardine harvest”—upstaged those by Eisenhower and Khrushchev and memorably gave his young country a voice and the “people’s revolution” the attention of the world.

In a narrative packed with fascinating historical detail and terrific photos, Hall makes an engaging argument that Castro’s trip established his reputation as “hero for the oppressed peoples of the world”—and spurred leftist movements everywhere.

A highly readable, engaging, astute microhistory of an overlooked event.

OPERATION VENGEANCE

The Astonishing Aerial Ambush That Changed World War II

Hampton, Dan

Morrow/HarperCollins (448 pp.)

$28.99 | Aug. 11, 2020

978-0-06-293809-1

A long and diffuse but generally satisfying account of the World War II hunt for a notorious Japanese strategist.

Hampton charts the killing of Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, a key planner of Pearl Harbor and of the Japanese war in the Pacific. After Midway and the Coral Sea, the Japanese perception of America as weak gave way to the realization that the enemy was tougher than anticipated; as the author writes portentously, “sand was leaking from the Japanese hourglass.” Yamamoto developed a three-pronged plan to tangle the Americans in island-hopping fighting in the Solomon Sea, invade southern New Guinea to threaten Australia, and finally “catch the U.S. fleet in open water and destroy it.” Such a formidable opponent had to be eliminated, and this became the objective of a group of elite American flyers who, working closely with intelligence units and cryptographers, divined Yamamoto’s location. Knowing that once a plan was formulated the Japanese seldom varied from it, they timed when his plane would pass within striking distance. As Hampton clearly chronicles, credit for the kill goes to an Oregon-born flyer named Rex Barber. Instead, a hot-dogging senior officer claimed credit and, by doing so, broadcast the plain implication that U.S. intelligence had cracked the Japanese code. An irate Adm. William Halsey thus shelved recommendations that the members of the air mission be awarded the Medal of Honor and instead demoted them to receive only the Navy Cross. Barber considers Halsey’s actions to be “contemptuous” and “ill-mannered,” but he reserves greater scorn for “Japanese hubris.” Though much of the big picture stuff has been covered more thoroughly in many of the standard WWII texts, the action sequences are vivid and engaging.

By the numbers but with a welcome payoff in giving credit where it’s due, albeit long after the fact.

DANCING WITH THE OCTOPUS

A Memoir of a Crime

Harding, Debora

Bloomsbury (384 pp.)

$27.00 | Sep. 22, 2020

978-1-63557-612-2

A powerful account of sexual assault and decades of lingering trauma.

The opening of Harding’s memoir, told in brief episodes, finds her confronting Charles, who, when she was a young teenager, kidnapped and raped her—and, we learn, surely would have killed her had she not escaped. There he sat, imprisoned, nonchalantly, “as if he were waiting there just for me in the same way he’d been that afternoon, twenty-five years ago, when our paths happened to cross.” The author reconstructs the terrible events of the assault, unpremeditated only to the extent that she just happened to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time as Charles, recently released from juvenile detention, acted out his pent-up rage. Complicating the tale is a home life that might have seemed normal to a casual observer but that was not: Her unhinged, raging mother “beat my legs with a belt so bad I had to cover them up at school the next day” while her father did little to protect her from that constant wrath. Still, in the aftermath of that night in 1978, Harding forged a deep
connection with him: “The crime had been important to my relationship with my father, forged an inseparable bond, and now it explained my unshakable loyalty to him,” she writes. All of these threads have unhappy resolutions even as Harding tries to get at the root of the debilitating anxiety that ensued years later. She decides that one key to restoring her health was to follow the tenets of “restorative justice,” one aspect of which is to face one’s attacker and hold a dialogue—in this case one that took place just before his release from prison, testing whether the transformation from violent youth to spiritual adult he said he underwent was genuine at all.

A thoughtfully told story that may inspire others to find healing in the wake of savage crime.

HOW WE LIVE NOW
Scenes From the Pandemic
Hayes, Bill
Photos by the author
Bloomsbury (144 pp.)
$20.00 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-63557-688-7

Hayes continues journaling about and photographing life in New York City, this time from quarantine.

In his latest, the author offers a slim, touching volume of jottings and images from his experience of the pandemic from the apartment he shared with his partner, the late Oliver Sacks. A recent New York Times article entitled “Publishers Snap Up Corona Books, From Case Studies to Plague Poetry” warned that “publishing books about an unfolding calamity, when the duration and outcome remain uncertain, carries obvious risks for authors and publishers.” With that in mind, Hayes’ sweet and searching record
of life in March and April seems a bit like a work in progress. His chart “57 Days in the Pandemic in the United States of America” ends on May 7, with “1,292,623 confirmed & 76,928 dead.” Of course, since then, those numbers have risen precipitously—and promise to do so even more by the time the book is published. The photos serve as potent documentation of an unprecedented time: empty subway trains and stations at rush hour, for example, or portraits of masked store owners and delivery drivers, or solitary figures roaming the streets. The author includes pre-pandemic images for contrast: A colorful picture of a packed 8th Avenue in December, illuminated by brake lights and neon, contrasts sharply with a black-and-white image of the same corridor on April 6, its skyscraper canyons empty of all but shadows. The text is less dramatic though engaging and personable enough. The author’s first-hand interactions with the virus are limited to a couple of sick acquaintances and the effect of social distancing on a nascent love affair begun in December. A list poem recalling “The last time I…” did and saw any number of once-mundane things feels like an homage to Joe Brainard’s I Remember.

Excellent photos and unassuming journal entries preserve the emotions and sights of the early stages of a pandemic.

THE WEIRDEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD
How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous
Henrich, Joseph
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (547 pp.)
$35.00 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-0-374-17322-7

The chair of the department of human evolutionary biology at Harvard limns the social and mental conditions that have made the West wealthy.

Other writers, notably Carlo Cipolla, have linked the rise of literacy to prosperity in the developed world. Henrich takes the argument further to correlate it to being “WEIRD”—i.e., “Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic.” Literacy is a major component, especially the Protestant literacy that placed the vernacular Bible into the hands of individuals, emphasized free will, and encouraged the cultivation of individual traits and interests. So it is that Westerners—and also members of societies that have emulated the West, such as Japan—also have peculiar, novel, and relatively recent mental markers, including a bias toward the right hemisphere of the brain and for analytical processing of data in the place of “broad configurations and gestalt patterns.” There are emotional and sociological sequelae, including the development of cultures that favor guilt over shame and of notions of justice and social organization that accord high levels of trust to strangers as opposed to kin-based groups. This last represents a significant break with primate tradition, with its preference for “kin altruism.” There are all kinds of wrinkles to this engrossing story, which Henrich illustrates with graphs and charts. Where there are high rates of cousin marriage, he writes, the more likely it is that people mistrust strangers; concomitantly, there are few “impersonal trust levels” that allow for the flourishing of credit and trade. Throughout, the author dives deep, even correlating the willingness to donate blood to the extension of kin altruism to those who aren’t related to us. “Many WEIRD people,” he writes, “have a set of folk beliefs that lead them to assume that any observed psychological differences among populations are due to economic differences.” In fact, the opposite is true: First come the psychological differences, then comes the money, which, the author allows, isn’t perfectly understood.

A fascinating, vigorously argued work that probes deeply into the way “WEIRD people” think.
formal education, was intelligent and often wise, which he illustrates with a long appendix of quotations.

A historian cleans out his desk with commendable results.

SEE WHAT YOU MADE ME DO
The Dangers of Domestic Abuse That We Ignore, Explain Away, or Refuse To See
Hill, Jess
Sourcebooks (448 pp.)
$26.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-72822-226-4

An Australian journalist finds countless faults with how society treats those who endure domestic violence.

Hill is all over the map, literally and figuratively, in this exploration of how “victims of domestic abuse have been blamed by the public, maligned by the justice system, and pathologized by psychiatrists.” After winning the Stella Prize for the Australian edition, the author has revised the book heavily for the North American market, and she finds antecedents for homegrown domestic abuse in the “deeply patriarchal and deeply sexist” views of the Puritans. Hill has a wealth of insight into why women stay with abusive partners; how the police and courts fail those who have suffered; the unique vulnerabilities of Aboriginal people; and the varied types of “coercive controllers,” who need more than one-size-fits-all “anger management” programs. The author also finds innovative solutions in countries including Argentina, which has special police stations for women, resembling living rooms with play spaces for children, where female victims find under one roof all the services they need—“lawyers, social workers, psychologists.” Hill stumbles, however, in analyzing the U.S., most notably when she suggests that in America, as elsewhere, “2014 will likely stand as the year when the Western world finally started taking men’s violence against women seriously,” in part because that was the year that NFL star Ray Rice assaulted his fiancee, Janay Palmer. In fact, as Rachel Louise Snyder writes in the excellent No Visible Bruises, the U.S. watershed came two decades earlier, when “Nicole Brown Simpson became the face of a new kind of victim” and Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act. Hill’s global perspective is valuable—as is a chapter on women who abuse men—but Snyder’s book has a firmer grasp of the American issues.

A meticulous historical analysis that will appeal most to students of British royal history. (b/w images, family trees)
An important story of a great civil rights battle told in exhaustive detail.

THE ENGAGEMENT

America’s Quarter-Century Struggle Over Same-Sex Marriage
Issenberg, Sasha
Pantheon (928 pp.)
$40.00 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-524-74873-9

A journalist and political science professor chronicles the fight for same-sex marriage from its beginnings through the presidential candidacy of Pete Buttigieg.

In 1990, three same-sex couples applied “on a lark” for Hawaii marriage licenses. The inevitable rejection set in motion a cascade of legal and political challenges that culminated in the landmark Obergefell v. Hodges decision, which legalized same-sex marriage throughout the U.S. In this exceptionally comprehensive but overwhelming and inefficiently organized account, Issenberg, Washington correspondent for the Monocle, shows how the movement lurched forward through triumphs in states like Vermont and Massachusetts and seemingly fatal setbacks such as Bill Clinton’s signing of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996. Advocates of marriage equality had to overcome the help of courageous opponents such as Dan Foley, a Buddhist attorney who took on the Hawaii marriage-license applicants as clients after chanting about it; and Mary Bonauto, a lawyer for Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, whom former congressman Barney Frank called “our Thurgood Marshall.” Issenberg’s encyclopedic narrative, though written well on the sentence level, has an inelegant structure that reveals an author unable or unwilling to necessarily condense the narrative (at least 200 pages could have been cut). He also includes too many unedifying details, including an attempt to put Barack Obama’s support for gay rights in context in part by stating, “Both Obama’s high-school drug dealer and favorite college professor were gay men.” Future journalists or historians will likely offer more efficient histories, but Issenberg’s research makes the book a vital source for bookstores, libraries, and LGBTQ studies completists.

An important story of a great civil rights battle told in exhaustive detail.

BREAKING BREAD WITH THE DEAD
A Reader’s Guide to a More Tranquil Mind
Jacobs, Alan
Penguin Press (160 pp.)
$25.00 | Sep. 8, 2020
978-1-9848-7840-3

A scholarly argument for engaging with writers from the past as a life-affirming and consciousness-building practice.

In our frenetically paced society, we are continually distracted and influenced by a surplus of information, which can lead to the loss of the capacity to process thoughts beyond the context of the present moment. In his latest, a follow-up of sorts to The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction and How To Think, Jacobs considers how “information overload and social acceleration work together to create a paralyzing feedback loop….There’s no time to think about anything else than the Now.” The author steers readers to the enriching wisdom that can be discovered through voices from the past, referencing a broad assortment of writers and philosophers, including Homer, Horace, Virgil, Simone Weil, Edith Wharton, Italo Calvino, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Jacobs instructs readers on how to confront and appreciate what these writers have to offer us within the context of their times rather than through the lens of our present-day circumstances, when “the not-Now increasingly takes on the character of an unwelcoming and, in its otherness, even befouling imposition.” He builds a convincing case for needed to expand one’s “personal density,” a term he derived from Thomas Pynchon’s novel Gravity’s Rainbow. “We lack the density to stay put even in the mildest breeze from our news feeds,” writes Jacobs. “Temporal bandwidth helps give us the requisite density: it addresses our condition of frenetic standstill’ by simultaneously slowing us down and giving us more freedom of movement.” The author offers Frederick Douglass...
and Zadie Smith as examples of writers adept at expressing personally held convictions while also appreciating the ideas of past writers who didn’t necessarily live according to these same standards. “That Keats was an outsider,” writes Jacobs, “with no clear path into the literary world was key to his appeal for Smith.”

A persuasive, if sometimes overly academic, case for exploring writers from the past.

**THE CONTAMINATION OF THE EARTH**

*A History of Pollution in the Industrial Age*

Jarrige, Francois & Le Roux, Thomas

Trans. by Egan, Janice & Egan, Michael

MIT Press (480 pp.)

$39.95 | Jul. 7, 2020

978-0-262-04383-0

Wide-ranging survey of the environmental damage wrought by industrial pollution in the last few centuries.

University of Burgundy historian Jarrige and scientific researcher Le Roux write of pollutions in the plural, for there are many channels that bring toxic materials within reach. “Never have so many chemical products—the safety of which generate widespread uncertainty—been in circulation,” they write in a narrative full of tables and hard data, adding, “chemical contamination is a feature of the entire planet.” These multiple pollutants combine and evolve along “complex pathways” that have developed over the roughly three centuries since industrialization emerged and then became economically dominant. The authors add that of course pollutions have been with us before that economic formation took shape, though in the main the concept of pollution (in the singular) was “rooted in religious cosmology and its ideas about purity and impurity”; some of those ideas associated such impurity with nonbelievers, outsiders, and the poor. With the rise of industrialization, those ideas gave way to the association of pollution as an inevitable collateral cost of progress. Still, as the authors note of the global market for recycled and castoff materials, “the waste trade is just one of the many examples that show that the burden of pollution is mainly borne by the poorest people in the poorest countries on the planet.” Meanwhile, citizens of wealthy countries are awash in goods and technologies. Laws have been written in poor and wealthy countries alike to curb pollution and polluters, the authors note, often to little avail, since, “as in the past, the most polluting industries do not cease to create new methods to resist, obfuscate, or soften environmental standards or reduce opposition.” So it is that pollutions are seen through the lens of capitalist economics as mere externalities rather than a shrouded and present danger.

Scholarly rather than polemical and of interest to students of environmental and economic history.

**THE CITY ON THE THAMES**

*The Creation of a World Capital: A History of London*

Jenkins, Simon

Pegasus (432 pp.)

$28.95 | Sep. 1, 2020

978-1-64313-552-6

The ageless genre of city histories receives a fine addition.

Though London was the biggest city in the world in the 19th century, it does not even make the top 10 today. Jenkins, a lifelong Londoner who served as the editor of *Evening Standard* and the *Times* and is now a columnist at the *Guardian*, clearly loves his home city, and he leavens his enthusiasm with expertise and a highly critical eye. Beginning as Londinium, founded after the 43 C.E. Roman invasion, by the end of the century it was a cosmopolitan city of 60,000. It nearly disappeared after Rome withdrew in 410 but pulled itself together after two centuries and prospered as a trading center, surviving the black plague and a civil war to become a European power by 1500. Henry VIII’s looting of the church produced vast wealth, and Elizabeth’s disinterest in aggressive wars did nothing to discourage London’s rise to “Europe’s premier financial centre.” Until he reaches the middle of the 17th century, Jenkins delivers historical tradition, mixing politics, culture, and trade. City planning and architecture take a back seat because little that was built still exists. Thereafter, the author takes his love of the city literally by concentrating on city government, delving heavily into the backgrounds of neighborhoods, palaces, squares, monuments, roads, and infrastructure. Londoners and frequent visitors will relish his expert, opinionated, and sometimes highly unflattering picture. While many European cities that rebuilt after World War II carefully preserved their historical gems, Britain did no such thing, giving builders carte blanche. As a result, “they inflicted greater destruction on London...than all Hitler’s bombs.” Readers unfamiliar with the city’s geography will appreciate the generous maps and illustrations but may feel the urge to skim many detailed accounts of local property development.

*A mostly delightful love letter to a great city.*

**ABOVE THE CLOUDS**

*How I Carved My Own Path to the Top of the World*

Jornet, Kilian

HarperOne (240 pp.)

$27.99 | Aug. 25, 2020

978-0-06-296503-5

A Catalan endurance athlete recounts his experiences and how they have shaped his worldview.

As Jornet, only 32, unwinds his exciting life story—tales of mountain climbing, ski mountaineering, ultralong-distance running, mountain biking, and...
A haunting, captivating memoir of homecoming.

TO THE LAKE
A Balkan Journey of War and Peace
Kassabova, Kapka
Graywolf (416 pp.)
$16.00 paper  |  Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-64445-026-0

A writer from the Balkans revisits the region's tumultuous past.

An award-winning writer of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction, Kassabova, who was born in Bulgaria, is the fourth generation of women to leave the Balkan region around lakes Ohrid and Prespa, encompassing North Macedonia and Albania. In lyrical, radiant prose, the author recounts her journey to the lakes in a quest to understand the historical forces that shaped her family and her sense of self and to seek "continuity of being through continuity of place." From her moment of arrival, Kassabova felt an uncanny connection to Ohrid, her grandmother's home city, and "an exhilaration of wholeness" beside the glistening, ancient lake whose shores had been inhabited for 8,000 years.

"Whose are you?" was a repeated refrain from many she met. Complicating that question about family heritage, Kassabova also asked, "What is a nation? What is geography?" The region, "still a bastion of Eastern hedonism and puritanism," had a violent past: Ottoman colonization, religious conflicts, wars, resistance, desperate escapes, and "the ravages of a decayed autocracy [that] resulted in civil collapse and the rule of banality." Albania suffered for three decades under brutal communist totalitarianism. Through the many people she met—many, in fact, relatives—Kassabova chronicles the region's history and culture, evoking songs, folk tales, poetry, myths, and superstitions. Ranging over "a traumatized topography," she reveals her own profound inner journey. "My whole life," she writes, "felt like a bid to break away from the grip of my predecessors with their endless grievances, step after step, road after travelled road—as if awakening and seeing the light of the Lake for the first time." As she examines her responses to "a lost homeland I was slowly remembering," the question that gnawed at her was not "Whose are you?" but rather, "Whose life are you living? No, really living."

A haunting, captivating memoir of homecoming.

THE BLESSING & THE CURSE
The Jewish People and Their Books in the Twentieth Century
Kirsch, Adam
Norton (336 pp.)
$30.00  |  Oct. 6, 2020
978-0-393-65240-6

Attentive review of major writings by Jewish authors in a century marked by tragedy and promise.

In this natural follow-up to The People and The Books: 18 Classics of Jewish Literature, Kirsch impressively surveys more than 30 significant Jewish authors of the 20th century. At the beginning, the author admits that any such study has its limitations, but the works he chooses are representative of the geographic, ideological, theological, and gender diversity of modern Jewish thought. They also focus the reader's attention on a century of monumental change for global Judaism, marked by mass immigration, brilliant philosophical movements, the horrors of the Holocaust, the creation of Israel as a sovereign state, and unprecedented secularism. Kirsch divides his review into four sections, looking first at Jewish writers in or from Europe whose works relate to the seismic changes that led to the Shoah. Readers will be familiar with many of the authors: Franz Kafka, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Anne Frank, Hannah Arendt. Moving on, the author explores books by American Jews, juggling their place in American society with their Jewish heritage; forming a new, uniquely American Jewish identity; and battling, or embracing, assimilation. The author then looks at the writings of Israeli Jews, astutely examining the realization of Zionism from a variety of angles. As Kirsch shows, S. Yizhar studied the irony of an exiled people creating new exiles of the Arabs; Hannah Senesh, through her diary, exposed the guilt of being a survivor in 1940s Palestine whose mother was left behind to suffer persecution. Finally, Kirsch discusses some of the great thinkers, including Martin Buber and Mordecai Kaplan, who have helped create the version of Judaism that the current century has inherited.
from the last. Kirsch’s work serves as an engrossing overview and introduction to a wide variety of writers, making it especially useful to general readers.

Well-crafted, expertly balanced, and deeply humane.

**SEX ROBOTS AND VEGAN MEAT**

Adventures at the Frontier of Birth, Food, and Sex

Kleeman, Jenny

Pegasus (272 pp.)

$27.95 | Sep. 1, 2020

978-1-64313-572-4

Intriguing updates from the protean worlds of food, companionship, death, and beyond.

Chronicling a far-flung, five-year research project, journalist and documentary filmmaker Kleeman provides a vigorous introduction to several inventions poised to alter essential industries. In Southern California, the author visited Abyss Creations, “the home of RealDoll, the world’s most famous hyperrealistic silicone sex doll.” One model, “Harmony” (cost: $15,000), was embroiled in a competitive frenzy to perfect a “synthetic companion convincing enough that you could actually have a relationship with it.” Kleeman also relates her interview with a man who lives with three synthetic playmates, one of whom is his “wife.” In other sections, she creatively spotlights pioneers in the production of sustainable, plant-based food systems and vegan “clean meat” and fish. An unrepentant carnivore, the author addresses six key reasons why an increasing proportion of the populace considers meat and fish production indefensible industries. The author is a focused and charming tour guide, with the kind of breezy writing skills that make each section immensely intriguing. Even readers with no interest in reproduction or childhood will be intrigued by the section on fertility specialists who offer unique “social surrogacy” options and fetuses incubated in an ectogenetic “biobag.” Besides clinical risks, this particular subject encompasses complex ethical dilemmas, which Kleeman explores. In the morbid yet fascinating concluding section, the author looks at rational euthanasia options like Sarco, described by its developer as a “world-first 3D Printed Euthanasia Machine.” Though most of these initiatives are male-driven, women do appear throughout the narrative, most notably as neonatologists and/or fierce advocates for voluntary euthanasia. Behind Kleeman’s profiles and research lies the belief that life can be vastly enriched with the aid of technology and without discomfort, inconvenience, or sacrifice even as these modernizations remain in development. Fans of Mary Roach will be pleased.

Provocative, exuberant perspectives on the “disrupting technologies” primed to enhance the human experience.

**UNACCEPTABLE**

Privilege, Deceit & the Making of the College Admissions Scandal

Korn, Melissa & Levitz, Jennifer

Portfolio (384 pp.)

$28.00 | Jul. 21, 2020

978-0-593-08772-5

Wall Street Journal reporters Korn and Levitz dig deep into the college-admissions scandal that figured so prominently in recent headlines.

It’s difficult for most students to gain admission to elite colleges and universities, and especially so for those of indifferent achievement. This has been a cause of anguish for doting parents who see an Ivy League degree as a ticket to the good life. Jared Kushner is a case in point; he represents “perhaps the most egregious example of a back door deal,” a mediocre student with poor test scores but with a father who donated $2.5 million to Harvard. Bingo: instant admission. Enter a hustler named Rick Singer, who, himself a mediocre student who took eight years to get through college, found a decidedly lucrative gig in coaching students in the intricacies of college admissions, to which he later added shortcuts including back-door and side-door deals. Singer became a master of gaming a system with few safeguards. The nut of the story of course, is how Singer’s machinations played out with the actors Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman. Interestingly, they write, Huffman eventually figured out, ruefully, that Singer was a scam artist, albeit one who got results in the form of admissions—notably to the University of Southern California, where three coaches were bribed to admit students as “recruited athletes,” even if it sometimes took extensive use of Photoshop to get a decent photograph of a student in action. Huffman and Loughlin may have been the public faces of the scandal, but, Korn and Levitz write, it was far more extensive—and it ruined some students’ lives. The authors’ highly readable exposé goes well beyond the tabloid level, though, in exposing malfeasance throughout the higher-education system in the chase for ever scarcer dollars.

A capable examination of the seamy intersection of ambition, money, and higher education.

**BELABORED**

A Vindication of the Rights of Pregnant Women

Lenz, Lyz

Bold Type Books (240 pp.)

$26.00 | Aug. 11, 2020

978-1-5447-6283-1

How the reality of motherhood contrasts sharply with our culture’s prevailing creation myth.

In America, writes Lenz, “to be a mother is to become a myth”—a white woman of purity and
Drawing on stories by and about a diversity of mothers, medi-
and sociological research, women's history, feminist theory,
and her own vividly rendered experiences, Lenz offers a shrewd
debunking of the myth of motherhood and a perceptive examina-
tion of “the violence of the term mother.” Raised in an Evangelical
family and, until recently, married to a religious spouse, Lenz had
imbibed the message that pregnancy offered “the promise of ful-
fillment.” No one intimated that if she miscarried, she would be
deemed culpable; that while pregnant, everything she did, ate, or
drank would be scrutinized; that she might feel depressed during
and after pregnancy; that the birth itself would be highly medical-
ized. To be a mother, she came to realize, “is to occupy a political
space where your body is fought over and you feel powerless to
control the conversation that rages around you.” That conversa-
tion has been dominated by men—politicians who make laws
regulating abortion and family leave and doctors who outlawed
midwives, urging women to give birth in hospitals, where, in the
early 20th century, “infections raged” and doctors ruled. “The
history of birth,” writes the author, “is the story of men and medi-
cine slowly taking control over the female body” with episioto-
 mies, sedatives, forceps, and C-sections. Working on this book,
Lenz admits, changed how she sees herself as a mother and made
her realize “how alone we all are.”

A thoughtful, impassioned look at mothers and
mothering.

**CHURCHILL’S HELLRAISERS**

*The Secret Mission To Storm a Forbidden Nazi Fortress*

**Lewis, Damien**

Citadel/Kensington (400 pp.)

$27.00 | Aug. 25, 2020

978-0-8065-4074-0

Fireworks in Nazi-occupied Italy
during the final year of World War II.

Prolific filmmaker and historian
Lewis has written many accounts of
commando derring-do across various historical eras. His cur-
rent effort begins in the fall of 1944, one year into the Italian
campaign. After months of slow, bitter advance up the penin-
sula, the Allies were stalled at the Gothic line, a heavily fortified
position north of Florence. On the bright side, resistance forces
in North Italy were perhaps the most effective in Europe. For-
tified by air drops of supplies, arms, and members of Britain’s
elite Special Air Service, they became a major thorn in the side
of the German occupation. Lewis builds his story around Roy
Farran and Michael Lees, two veteran British officers, describ-
ing their dramatic, if not always successful exploits in the years
before they came together for Operation Tombola. Ordinar-
ily resistance units confined themselves to acts of sabotage
and ambush, but on this occasion, they received approval to
target a corps headquarters housed in two well-defended villas.
Lewis delivers his usual vivid account of the planning and fierce
March 1944 attack, which included 50 British soldiers dropped
in for the occasion and several hundred partisans including a
company of Russian escaped POWs. It was largely successful,
destroying the villas and causing substantial German casual-
ties at the expense of two British dead. The operation has been
called “possibly the most significant single action involving par-
tisans in the entire history of the partisan movement.” Readers
may wince at some of the author’s purple novelization in which
historical characters talk, think, and reveal their emotions, but
they will forgive him because he has turned up a little-known
behind-the-lines spectacular led by two heroic British officers.

Successful niche military history for a popular audience.

**THE SELECTED WORKS OF AUDRE LORDE**

Lorde, Audre

Ed. by Roxane Gay

Norton (352 pp.)

$16.95 paper | Sep. 8, 2020

978-1-324-00461-5

A collection of Lorde’s groundbreaking
prose and poems on race, injustice, inter-
sectional feminism, and queer identity.

A trailblazing black lesbian writer
and activist, Lorde (1934-1992) produced a prolific and profound
body of work. In this compilation, Gay presents a selection of
representative texts from among Lorde’s prose and poetry. The
compilation features a dozen essays, including a series of jour-
nal entries about living with cancer; selections from Lorde’s
American Book Award–winning collection, *A Burst of Light* (1988); and more than 60 poems taken from multiple volumes,
including National Book Award nominee *The Land Where Other
People Live* (1973). For Gay, Lorde was the first to demonstrate
that “a writer could be intensely concerned with the inner and
outer lives of black queer women, that our experiences could
be the center instead of relegated to the periphery. She wrote
beyond the white gaze and imagined a black reality that did not
subvert itself to the cultural norms dictated by whiteness.” In
the oft-quoted “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the
Master’s House,” Lorde denounces white women for being in
bed with the “racist patriarchy,” excluding black women’s lead-
ership and ideas from supposedly feminist spaces. In “Uses of
the Erotic,” Lorde calls for a more expansive view and embrace
of the erotic “as a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply
female and spiritual plane.” She also revisits the turbulent onset
of her adolescence and complex relationship with her mother.
Lorde’s poems, urgent and intimate, focus on the ordinary and
the extraordinary, a range of subjects including love, death and
dying, and police killings of black people with impunity. That
the author’s masterful work is as relevant and necessary today as
it was in the last century is both a tribute to her and a condem-
nation of a society that continues to oppress and marginalize
black women.
An essential anthology that challenges our 21st-century social and political consciousness.

LOVING SPORTS WHEN THEY DON’T LOVE YOU BACK
Dilemmas of the Modern Fan
Luther, Jessica & Davidson, Kavitha
Univ. of Texas (408 pp.)
$26.95 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-4773-1313-8

Revealing some of the ugliest truths about professional sports.

Luther and Davidson are both well known in the world of sports journalism, and their investigative skills serve them well in this acute survey of their chosen field. (This is also a natural follow-up to Luther’s previous book, Unsportsmanlike Conduct: College Football and the Politics of Rape.) Written as something of a guide to ethical conflicts that so often erupt in this massive, lucrative business, the overarching theme here is cognitive dissonance. With guidance from psychologists and other experts, the authors dig into the mindsets of fans and their love of the game and players and the manners in which they experience them. They also examine what happens when players and owners behave in problematic, occasionally inexcusable ways. There are some obvious targets: The authors first tackle the issue of doping, famously represented by Lance Armstrong, as well as the inherent issues around brain trauma in the NFL and the persistent problem of defending players credibly accused of domestic violence or sexual assault. But the depth and breadth of the book are impressive, as the authors discuss less-reported issues like inequality in the world of women’s sports or the struggles of players who identify with the LGBTQ community. Because the authors are journalists and not commentators, they also delve much deeper into the inner workings of the sports industry, covering in detail such topics as malevolent team owners, exemplified by former Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling, who was banished by the league for his racist comments; the odd mechanics of professional baseball’s free market; and the economic inequities surrounding college basketball’s March Madness. With illuminating interviews and commentary by insiders from the sports community, an appealing pace, and elegant writing, this is a sports book that should interest not just sports fans, but anyone interested in politics, business, or society at large.

An incisive, damning indictment of the world’s most popular pastimes.

COVID-19
The Pandemic That Never Should Have Happened and How To Stop the Next One
MacKenzie, Debora
Hachette (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Jul. 21, 2020
978-0-306-92424-8

New Scientist journalist MacKenzie serves up a vivid account of the origins and fortunes of coronavirus, warning that worse may be yet to come.

There are several takeaways in this sharp survey of the current (as of this writing) pandemic. The first is that, decidedly, not enough was done—not by China, which failed to alert the world to the arrival of the novel virus until well after it had spread outside the country; and certainly not by the U.S., whose government seemed to want to wish the virus away. “Once public health fails and contagion appears anywhere, it goes everywhere,” writes the author. Even though COVID-19 (whose formal name is SARS-CoV-2) has shown some signs of abating, the pandemic has exposed gaping holes in the public health regimes of countries around the world, with a few exceptions—Hong Kong, for example, locked down early on and endured the plague with only 715 cases and four deaths as of the end of March 2020. Charting the etiology and course of the virus, MacKenzie observes that nearly everything about its origins and spread offers lessons on how not to act when the next pandemic comes. She goes on to warn that another pandemic is sure to come, perhaps soon, probably some variant of bird flu and, in any case, “worse than the one we are fighting now.” The measures she suggests include better monitoring and reporting of emergent diseases, stockpiling supplies such as face masks and antibiotics to combat diseases that are already known to us, developing “surge capacity in manufacturing,” and holding governments accountable for things said and promises made. For the conspiracy theorists in the crowd, MacKenzie also notes that “one thing we can say for sure: Covid-19 was not created in a lab.”

Essential, enlightening reading in a time of panic and plague.

SEEING SERENA
Marzorati, Gerald
Scribner (272 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 6, 2020
978-1-982127-88-6

A year spent watching Serena Williams play tennis yields some provocative insights.

In his previous book, Late to the Ball, Marzorati, a former editor for the New York Times Magazine and the New Yorker, detailed his own attempts to become a competitive tennis
An enlightening, much-needed resource for parents hoping to raise their children without limitations.

RAISING THEM

My Healing Cycle Across America
McGowan, Elizabeth
Bancroft Press (268 pp.)
$28.95 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-61088-514-0

The Pulitzer winner interweaves a cross-country cycling travelogue with an account of growing up with her late father. Five years free of the melanoma that had dogged her for more than a decade, McGowan decided to follow through on an idea she had been toying with for some time: a solo cycling journey across the U.S. The year was 2000; she was 39 years old, and she had 4,250 miles in front of her—in a time before the ubiquity of cellphone service. She “envisioned my undertakings as a fundraiser for cancer research” and as an example of what a cancer survivor could do. The time alone would also give her the opportunity to deal with the pain of her father’s death to the same type of cancer 24 years before; the author sought to reckon with his complexity and plumb the grief she had been carrying around since high school. McGowan’s memories of her father are emotionally raw but bracingly unadorned as she sews together the connective tissue of his many parts: frequent unhappiness, verbal bullying, need for order, and sheer volatility and unpredictability—but his many positive traits, as well. The author wrestles around to take in players like Coco Gauff, who began her career when she was even younger than Williams and whose game’s intricacies while those already familiar with the game will benefit from subtler details. A scrupulous examination of the career twilight of “the most consequential athlete of her time.”

OUTPEDALING THE BIG C

At the age of 60. In 2019, he followed Williams, who was attempting to make a comeback at the age of 37, two years after the birth of her daughter, by winning at least one Grand Slam tournament, thereby tying or exceeding the number of Grand Slam titles held by Australian Margaret Court. Though this is not an authorized biography—Marzorati spoke to Williams only as a typical member of the sports press—the author takes advantage of his detached position to meditate, objectively but not without compassion, on Williams as not just a tennis player, but a cultural figure and human being as well. The narrative moves chronologically, from the Australian Open in January through the other three Grand Slam tournaments, with stops along the way in Miami, Rome, and Indian Wells in California. The author shifts smoothly among observations of Williams’s often less-than-impressive performances during the year, stories of her earlier life, memories of other matches he had seen her play over the years, and nuanced reflections on his subject matter—e.g., because she started tennis so young, Williams was “a personality before she could reasonably be expected to be a person.” Marzorati doesn’t laser-focus on Williams; he also glances around to take in players like Coco Gauff, who began her career when she was even younger than Williams and whose changing style of play the author discusses. Readers who know more about Williams than her tennis career will learn about the game’s intricacies while those already familiar with the game will benefit from subtler details.

A keen and poignant celebration of being alive. (4-color photo insert)
A guide to the good life, courtesy of Baruch Spinoza via modern philosopher Nadler.

Spinoza, a Sephardic Jew who lived in Holland in the 17th century, had no use for the deity as an imaginary being, less so as one who takes an interest in the daily affairs of human beings. “Such a divinity is a superstitious fiction, he claims, grounded in the irrational passions of human beings who daily suffer the vicissitudes of nature,” writes Nadler, whose 1999 biography of Spinoza won the Koret Jewish Book Award. Furthermore, teleology is out: There is no purpose to nature, no end to which it directs human beings. So why bother? Spinoza proposes a different view of human well-being, in which nature is perfect and humans should strive for perfection, exercising “adequate,” fully developed ideas in order to attain a certain kind of power. “A tree is striving to be a maximally powerful tree,” writes Nadler, “and a giraffe is striving to be a maximally powerful giraffe.” Humans should do the same. This idea has led some to consider Spinoza an “egoist,” but it really insists that a wholly realized human being is free only to the extent that that human exercises reason and “want[s] nothing for themselves that they do not desire for other men.” This implies a responsibility, Nadler adds, for the rational person to “strive to improve” the people around them, leading them to the realization that what is good contributes to “the power and perfection of the intellect.” By Nadler’s lights, this does make Spinoza a “psychological egoist.” It doesn’t rule out the possibility of altruism, but it is also a drive for self-interested knowledge, which includes the realization that life ends in death, a fact that is important to acknowledge.

A helpful explication of the early modern philosopher’s ideas about ethics, the afterlife, and human nature.

**THE LAST MILLION**
**Europe's Displaced Persons From World War to Cold War**

Nasaw, David

Penguin Press (672 pp.)

$35.00 | Sep. 15, 2020
978-1-59420-673-3

Historian Nasaw, known for biographies of industrial moguls, turns his attentive gaze on the period immediately following the end of World War II in Europe.

When the Third Reich finally collapsed in May 1945, millions of displaced persons, including forced laborers and prisoners of war, were stranded in the ruins of Germany. Not all were blameless victims, notes the author. Many, especially from the Baltic states, were anti-communists who had willingly joined the Waffen-SS and thrown themselves into the killing of Jews, Roma, and other “undesirable” people. This masterful book centers on “displaced Eastern Europeans who, when the shooting stopped, refused to go home or had no homes to return to.” Some were Polish Catholics who had been forced to work in German factories but had no wish to return to a homeland occupied by Soviet troops. A small minority, fewer than 30,000, were Jewish survivors of the Shoah who tried to repatriate themselves to Germany only to find that they were not wanted and so moved on, eventually, to Israel and the U.S. And those Eastern European Nazis? Australia took in many of them, favoring white, Protestant Latvians and Estonians who were volubly anti-communist; as Nasaw writes, Australia resettled more refugees than any other nation, though only 4.5% were Jews. Britain favored Polish soldiers who had fought under British command as well as “a thousand single young female Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian displaced persons [who] were recruited to work in understaffed tuberculosis sanatoria.” Canada screened rigorously for evidence of Nazi collaboration and admitted more Jews than other Commonwealth nations, while the U.S. overlooked wrongdoing almost entirely. One of Nasaw’s many intriguing cases in point is a Romanian Iron Guard leader who became a faux preacher and “was invited by Richard Nixon to deliver the opening prayer at the convening of the 1955 Senate session.” Deported to Portugal in the early 1980s, he died a free man.

A searching, vigorously written history of an unsettled time too little known to American readers.

**THE HOUSE THAT ROCK BUILT**
**How It Took Time, Money, Music Moguls, Corporate Types, Politicians, Media, Artists, and Fans To Bring the Rock Hall to Cleveland**

Nite, Norm N. and Feran, Tom

The Kent State University Press (176 pp.)

$28.00 paper | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-60635-399-8

The beat goes on—and on and on—in this history of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Why should Cleveland be the home of the world’s chief museum devoted to rock music? As Nite, a veteran DJ and broadcaster, and Feran, who worked for the Cleveland Plain Dealer for nearly 40 years, observe, it was the home base of Alan Freed, who introduced the term “rock and roll” to a broad audience in the 1950s before falling afool of the censors. Freed “championed the music so vigorously he became its personification and was called its father,” and the international syndication of Freed’s show and others out of Cleveland introduced the sound to radio listeners such as Ringo Starr, who remembers “hearing Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis for the first time.” In a mixture of keepsake volume and business history, the
A pressing book that takes it as a given that Russia helped Trump in 2016 and will do so in 2020 without immediate action.

**Election Interference**

Donald Trump vigorously denies Russian interference and aid today, but he didn’t always. Indeed, writes Ohlin, vice dean of law at Cornell University, his open call for Russia to ferret out the secrets in Hillary Clinton’s emails constitutes criminal solicitation, “the most salient legal category for understanding the significance of Trump’s behavior.” Solicitation involves asking another party to commit a crime, which differs from a conspiracy; solicitation constitutes a crime whether or not the party being asked actually carries through with it. Similarly, Ohlin argues that the most salient legal category under which to consider the whole program of Russian interference—and now Iranian and Chinese hackers getting into the game—is the violation of “the American people’s right of self-determination.” Working under that theory requires the author to make his way through a thicket of sometimes contending laws and doctrines, and readers without grounding in the law may feel lost at times. In the end, though, Ohlin draws fine distinctions between self-determination and sovereignty, with legal implications for both. He also considers electoral interference by means of manipulating social media and other cyberattacks to be a virtual declaration of war, “thus making the election interference an opening salvo in an armed conflict.” Ohlin argues that Congress should address the issue of foreign involvement in elections by “explicitly criminalizing” it, which may fall afool of First Amendment and international human rights considerations—to which the author responds that even political speech can be regulated without violating constitutional guarantees. The better course would be for social media platforms to self-regulate, which would “avoid any First Amendment issue because there would be no state action.”

A comprehensive legal analysis of Russia’s tinkering with the 2016 presidential race.

**Election Interference: International Law and the Future of Democracy**

Ohlin, Jens David

Cambridge Univ. (280 pp.)

$29.99 paper | Jun. 30, 2020

978-1-108-79682-8

A disturbing account of the early years of the atomic bomb, when safety took second place to winning World War II.

After his father’s death, Nolan Jr., professor of sociology at Williams College, received a box of revealing material from his grandfather James F. Nolan, chief medical officer at Los Alamos. It intrigued him enough to produce this haunting book, which authors painstakingly—and repetitively—chart the course that brought the museum to Cleveland. The initial driving force was record-industry mogul Ahmet Ertegun, who, allied with other music insiders, established the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation and enlisted support for the endeavor. Another important figure was the fiscally conservative mayor George Voinovich, who “seemed an unlikely champion” but recognized the dangers. As the July 1945 date of the first test approached, Nolan recounts, “He shifts keys four or five times; I can only imagine to mess with us. I can’t imagine why else this happened.”

A middling rock history that will be a boon to Cleveland boosters and rock completists.

**Atomic Doctors: Conscience and Complicity at the Dawn of the Nuclear Age**

Nolan Jr., James L.

Belknap/Harvard Univ. (304 pp.)

$29.95 | Aug. 6, 2020

978-0-674-24863-2

A unique perspective on the Atomic Age.

A pressing book that takes it as a given that Russia helped Trump in 2016 and will do so in 2020 without immediate action.
Writers reflect candidly on the literature that shaped them and their work. Librarian and literary critic Pearl teamed up with media journalist, producer, and playwright Schwager to interview American writers about the books that “whispered most persistently in their ears.” They asked a diverse selection of novelists, poets, and nonfiction writers, “how does the practice of reading inform the life of a writer?” Gently probing interviews elicited thoughtful responses about books that informed each writer’s literary sensibility and professional aspirations. Appended to each interview is a brief list of the writer’s treasured titles. Not surprisingly, many attest to having been early and enthusiastic readers. Jonathan Lethem described himself as a “prodigious, insatiable reader” when he was young. Jennifer Egan, too, was a precocious reader, and she was drawn to Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* when she was 11 and discovered Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* in high school. Wharton, she says, became a “huge touchstone for me,” as did writers she hoped to emulate, including Ethan Canin, Michael Chabon, and Don DeLillo. For Lethem, Kafka’s *The Trial* “became this talismanic thing.” Louise Erdrich remembers the impact made by Herman Wouk’s *Marjorie Morningstar*. “You started me, Herman, you started me,” she recalls. For several writers, the books they read as children felt alien to the world in which they lived. Susan Choi, the biracial daughter of Jewish and Korean parents, thought of books “as a portal to some better place, where all the pretty people live in nice landscapes.” Growing up in Morocco, attending French schools, novelist Laila Lalami found books “exclusively populated by French people with French concerns.” As a Vietnamese refugee, Viet Thanh Nguyen found Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* “literally too dark for me.” Other interviewees include Luis Alberto Urrea, T.C. Boyle, Siri Hustvedt, and Donna Tartt.

A spirited collection offering intimate insights into the writing life.

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**THE WRITER’S LIBRARY**

The Authors You Love on the Books That Changed Their Lives

Pearl, Nancy & Schwager, Jeff
Illus. by Kieran, A.E.
HarperOne (368 pp.)
$27.99 | Sep. 8, 2020
978-0-06-296850-0

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**WINNING THE GREEN NEW DEAL**

Why We Must, How We Can

Ed. by Prakash, Varshini & Girgenti, Guido
Simon & Schuster (256 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-982142-43-8

Founders and supporters of the progressive Sunrise Movement join forces to argue for the Green New Deal.

In this urgent collection, edited by Sunrise leaders Prakash and Girgenti, the contributions cohere into a difficult-to-disparage—logically, at least, if not politically—argument for immediate change. “The Green New Deal,” writes Rhiana Gunn-Wright, who helped create the concept with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, “is a proposal for a ten-year economic mobilization to rapidly transition the U.S. to a zero-carbon economy, and in doing so to regenerate and reorganize the U.S. economy in ways that significantly reduce inequality and redress legacies of systemic oppression.” She continues later, “[it] is a new policy vision—one that will guide government and society through the biggest task in modern history: decarbonizing our global economy within the next ten to twenty years.” It seems like an inarguable, necessary proposition, but not in a political system that perpetuates economic inequality and ensures that the poor stay poor and the rich get richer. Addressing politics, science, economics, racism, and income inequality, among other topics, the contributors eviscerate the opposition to a movement that could not only change everything for the better, but save a world moving toward extinction. Though the reading is sometimes intellectually intense to the point of exhaustion, the editors wisely break up the rhetoric with personal stories from people whose regions will be inevitably affected by climate change. There are also moving personal narratives from the children who occupied Nancy Pelosi’s office in 2018. Arrested by Capitol Police, they earned acclaim from Ocasio-Cortez and others. These incisive essays provide a clear blueprint for creating solutions regarding the climate crisis, standing up for appropriate representation, and uniting disparate forces to build a better world. Among the other contributors are Bill McKibben, Naomi Klein, William Barber II, Joseph Stiglitz, Kate Aronoff, and David Wallace-Wells.

A clear demonstration that the kids are all right. Now lead, follow, or get out of their way.
Biologist and versatile nature writer Pyle collects rangy essays on the natural world.

In his latest book, the author, founder of the Xerces Society, examines how “a strong individual sense of connection to nature and natural processes is utterly essential to the healthy coexistence of humans with their biological neighbors and physical setting.” The author takes his time while considering habitats and ecologies—or sussing out the semiotics of Bigfoot (“the observed facts suggest that we would be foolish to dismiss the actual occurrence of unnamed hominoid apes...as fantasy, hoax, or solely a metaphor”)—but what Pyle truly desires is to encourage readers to get outside, take in the details of nature, and avoid at all costs what he calls the “Extinction of Experience.” As he sagely notes, “the sequence to extinction and alienation are further loss and greater detachment, round and round...a cycle of disaffection, degradation, and the ultimate separation of nature.” Throughout these essays, the author brings an intimate, protective tone to creep in—“Most mountain walkers never see these common things”; “these people would be better off spending their pennies on a Roger Tory Peterson field guide”—but mostly what comes across is the author’s unbridled enthusiasm as a witness to the world’s many wonders, from wildness (a sliding scale “in the sense of that which takes us out of ourselves”) to the clump of moss in the sidewalk crack, what Nabokov would call “individuating detail.” Pyle proves yet again that he is one of the most nourishing nature writers at work today.

If Pyle doesn’t arouse your biophilia, check your pulse.

THE OXFORD ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE BOOK
Ed. by Raven, James
Oxford Univ. (480 pp.)
$39.95 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-0-19-870298-6

A profusely illustrated, handsomely produced intellectual history.

Raven, a history professor and director of the Cambridge Project for the Book Trust, has drawn together scholarly essays offering a sweeping, erudite, and thoroughly engaging narrative focused on “how the book has been remodelled and reformed over time and in different parts of the world.” Beginning with evidence of the earliest writing in 3500 B.C.E. and ending with Google’s project to create a global, digitized library, the contributors consider the technologies and economics involved in textual production, distribution, and reception; varied uses of written material; censorship and piracy; and the ways that books reflect and shape the societies from which they emerge. “What do books do?” asks Eleanor Robson, a scholar of ancient Middle Eastern history; a question that underlies many essays, as does a more basic question: What is a book? Raven suggests that books “offer a durable, portable, or mobile, replicable and legible (that is, readable and communicable) means of recording and disseminating information and knowledge,” although he readily admits that evolving technologies may require a revision of even so capacious a definition. Legal, scholarly, religious, and literary texts survive from ancient times as parchment, scrolls, and steles, and, Robson notes, every literate society “supported a class of professional scribes who were not obviously economically productive.” The spread of basic literacy incited a desire for books. As cultural historian Ann Blair reveals in an essay about information management, readers looked for aids in finding content both within books and among them. The index and table of contents proved to be welcome new innovations, and with a huge proliferation of books resulting from printing, library catalogs became indispensable. Other contributors range across time and place, focusing on the Renaissance and Reformation, the Islamic world, and modern China, Japan, and Korea. In addition to the striking illustrations, Raven also includes a helpful 14-page timeline.

A deeply informative, stimulating volume.

THE FLAPPER QUEENS
Women Cartoonists of the Jazz Age
Robbins, Trina
Fantagraphics Books (136 pp.)
$34.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-68396-323-3

Throughout the 1920s, the fun-loving flapper made her way into comic strips.

Comics historian Robbins, a “retired underground cartoonist” who is a member of the Will Eisner Hall of Fame, pays homage to six women artists of the 1920s and ’30s in a lively, vividly illustrated celebration. Published in newspapers across the country, the cartoons chronicled the adventures and misadventures of “happy-go-lucky society girls and co-eds” who styled themselves flappers. Flirtatious and adorable, they wore their hair bobbed, smoked, drank, partied, and reveled in the latest—slinky, glamorous, and sometimes absurd—fashions. Feminist Nell Brinkley, the “mother of comic strips that star pretty girls created by women,” wrote for Hearst papers. Her characters included Prudence Prim, Flossie, and the daydreaming Dimples, who fantasized about becoming an aviatrix, an artist, or even president of the U.S. Most cartoon flappers, though, were
intent on finding a suitor and, even better, a husband, and their romantic escapades filled many Sunday magazine pages. Eleanor Schorer contributed "The Adventures of Judy," and Edith Stevens often did a rundown of fashion, hairstyles, and hats for the Boston Post. Ethel Hays conveyed advice about romance in her popular series "Flapper Fanny Says": Fanny, a skinny young woman with impossibly long legs (and short skirts) offered sly comments about men and dating. Virginia Huget, "the flappiest of the flapper queens," drew society girls, "all sharp elbows and knees bent at forty-five degree angles," and also working-class girls: "Babs in Society," for example, featured a department store clerk; another series featured a manicurist. Published in many newspapers, Huget also drew cartoon advertisements for Lux soap, aimed at bolstering women's self-confidence and self-image. The Wall Street crash of 1929 was the "beginning of the end" for carefree flappers, and by 1930, Brinkley noted that the flapper was "a fading mirage."

A fresh, spirited look at a colorful cultural phenomenon.

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM FAULKNER
This Alarming Paradox, 1935-1962
Rollyson, Carl
Univ. of Virginia (676 pp.)
$34.95 | Sep. 22, 2020
978-0-8139-4440-1

The concluding volume of a comprehensive account of the life and work of the Nobel laureate.

Rollyson, a professor of journalism and prolific biographer—his many subjects have included Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, Lillian Hellman, and Marilyn Monroe—returns to finish his dense, informative biography of Faulkner. The format remains: sturdy chronology, sometimes lengthy summaries of Faulkner’s books (and reviews thereof), his speeches and interviews, non-judgmental accounts of his private life (he had several extramarital affairs, most notably with Meta Carpenter, secretary for Howard Hawks), and some analysis of his attitudes about race in his work, letters, behavior, and public utterances. (He was a gradualist, but he befriended a number of African Americans, even helping to pay college tuition for one.) Rollyson also provides detailed accounts of Faulkner’s numerous screenwriting sojourns in Hollywood, and he gives him more credit than is usually afforded to the author. (Hawks loved his work.) The current volume also covers Faulkner’s Nobel Prize (1949) and his time, near the end of his life, as writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia, where he learned to enjoy fox hunting. Rollyson shows us Faulkner’s nearly endless struggles with money (his wife, Estelle, loved to spend) and chronicles his acquisition of property to supplement the land he had earlier acquired, Rowan Oak, in Oxford, Mississippi. Also appearing continually are accounts of Faulkner’s well-known drinking problems (Estelle also had issues), which will make many readers wonder how he accomplished as much as he did. Rollyson concludes with a swift, sad summary of Faulkner’s death (heart attack) while he was a resident of a “drying out hospital.” Although the author does not create a galloping narrative, he is relentless and all-inclusive in his research, and Faulkner aficionados will be grateful for his diligence.

A lush story of a genius and his substantial achievements, failures, and demons.

EMPIRE OF RESENTMENT
Populism’s Toxic Embrace of Nationalism
Rosenthal, Lawrence
The New Press (272 pp.)
$27.99 | Sep. 29, 2020
978-1-62097-510-7

A cogent political analysis that links the tea party movement to Trumpism.

Hillary Clinton may have been better prepared to be president, writes Rosenthal, the chair of the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies, but that doesn’t mean that Donald Trump was completely out of his element: He studied right-wing media closely to seize control of the populist revolt that he found there, “convincing America’s right-wing populists to migrate ideologically—from the Tea Party’s free-market fundamentalism to Trump’s anti-immigrant, America-First nationalism.” Those populists, in turn, were motivated by resentment: the sense that the power elite were robbing them in order to bestow favors on others—read: nonwhite, perhaps immigrant others—in a nexus of giveaways supposedly orchestrated by the educated class and the mainstream media. Thus the attention on lifestyle issues, since liberals are supposedly recognized by their “cultural capital,” something that can be refuted simply by claiming superior intelligence, as Trump has often done, stealing a page from Rush Limbaugh and his claim to “talent on loan from...God.”

The most important expression of belonging to the populist wave is the claiming of in-group status, a politics of identity that contrasts true believers with others who are not to be considered “real Americans.” Certainly, Trump was effective in rallying those believers to his cause, and if they are in a minority, they certainly put the lie to any notion that America is on the road to a post-conservative—and post-racial—future. Rosenthal adds that if the adherents to white supremacist causes have yet to claim their place in the sun after misjudging the public mood in Charlottesville in 2017, they’re biding their time. Trump’s “hybrid populism” is perhaps best characterized by its breaking down some of the old differences between left and right by scorning the financial elite—though Trump belongs to that class—and engaging in “red-meat scapegoating” of the “Imagined Other” lurking just outside the door.

A welcome exposé of the politics of wounded resentment and the manipulators behind it.
of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Also during this time, relations among Arab countries shifted dramatically as the U.S. embarked on the first Gulf War and the Palestinian National Authority established itself in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, becoming a political body. Furthermore, writes the author, “the nature of terrorism during this period also changed beyond recognition.” Shavit (b. 1936) joined the Mossad in 1964 and moved up the ladder during the subsequent decades, taking the reins in the spring of 1989. He was appointed by Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir after the retirement of outgoing director Nahum Admoni. As Shavit notes, the Mossad does not deal with internal Israeli intelligence but rather with issues in the greater Middle East and beyond, especially in terms of unconventional warfare and global terrorism—a role similar to that of the CIA in America. However, the Mossad’s scope has expanded since the mid-1970s and the intelligence fiasco of the Yom Kippur War. Readers hoping for a glimpse inside the secret operations of the Mossad will be disappointed, as Shavit underscores the importance of secrecy in conducting its operations. In that vein, the author criticizes the idea of total transparency, such as in the Edward Snowden revelations, as leading to “anarchy.” Shavit’s mostly straightforward approach is consistently systematic, especially in sections such as “How To Confront Fundamentalist International Terrorism,” though he does flesh out certain iconic figures with whom he worked during fraught times, including Rabin and King Hussein of Jordan.

A well-documented yet dry, logistical delineation of decades of sensitive Israeli security and intelligence concerns.

SOONER
The Making of a Football Coach—Lincoln Riley’s Rise From West Texas to the University of Oklahoma
Sneed, Brandon
Henry Holt (320 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-250-62215-0

An elegantly written, admiring portrait of a still-young but impressive college football coach.

Just 36 at the time of this book’s appearance, Lincoln Riley came to the University of Oklahoma in 2015 as an offensive coordinator. He soon took the head role after former coach Bob Stoops retired—a move that, by sportswriter Sneed’s account, afforded Stoops the chance to hand-pick his successor. Riley is modest about his achievements (and didn’t directly participate for such a portrait). According to the author, Riley possesses a kind of iron-trap mind for football, “a unique ability bordering on genius” that enables him, in the words of a colleague, to see “concepts”—i.e., to formulate offensive and defensive formations and play them out in his mind. Football, writes Sneed, is “the art of using your concepts to explore and then exploit the weaknesses of your opponent.” The author’s knowledge of the game is evident throughout this well-paced account, which takes
Riley from playing high school ball in a tiny town in West Texas to coaching positions at several schools before landing at Oklahoma. Riley’s deep understanding of the game and the psychology of play is clear, too, evidenced by his nurturing back-to-back Heisman Trophy winners and winning three successive Big 12 championships. Sneed closely analyzes some of Riley’s trademark tactics, including an approach to play that is lightning-quick and that took his players some time to get used to: “Pace had always been one of the most important elements of the Air Raid offense…but Oklahoma wasn’t quite getting there.” That would soon change. The author is especially good at describing some of the changes that technology has wrought on college ball, which now has a vast audience—and also enables fans to get inside players’ heads through instant messaging and social media.

Vigorous and smart, like its subject, and a special treat for Sooners fans.

BUNDINI
Don’t Believe the Hype
Snyder, Todd D.
Hamilcar Publications (296 pp.)
$29.97 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-949590-20-3

Biography of Muhammad Ali’s revered corner man.

By rhetoric and writing professor Snyder’s account, Drew “Bundini” Brown (1928-1987) was less a boxing coach than a hype man, Flavor Flav to Ali’s Chuck D., whose main role was to be a walking pep rally. He was the true author of Ali’s famed line “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee”—and without Ali, by some lights, there would have been no hip-hop. “As the rhetorical tradition expanded over the years,” writes Snyder, “the term hype man eventually became synonymous with the concept of a loyal sidekick or trusted companion.” Though Brown wasn’t a boxer himself, writes the author, he was present for three-quarters of Ali’s boxing matches and kept him company for workouts, including those that Ali conducted in a rural retreat that threatened to inflect cabin fever on his urbane, sharp-dressing aide. Brown lived a life of adventure, too, joining the Navy years before he was old enough to do so, traveling the world, frequenting the jazz clubs of Harlem and—daringly for the time—marrying a Russian Jewish woman (who, though the union didn’t last, traveled to attend his funeral. “If you can’t seize the title, then win the people,” he counseled Ali, who did just that, though he made an enemy of Joe Frazier by taunting him with the racially laden epithet “gorilla”—one of the rhetorical turns that, Snyder adds, didn’t owe to Brown’s inspiration. The narrative runs long and sometimes uneasily blends the academic with the popular (“Here, I am referencing Sisyphus, the figure in Greek mythology who was punished by Hades”). Though the text is generally accessible, it doesn’t stand up to the standards of Plimpton Liebling.

A well-intentioned, overdue, and overcooked treatment of a complex figure in the boxing world, best suited to completists.
The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist

In his latest book, Tomine, who has been successful by nearly any measure—his oeuvre includes many minicomics and books and several New Yorker covers—delivers an understated yet illuminating graphic memoir full of insights on the creative process and the struggles of defining “success” in the world of comics and graphic novels. Early on in the narrative, the author is something like a younger Rodney Dangerfield, frustrated by a lack of respect. Schoolmates taunted him, and even the acclaim he earned as a teenage prodigy—“the boy wonder of mini-comics”—was short-lived, crushed by a backlash review that dismissed him as a derivative “moron.” The rites of passage that seemed like markers of success—Comic-Con, book signings, tours, awards ceremonies—generally left Tomine feeling deflated and resentful. Instead of reveling in the acceptance he received from the New Yorker and elsewhere, the author dwelled on the slur of dismissal as a Japanese American that he received from one veteran artist. Throughout his narrative, Tomine expresses feelings of inferiority to the more celebrated venues became gastropubs and twee tourist destinations. “The proper pub,” she notes, “is about far more than having a good time. It accommodates the miserable, the misfits, those who are in their seats at curtain up, having nothing in their lives to make them late: from the moment of waking, they are waiting for the moment of opening.” Her grandmother presided over her motley clientele with toughness, courage, humor, and generosity. The daughter of a pub owner, by the time her father died, she was divorced and, as a single woman, could not inherit the business that she knew she was more than capable of running. But the brewery for which she worked for a time granted her a publican’s license—the first, she claimed, for an English woman who was neither a wife nor a widow—and she turned a decrepit country inn into a successful pub. Thompson spent much time there, working behind the bar when she was a teenager, listening to gossip, observing the vagaries of her grandmother’s customers. The pub, she writes, “was not the whole of my life, nothing like, but it was a backdrop that made me feel luckier” than her classmates who were cloistered in their homes for holidays. “I couldn’t actually imagine Christmas in a private house.” Any pub’s landlady, Thompson writes, has to be “part mother, part nanny, part sorceress, part goddess.” Her grandmother fulfilled those roles with panache: “the supreme landlady, with all that was best in the breed writ large upon her.”

A delightful memoir of a fearless and determined woman.

Neil Gaiman and Daniel Clowes—though an epigram from the latter, on how being a famous cartoonist is “like being the most famous badminton player,” proves telling. Even marriage and fatherhood failed to resolve Tomine’s insecurities or anger issues, and readers will begin to suspect that what’s at issue isn’t the lonely profession the author has chosen but rather problems of self-acceptance. A medical scare provided a reckoning and a realization that his obsession had become his albatross and that he needed to put his life in perspective. Upon reaching this “turning point,” he heads back to the drawing board—hopefully, for many more years to come.

Subtle, provocative, and sharply drawn—a portrait of the perpetually dissatisfied artist.

A Portrait of the Artist

Francisco Goya (1746-1828) began his studies in Zaragoza before moving to Madrid in 1775, where he would spend nearly 50 years as court painter for successive monarchs. In 1824, Goya retired to France, where he spent the last four years of his life. Many works about Goya’s life fail to fully explore how his art was shaped by family, friends, and travel. But as Tomlinson explains, recent discoveries, including a sketchbook used by the artist in Italy and in the years following his return to Spain, “justify a new consideration of Goya’s life.” The author, who has written widely on her subject, contends that his formative years in Zaragoza are often overlooked as a prologue to his later career. Zaragoza was a “source of memories and inspiration for his later work.” The author contends that the true turning point, he heads back to the drawing board—hopefully, for many more years to come.

In his craft actually “blossomed in experimental works during the years to follow.” The author contends that the true turning point likely occurred a decade later, in 1803, following the death of a dear friend and decline of royal patronage. “Having witnessed the exile of patrons once powerful and political alliances come and go... Goya now looked to his family and to patrons beyond the court, working to ensure his personal and professional legacy in an increasingly unstable world.” Tomlinson’s meticulous distillation of a voluminous number of parish records, drawings, notes, and letters is impressive, and her knowledge of and passion for Goya continually shine through in her writing, making for a fascinating and insightful reading experience.

A top-notch biography.
Part action comic, part historical biography: an attempt to correct the record and give a pivotal figure the prominence he deserves.

As Walker, a history professor who has written widely on Latin American history, writes, Juan Bautista Túpac Amaru (1747-1827) “was an unlikely icon. He did not lead men into battle or give inspiring speeches. His memoirs are his only publication. He himself expressed surprise at his turns of fate, including his decades of harsh imprisonment and his return to freedom in Argentina as an old man.” That autobiography, in which he chronicles what he suffered, endured, and observed on three continents, in exile and imprisonment, demonstrates that he “had a ringside seat to the events of the Age of Revolution and rubbed shoulders with many of the era’s important figures.” He lived not only during a time when the New World was threatening to cast off the chains of the old, but also when the French Revolution was illuminating the hope of liberation. After his half brother, José Gabriel Túpac Amaru, died in the Inca revolution, Juan Bautista faced a lifetime of incarceration and misery. He was taken in chains on a deadly voyage across the Atlantic to Europe, where he would spend almost half of his life imprisoned. The graphic narrative of the first section, illustrated by Cape Town–based illustrator Clarke, is a swashbuckling account, as colorful and action-packed as a summer blockbuster. In the second and third sections, which are not illustrated, Walker provides the historical context, including primary sources and information about how and when Juan Bautista wrote the memoirs that he published; how and why they were discredited, with a single source labeling them “apocryphal” and their author an “imposter”; and how it took a century before their veracity was confirmed. This is a fascinating story, though younger readers of the graphic narrative may be jarred by the contrast between the illustrated first half and the academic second half.

An educational hybrid, with vivid illustrations backed by scholarly context.
**THE WILD KINDNESS**  
*A Psilocybin Odyssey*  
Williams, Bett  
Dottir Press (280 pp.)  
$19.95 paper | Sep. 1, 2020  
978-1-948340-31-1  

An exuberant endorsement of the use of psychedelics as an instrument of self-discovery.

Michael Pollan’s *How To Change Your Mind* explores the effects of psychedelic drugs, especially LSD and psilocybin, on the damaged psyche, but “only under the supervision of a trained professional.” Nonsense, says Williams, who notes that “Pollan advocates for the use of psilocybin in a clinical setting within an established Western psychopharmacological context.” Such a provision ignores the explorations of “women, indigenous people, old-school hippies, herbalists, and even teenagers” in self-directed trips courtesy of magic mushrooms. The author’s explorations began at the age of 15 and picked up again in adulthood; not for her the old bromide that one should abandon a drug when it no longer has anything to teach. “I almost got arrested is a good answer,” she counters and then adds, “If it happened decades ago, it’s just a memory.” Offering a few useful rules for would-be psychonauts, Williams counsels not to store your drug dealer’s number on your cellphone, share that dealer’s name with friends until you’ve cleared it beforehand, and never show up with less than the amount you need to clear the transaction. Otherwise, “you deserve to be the unlucky victim in one of those scenes that happens in an abandoned dump site in Breaking Bad.” So much for peace and love. Otherwise, she writes, ingest some mushrooms and take a bus across West Texas, digging the vibes—and don’t be like Jane Fonda, who confessed to doing peyote with Lily Tomlin to prepare for a film role but didn’t enjoy the experience. Venturing into New Age territory, Williams even advises that one doesn’t need to eat a plant such as datura in order to “have a powerful relationship with it”; sometimes it’s enough just to have it on hand to dig its essence and head out into the cosmos.

An often entertaining though sometimes erratic paean to the joys of psychedelic adventuring.

**THE NATIONAL ROAD**  
*Dispatches From a Changing America*  
Zoellner, Tom  
Counterpoint (304 pp.)  
$26.00 | Oct. 13, 2020  
978-1-64009-290-7  

America is a vast and daunting prospect, and Zoellner thirsts for more.

Longing for a kind of national cultural citizenship, the author knows that absorbing even the barest fraction of a country’s everyday majesty, and tribulation, is the work of a lifetime. He seems up to the task. In addition to his seven previous books, Zoellner, the politics editor of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, teaches at Chapman University and Dartmouth College. The principal inspiration for this collection was journalist John Gunther’s *Inside U.S.A.* (1947), which Zoellner calls “a staggering achievement and the best tome about this nation ever written.” Taking on a similar task, Zoellner wonders how an increasingly fractured nation of such disparate lands and peoples remains united, however tenuously, in a consensus informed by the Constitution. The author’s diverse, penetrating essays, some previously published, can only answer that question in part, but his effort is valiant, deeply moral, and often moving, based on observations gleaned from 30 years of crisscrossing the country, frequently by car. Zoellner grasps all the touchstones and knows all too well the challenges and depredations, be they cultural or ecological. He also traverses the fault lines, from the income, opportunity, and urban-rural divides to immigration and the growing distrust of key liberal values by those inhabiting “zones of exclusion.” He also vivifies many historic emblems, including the mythic scaffolding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or how King Philip’s War in Puritan New England was a tragic template for the destruction of Native lands in America. Zoellner exposes naiveté, foolishness, and malfeasance with equal clarity, but he is evenhanded and sometimes produces a piece of sardonic humor, haunting beauty, or melancholy that pulsates on the page. He is both a first-rate reporter with years of newspaper and magazine work behind him and a skilled stylist who makes you want to come back for more.

**Highly recommended. Zoellner will acquaint you with byways, and mores, you never knew existed.**
This picture-book biography, beginning in Flannery O’Connor’s childhood and ending with her untimely death, shines a light on her love of strangeness.

With its memorable opening line, “Right from the start young Flannery took a shine to chickens,” the book celebrates her fascination with life’s peculiarities—and death: “How strange to find something large and beautiful rushing in with all that sadness,” the text remarks about her grief at her father’s passing. Deciding that she wants to write stories “as strange as death,” she chooses staring as a writer’s tool, plumbing the “hidden strangeness” of people and looking for “flashes of good” in complicated characters. After college and a brief stint writing in New York, she is diagnosed with lupus and returns home to Georgia. Alznauer includes some appropriately grim humor, as in young Flannery’s fondness for a photo of a rooster that lived for a month without its head, and classroom humor as well: Flannery flings elastic from her braces at an impatient Sister Consolata. The exaggerated scale and off-kilter perspectives of Zhu’s illustrations align with the book’s focus on eccentricity; adding some imagined characters of color to the mostly white cast of historical figures. The thoughtful design—at 12 inches square, as outsized as its subject—includes a type chosen because its designer, like O’Connor, had a love for drawing birds. Backmatter fleshes out O’Connor’s life and personality and includes a bibliography; it’s not clear if the book’s dialogue is directly quoted or invented.

A striking, quirky ode to a unique vision. (Picture book/biography. 5-18)
In this special Pride Issue, I’d like to talk about school visits. What, you may ask, do they have to do with each other? I will tell you.

It is an open secret of writing and illustrating for young people that the vast majority of creators—during the early years of their published careers, if they don’t have day jobs—are largely sustaining themselves on income from school visits. They hone their presentations, book themselves on tours, and talk to hundreds and hundreds of schoolchildren.

But when you are a queer author, you might find it hard to book those visits. Just as books with LGBTQ+ content dominate the American Library Association’s Top 10 Most Challenged Books lists every year—eight of the books on 2019’s list were challenged for that reason—queer authors or authors whose books have queer themes have difficulty getting into schools to share their stories with children.

Lesbian author K.A. Holt has recounted her experiences with what she called “soft censorship” following a spring 2019 school visit where she expected to talk to an auditorium full of kids about her middle-grade book Rhyme Schemer (Chronicle, 2014) and instead found an audience of just 20 AP English students. It’s worth noting there is no queer content in Rhyme Schemer. Queer author Robin Stevenson was uninvited from an October 2019 visit due to her inclusion of Harvey Milk in Kid Activists (Quirk, 2019). (She was later invited back to the district—to speak to high school students and not the elementary school students she was initially to address.) And just last month, queer author Phil Bildner was uninvited from a school visit after parents complained about his middle-grade coming-out book, A High Five for Glenn Burke (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Feb. 25).

All these authors have spoken publicly and movingly about their experiences, stressing that the victims in these instances were the kids, particularly the LGBTQ+ kids who might have had the opportunity to see their future creative selves in a visiting author.

But there are other victims of this same bigotry—the queer creators who are not in positions to be out, which could risk opportunities to make a living. There are authors and illustrators who are in same-sex relationships that are completely missing from their public personae. Where creators who are in opposite-sex relationships frequently reference their spouses or partners using gendered language, sometimes posting pictures of their families on their websites, many queer creators are utterly opaque.

This is a hidden barrier to equity in our industry. The system whereby authors and illustrators make much of their income speaking—not writing or illustrating—is one that discriminates against creators whose right to marry a same-sex partner is the law of the land but is nonetheless rejected by the small-minded. That the discrimination actively occurs in school board chambers and principals’ offices, and not in the offices of the publishers who too often place the burden of promotion on creators, does not make it any less an industry responsibility.

It is everybody’s right to disclose only what they wish about themselves—to me, to the general public, to the children they are writing or illustrating for. But during Pride Month, it seems a shame that there are creators among us who must make a choice between their livelihood and their pride.

Vicky Smith is a young readers’ editor.
A tapestry, both humble and rich.

SPINDELFISH AND STARS
Andrews, Christiane M.
Little, Brown (400 pp.)
$16.99 | Sep. 22, 2020
978-0-316-49601-8

An epic tale of abandonment, travel, secrets, family, and the meaning of art.

Clo and her father, art restorer and small-time thief, never live for long in one village; when it’s time to move on, he signals her, she meets him at the forest’s edge, and they walk through the night to someplace new. One day, he doesn’t show. A swineherd delivers a half-legible note: Clo must take this paper ticket of “half passage” to someone named Haros, near “th’ water…full o’ salt.” So Clo, “wall-jumper, turnip-picker,” embarks on a lonely journey halfway across a raging sea to an island where people and skies are gray, time doesn’t pass, a dried-apple–faced old woman inexplicably knows her, and fish can be carded and spun into shimmering yarn. Exquisite in detail, Andrews’ stunning novel gives careful importance to objects; even a simple shawl holds revelations. Chapter titles sparkle and tantalize (“In Which Our Hero Dies”), and prose sings. Tropes of sacrifice and Greek mythology serve as scaffolding. There must be a way for Clo to escape her repulsive fate of carding and spinning silver fishes’ guts into yarn and maybe even help a vulnerable, always-damp, flute-playing boy who was scooped from the ocean—but that path must allow for the literal, physical, yarn-based weaving of “humid forests and gleaming deserts, rimy fields and green valleys”—and human lives. Characters seem white.

A tapestry, both humble and rich. (Fantasy. 10-14)
**ALICE & GERT**

**An Ant and Grasshopper Story**

*Becker, Helaine*

*Illus. by Seiferling, Dena*

Kids Can (24 pp.)

$17.95 | Aug. 18, 2020

978-1-77147-358-3

Alice and Gert, two anthropomorphic insects, exhibit different work ethics.

With a nod to the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas (seen in the author’s dedication statement), this enchanting picture book from Canada tells the story of artistic Gert, a “sweet, flighty” grasshopper, and Alice, a hardworking ant. Gert spends the beautiful summer days soaking up the sunshine and cajoling Alice—who endlessly schleps food to her nest in preparation for the lean days of winter—to “relax and enjoy this fine weather.” Alice reminds Gert of winter’s looming onset, but Gert brushes her off in an affectionate way. For her own part, Gert liven up Alice’s hardworking days by composing and performing a song for her and acting out a pirate play.

**LETTERS FROM CUBA**

*Behar, Ruth*

Nancy Paulsen Books (272 pp.)

$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020

978-0-525-51647-7

In 1938, a Jewish refugee from Poland joins her father in small-town Cuba. After three years abroad, Papa’s saved only enough money to send for one of his children. Thus Esther boards the steamship alone even though she’s not quite 12. Cuba is a constant joy. Nearly everyone Esther meets is generous beyond their means. She adores her new trade as a dressmaker, selling her creations in Havana to earn money to bring over the rest of the family.

**TIME FOR BED’S STORY**

*Alvardo, Monica*

*Illus. by the author*

Kids Can (32 pp.)

$17.99 | Sep. 1, 2020

978-1-5253-0239-8

A sentient bed is fed up with a child’s complaints about bedtime.

It is bedtime, and Bed has something to say. The anthropomorphic piece of furniture shares that it understands that the child doesn’t like bedtime, but Bed is frustrated with the child, too. At night, Bed gets kicked and drooled on. In the daytime, the child is noisy and jumps on the bed. There’s even a stench coming from under Bed. Covered in stickers and continuously mistreated, Bed pleads for the child to try and understand Bed’s feelings. In its aggrieved narration, Bed refers to itself in the third person while addressing the child in the second person, making readers feel that Bed is talking to them. This fresh, distinctive delivery creates a quirky, humorous story. The illustrations are colorful, and expressive headboard facial features bring Bed to life. The end falls flat, with no real resolution, but the illustrations support the limited text with sweet smiles of appreciation between child and Bed. Many different emotions are portrayed on Bed’s face—annoyance, disgust, embarrassment, sadness, and more—making it an excellent vehicle for learning empathy and respect. The child illustrated is fair-skinned with dark hair, with one visiting friend who has brown skin and dark hair. *(This book was reviewed digitally with 12.78-by-17.88-inch double-page spreads viewed at 44% of actual size.)*

A cute, original, and funny book for younger readers. *(Picture book. 3-6)*

**WARMHEARTED CROSS-CULTURAL FRIENDSHIP FOR A REFUGEE ON DISTANT SHORES: BOTH NECESSARY AND KIND.**

*LETTERS FROM CUBA*
THE WORLD NEEDS MORE PURPLE PEOPLE
Bell, Kristen & Hart, Benjamin
Illus. by Wiseman, Daniel
Random House (40 pp.)
978-0-593-12196-2
978-0-593-12197-9 PLB

A monohued tally of positive character traits.
Purple is a “magic color,” affirm the authors (both actors, though Hart’s name recognition is nowhere near the level of Bell’s), and “purple people” are the sort who ask questions, laugh wholeheartedly, work hard, freely voice feelings and opinions, help those who might “lose” their own voices in the face of unkindness, and, in sum, can “JUST BE (the real) YOU.” Unlike the obsessive protagonist of Victoria Kann’s Pinkalicious franchise, being a purple person has “nothing to do with what you look like”—a point that Wiseman underscores with scenes of exuberantly posed cartoon figures (including versions of the authors) in casual North American attire but sporting a wide range of ages, skin hues, and body types. A crowded playground at the close (no social distancing here) displays all this wholesome behavior in action. Plenty of purple highlights, plus a plethora of broad smiles and wide-open mouths, crank up the visual energy—and if the earnest overall tone doesn’t snag the attention of young audiences, a grossly literal view of the young narrator and a grandparent “snot-out-our-nose laughing” should do the trick. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10.4-by-20.6-inch double-page spreads viewed at 22.2% of actual size.)

The buoyant uplift seems a bit pre-packaged but spot-on nonetheless. (Picture book. 6-8)

BALLET SCHOOL
Bouder, Ashley
Illus. by Bereciartu, Julia
Frances Lincoln (64 pp.)
$19.99  |  Aug. 4, 2020
978-0-7112-5128-1

Read! Practice! Perform!
Three girls (Amirah, Violet, and Sahani) and two boys (Joonwon and Alejandro) take ballet class. They clearly demonstrate warm-up moves, basic feet and arm positions executed at the barre, and center-floor movements including jumps. Their facial expressions vary from happy to fretful. When they have performed their “reverence,” or bows, they are ready to move on to a performance of The Sleeping Beauty, a popular story ballet danced to a beautiful score by Tchaikovsky. Violet’s mom, a former dancer, enters to tell the children the story, and they act out the various roles, from the elegant Lilac Fairy to the evil Carabosse. Each role involves steps that they previously learned and very expressive facial and body emoting. Bouder is a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet and writes with enthusiasm and knowledge. The uncluttered cartoon illustrations are lively and colorfully detailed, depicting a multiracial cast (as hinted at by the children’s names). That Violet and her ex-professional mom are white somewhat undermines the egalitarian message. While it may prove challenging for readers to actually try the steps on their own, especially the jumps, they should enjoy practicing. When readers play the score (not included but readily available) in the background, correct ballet movement or simply expressive individual movements can result in a very enjoyable staging.

The many enchanting elements of dance and story in The Sleeping Beauty ballet come alive for young children. (glossary) (Picture book. 5-8)

Our Bodies Stay Home, Our Imaginations Run Free
Lora L. Hyler

Helps children ages 6-10 navigate their scary new world due to the coronavirus.

Seven-year-old Maya is struggling with her feelings as she misses her classmates and teacher, her friends, her grandparents, and visits to her favorite places. And even worse, her 8th birthday is coming up during quarantine. How can she possibly have a party?

With her family’s help, Maya understands she needs to do her part to help her family and community. Practicing proper handwashing, wearing a mask, and social distancing is needed. She finds joy in making masks, watching nature and creative play from afar.

Maya is amazed when she has the best 8th birthday party ever!

For all inquiries, please email loralahyler@gmail.com • www.loralahylerauthor.com
RISE OF THE HALFLING KING
Bowles, David
Illus. by Bowles, Charlene
Cinco Puntos Press (64 pp.)
$12.95 paper | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-947627-37-6
Series: Tales of the Feathered Serpent, 1

A halfling child challenges a cruel king for the throne.

Almah, an apprentice witch in Kabak, a city in the Yucatan Peninsula, receives from the elfin beings known as Aluxes a magic stone and a drum that “will announce the true king of Uxmal.” As years go by, Kinich Kak Ek takes the throne in Uxmal, but the sorcerer Zaatan Ik prophesies a challenger: Not born of a woman, the usurper will take Kinich Kak Ek’s throne once he bangs the kingmaker drum and conquers three challenges. Unbothered by the prophecy, the king annexes neighboring cities and imposes on them rules and punishments. Almah asks the gods for help for her people and receives a response in the shape of an Alux halfling boy, Sayam, who hatches from an egg. When Zaatan Ik releases a defiant Sayam, a serpent from the underworld, he sets in motion a series of events that will change Sayam’s fate along with the rest of Uxmal. In the first of 10 graphic novels to adapt his work *Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky* (2018), David Bowles pairs up with illustrator Charlene Bowles to bring Mesoamerican heroes to life. With seemingly simple yet vivid illustrations characterized by strong, dynamic lines, the illustrator develops cunning and endearing characters to populate this enticing tale. In an afterword, the author shares the historical significance of Maya storytelling and its connection to today’s graphic novels.

An unmissable adventure of mythical proportions. (Graphic fantasy. 8-14)

THE SECRET IN THE JELLY BEAN JAR
Solving Mysteries Through Science, Technology, Engineering, Art & Math
Bourier, Ken
Illus. by the author
Red Chair Press (64 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $26.65 PLB | Aug. 1, 2020
978-1-63440-958-2
978-1-63440-957-5 PLB
Series: Jesse Steam Mysteries, 1

In this offering in a new series, naturally curious fourth grader Jesse uses science, technology, engineering, art, and math skills to solve simple mysteries.

Jesse makes mistakes estimating volume, resulting in spilled juice when she overfills her glass and, more critically, a popped bike tire when she puts in too much air. When the local toy store offers a prize of a new bike to whomever is the first to guess (within 500) the number of jelly beans in a large container, she welcomes the assistance of neighbor Professor Peach in learning how to calculate volume. He provides easy-to-understand step-by-step instructions that help Jesse measure how many jelly beans fit into a cubic inch (which they make with construction paper) and then determine the volume of a container. Jesse makes her own calculations to figure out how many jelly beans should be in the jar—leading to a smart estimate. Jesse and the other principals are white; racially diverse friends play supporting roles. Four companion titles publish simultaneously, each focusing on a different aspect of STEAM. The stories are appropriately short for emergent readers, lavishly illustrated with Bowser’s attractive, colorful illustrations, and present commonplace, recognizable situations. The other stories explain pendulums, discuss geology and archaeology, provide information on the aerodynamics of a sycamore seed, and illustrate how a lens can focus light. Backmatter in each includes a surprisingly amusing glossary and a supporting activity.

This effort models STEAM concepts in such an inviting way that readers will be inspired to make their own explorations. (Mystery. 7-10) (The Case of the Clicking Clock: 978-1-63440-945-2 PLB, 978-1-63440-946-9 paper; The Clue in the Painted Pattern: 978-1-63440-951-3 PLB, 978-1-63440-952-0 paper; The Comundrum of the Crooked Crayon: 978-1-63440-933-9 PLB, 978-1-63440-934-6 paper; The Riddle of the Spinning Sycamore Seed: 978-1-63440-939-1 PLB, 978-1-63440-940-7 paper)

ROCKET SAYS CLEAN UP!
Bryon, Nathan
Illus. by Adeola, Dapo
Random House (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-0-593-11899-3

Rocket’s back with an environmentally friendly message.

Series predecessor *Rocket Says Look Up!* (2019) encouraged readers to fix their imaginations on the stars. This sequel helps them to focus more terrestrially, on ocean pollution. With cool blues and warm and sandy tans, Adeola’s cheery illustrations offer a brightly hued contrast to the previous book. Rocket is a brown-skinned girl with cornrows billowing into two perfectly coiffed afro puffs. She, her mother, and her brother, Jamal, are visiting the children’s grandparents’ animal sanctuary, nestled on an undisclosed tropical island. As they build sand castles and surf the waves with their grandparents, Grammy and Grampy offer lessons about interacting with wild animals and the looming threat of pollution on island shores. The fun is instantly usurped when a baby turtle washes ashore tangled in plastic. As Rocket learns just how bad the pollution problem is, she immediately vows to take action. Quick-witted Rocket sets out the very next day to educate beachgoers, and in no time, Rocket has a cleanup crew compiling a mass of trash. With creativity and community partnership, Rocket and her newfound friends find an artful purpose for the accumulated waste. Rocket’s whole family presents black, and
WE CAN’T ALWAYS BE TOGETHER
BUT WE CAN ALWAYS
CELEBRATE NEW BOOKS!

“Joy is evident on the page—and infectious.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Brings new energy to the task of learning to read.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Spirited.”
—Publishers Weekly

“An incredibly useful tool for both school and public libraries.”
—School Library Journal, starred review

“A deeply affecting, nuanced, and comprehensive account of the history of LGBT rights.”
—Dr. Rob Bittner for CM Reviews

“Activists’ stories are extraordinary.”
—Publishers Weekly, starred review

“Thought-provoking reading...Valuable.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

“Informative, diverse, and highly engaging. Much-needed.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review
In Lexie Bean’s debut middle-grade novel, *The Ship We Built* (Dial, May 26), readers meet Rowan Beck, a 10-year-old trans boy in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula in the late 1990s. Rowan hardly speaks, but he writes letter after letter, sending them aloft via helium balloon to no known recipient. These letters and his friendship with classmate Sofie sustain him through his fifth grade year, as he endures both ostracism at school (he’s blurted out his true identity as a boy) and nighttime visits from his father at home. In their author’s note, Bean writes, “This book is a gift to my ten-year-old self. I was nine when I stopped speaking at school. I was ten when I wrote my first suicide note.” We talked with Bean from New York via Zoom; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

This book defies so many rules associated with middle-grade novels. You really focus the plot on Rowan’s interiority and day-to-day existence, with no added drama. A lot of that [is because I was] writing for a past version of myself. And I think what I needed at that time wasn’t a grand mystery or a plot that will keep me turning the pages—what I needed was a friend. I’m a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and I think days can just feel so long and every thought feels small and stupid when [you’re] growing up in an abusive environment. I wanted to stay true to life and its slowness and how out of control it feels sometimes. I also think the imagination steps in when you’re not busy. And his imagination is what keeps him alive to a great degree.

Even though Rowan is writing so much, some things are hardly spoken—the abuse that Rowan endures is so understated.

He doesn’t have the vocabulary, and even if he did, he might not be ready to name it. Abuse is such an isolating experience, so I didn’t want him to find the words for what’s happening, partially because I didn’t. I wanted readers to understand what [abuse] does to someone’s relationship with their voice. I think if it wasn’t for the abuse, he wouldn’t have written the letters to begin with. If he were only navigating gender, it would have been a completely different story.

This was probably one of the hardest parts about how [abuse] has impacted my own gender journey. Because one of the doubts [Rowan] has throughout the entire book is wanting and not wanting to be a boy, because he’s being hurt by one. I haven’t seen that represented anywhere. And I think it’s really important to talk about, especially considering that trans boys have the highest suicide rate in the LGBTQ+ umbrella. But I didn’t want to center it because I think survivors shouldn’t be expected to talk about their abuse all the time in order for it to be real. It’s a part of Rowan’s everyday life. And so he’s going to talk about it like it’s his everyday life, and that includes not talking about it all the time.

I also wanted to be honest about the feeling that there’s no good place to go. And I think regardless of abuse, a lot of queer or trans youth feel like school’s not good, home’s not good.
At this moment when kids are literally trapped in their homes, this might be an even more valuable book than you imagined when you started. I’ve been thinking about that a lot. In the synopsis it never says the word trans or queer or even sexual abuse, and I’m really grateful for that. I chose not to include those words because those words just wouldn’t be part of [Rowan’s] vocabulary. But now, people who have those experiences but wouldn’t necessarily be in an environment where their parents would get them a trans book, or a book that deals with these topics, could still hypothetically get [it] because the words aren’t on there.

One of the things that struck me about your author’s note is that you say this book is probably going to be banned.
Yeah, if they don’t complain about the queer parts, they’re going to complain about the abuse parts. A lot of people might [say it’s not] child appropriate. And I guess my response to that is: As long as children are experiencing it, it is child appropriate.

The Ship We Built received a starred review in the April 15, 2020, issue.

THE LAST LOOSE TOOTH
Burke, Tyler Clark
Illus. by the author
Random House (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Sep. 1, 2020
978-0-593-12144-3
978-0-593-12145-0 PLB

Talk about being down in the mouth. One of 20 and ensconced in the Upper Mouth, Lou will soon be the last remaining loose baby tooth. Much to Lou’s consternation, all 19 companion teeth are departing, making way for the permanent teeth. However, Lou just can’t seem to let go and fall out. Eventually, Lou’s surrounded only by “BORING adults.” Then, in a rushed, unconvincing development, Lou is finally free. The Tooth Fairy takes Lou to the Great Land of Teeth, an amusement park for dentition where Lou’s heartily welcomed by those former comrades in enamel. All baby teeth apparently end up there when their deciduous days are over. Readers who’ve chewed over the fate of baby teeth may find this conclusion satisfying. This amusing, albeit thin, story, narrated by Lou in first, er, person, is akin to positive tales about apprehensive kids discovering they can handle scary situations. Humorous, cheery, imaginative illustrations present, both in interior art and on endpapers, the denizens of upper and lower gums as close-knit, supportive companions. Ever smiling, dapper Lou sports a golden crown, blue bowtie, red boots, and green kneepads. Teeth are sparkly white and dressed in various costumes; canines are aptly depicted as dogs. Humans present white. Dialogue appears in balloons; some speech and onomatopoeic sounds are set in large capitals for dramatic effect.

An unusual take on managing change and new experiences. (Picture book. 4-7)

I AM NOT A LABEL
30 Artists, Thinkers, Athletes, and Activists With Disabilities From Past and Present
Burnell, Cerrie
Illus. by Baldo, Lauren Mark
Wide Eyed Editions (64 pp.)
$23.99 | Jul. 7, 2020
978-0-7112-4745-1

English actor Burnell highlights the accomplishments of disabled people past and present.

“Everyone deserves to see someone like them in a story or achieving something great,” notes the author, who was born
Short chapters and a breathless pace make this a clever, engrossing tale.

A DOG-FRIENDLY TOWN

Carranza, Cozbi A.
Illus. by the author
Denene Millner Books/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-5344-5421-7

A little girl shares a joy-filled rainy day with Mama.

Mother-daughter pairings of swimsuits, flower bouquets, and bicycles are presented in small, bright vignettes on the endpapers of Cabrera's cozy tale, serving as appetizers for the visual feast within. Impressively detailed scenes, from the first spread, which shows the child coming downstairs, to her mama’s artfully designed workspace to a later scene of the little girl drifting off to sleep haledo by stars and dreaming of day with her mother, are rendered with visible daubs of acrylic paint. They are complemented by alternating scenes of single objects, such as Mama’s teacup beside her daughter’s sippy cup, set against the soft and warm pastel backgrounds showing the strengthening of their bond through the daily actions mother and daughter share. Though much of the text is uneven in rhythm with no consistent movement to usher readers from page to page, it contains gems, such as a description of the vegetation on the sidewalk, “in the in-between. / It’s moss, Mama says. / It’s velvet, I say.” Still, the greatest delight is in the images that vibrantly showcase their simple, loving connection. In the book, the mother, daughter and, later, brother Luca all have gorgeous, varied hues of brown skin, with textured hair that is plaited, coily, and afro-puffed. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11 by 18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 48.3% of actual size.)

A beautifully illustrated, slice-of-life ode of adoration for doting daughters and marvelous mamas. (Picture book. 4-8)

ME & MAMA

Cabrera, Cozbi A.
Illus. by the author
Denene Millner Books/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-5344-5421-7

Three clever but remarkably quirky siblings and two of their friends take on an infamous and crafty jewel thief.

Epic, interested in robotics and facing the challenging transition from a tiny private academy to a large public middle school, is often tasked with keeping an eye on his younger brother, Rondo, who takes detecting very seriously, and Elvis, his little sister, who’s just as focused on famous movie-star dog Sir Bentley. Her dream is coming true: Sir Bentley is coming to stay at their parents’ dog-centric bed-and-breakfast, Perro del Mar, in the titular “dog-friendly town” of Carmelito, California. Unfortunately, in the middle of the night someone steals Bentley’s valuable, jewel-studded collar, and the crime is quickly publicized on dog-focused celebrity blogs. The B&B is full of plausible jewel-thief candidates, most in town for the season’s biggest doggie bash, Puppy Picnic. Epic, in his believably (and yet humorously) angst-wracked narration, reports the riveting, evolving developments in a mystery that is thick with red herrings. Short chapters and a breathless pace make this a clever, engrossing plot-driven tale with plenty of unusual, well-developed characters—even the dogs. Epic and his family are white, and opening illustrations indicate that much of the rest of the cast is diverse.

Thoroughly entertaining—mystery fans and dog lovers will lap this one up. (Mystery. 10-12)

THE VOICE OF LIBERTY

Carranza, Cozbi A.
Illus. by the author
Denene Millner Books/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-5344-5421-7

A beautifully illustrated, slice-of-life ode of adoration for doting daughters and marvelous mamas. (Picture book. 4-8)

A DOG-FRIENDLY TOWN

Cameron, Joouilaine
Illus. by Yan, Xindi
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (384 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-0-374-30644-1

Three clever but remarkably quirky siblings and two of their friends take on an infamous and crafty jewel thief.

Epic, interested in robotics and facing the challenging transition from a tiny private academy to a large public middle school, is often tasked with keeping an eye on his younger brother, Rondo, who takes detecting very seriously, and Elvis, his little sister, who’s just as focused on famous movie-star dog Sir Bentley. Her dream is coming true: Sir Bentley is coming to stay at their parents’ dog-centric bed-and-breakfast, Perro del Mar, in the titular “dog-friendly town” of Carmelito, California. Unfortunately, in the middle of the night someone steals Bentley’s valuable, jewel-studded collar, and the crime is quickly publicized on dog-focused celebrity blogs. The B&B is full of plausible jewel-thief candidates, most in town for the season’s biggest doggie bash, Puppy Picnic. Epic, in his believably (and yet humorously) angst-wracked narration, reports the riveting, evolving developments in a mystery that is thick with red herrings. Short chapters and a breathless pace make this a clever, engrossing plot-driven tale with plenty of unusual, well-developed characters—even the dogs. Epic and his family are white, and opening illustrations indicate that much of the rest of the cast is diverse.

Thoroughly entertaining—mystery fans and dog lovers will lap this one up. (Mystery. 10-12)
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—KIRKUS REVIEWS

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—THE NEW YORK TIMES

“Readers can’t go wrong with the sheer kid-appeal of a surfing pug.”
—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

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little bigfoot
an imprint of sasquatch books
sasquatchbooks.com
to attend the statue’s welcoming ceremony. No matter that women are forbidden to make speeches on the day or appear on the island where the statue stands. The suffragists—Lillie Devereux Blake; her daughter, Katherine “Katie” Devereux Blake; and Matilda Joslyn Gage—manage to commandeer a smelly cattle barge and join the naval flotilla on the Hudson River. The women chant slogans, some observers hurl insults, and the barge sails right up to the statue. The women’s efforts result in news stories and donations that fund additional suffrage campaigns. This lively account of the events should appeal to readers interested in the Statue of Liberty or women’s history. The clipped prose and vigorous efforts of the stalwart women promote fast-paced reading and dramatize some particulars of the momentous celebration. Bold, colorful, energetic illustrations capture time and place well. The suffragists are depicted as white; some characters are racially diverse. Extras include facts about these suffragists and Lady Liberty; a timeline, bibliography, author’s note, and dialogue sources.

A fine tribute as 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. (Informational picture book. 6-9)

ONE TRUE KING
Chainani, Soman
Illus. by Bruno, Iacopo
Harper/HarperCollins (624 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-06-269521-5
Series: The School for Good and Evil, 6

Three magical challenges will decide who will be Camelot’s king in this series wrap-up.

Being smarter, viler, and, except maybe for Merlin, more powerful a wizard than anyone else, it looks like Japeth, impersonating his dead good twin, Rhian, is destined to seize both crown and the Storian, the pen that writes—and can as easily rewrite—reality. Standing in his way is chiseled, golden-haired, relentlessly noble-hearted rival claimant Prince Tedros—who, for all that he can really fill out a wet shirt, is well proven in previous episodes that he would come out second best in a battle of wits with a fence post. Unfortunately (for Japeth), Team Tedros includes a lot of strong, savvy women, led by the prince’s angelic true love, Agatha, and her wickedly flamboyant BFF, Sophie. Pulling together a now-teeming cast, Chainani spins out a series of adventuresome quests that frequently grind to a halt for personal epiphanies, explicative backstory, and earnest conversations on the nature of true love (particularly in contrast to Japeth’s unrequited same-sex love for the dead, equally evil Aric). There are also heroic sacrifices and exploits aplenty on the way to (what else?) a literal storybook ending. Exceptions to the default-white lineup are cued by occasional references to “brown” or “cinnamon” skin and non-European names; likewise, some of the small figures in Bruno’s exuberantly detailed chapterhead vignettes are people of color.

A top-heavy close that gives fans a fitting happily-ever-after. (Fantasy. 11-13)

THE BELONGING TREE
Cocca-Leffler, Maryann
Illus. by Lombardi, Kristine A.
Christy Ottaviano/Henry Holt (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-250-30513-8

In the big oak tree, life couldn’t be better—there are squirrels everywhere. But with summer comes discord.

Who invited the noisy blue jays? And why are there so many chipmunks? Hey, where did those beavers come from? Pa and Ma are not amused. Archie Bunker-like proclamations issue forth from disgruntled Pa. “Blue jays don’t belong here!” Pa grumps. And: “Beavers are the worst neighbors of all!” When they pack up and move across the river, Ma tells her son, “Look, Zeke! There are lots of squirrels here, just like you.” But Zeke misses his friends. On his way to visit them, a sudden storm wreaks havoc. He is stranded on a branch, dangling over the river, when his family’s maple tree comes crashing down. The former neighbors come to the rescue and return the squirrel family to the oak tree, where they all truly belong—together.

Cocca-Leffler’s message-driven story is easily accessible, with concise, clear sentences, and Lombardi’s bright, humorous, and inviting illustrations of the forest setting are eye-catching. However, there’s a jarring disconnect between the anthropomorphized squirrels and beavers and the realistically rendered chipmunks. Also, the next sequence of spreads, in which the squirrels move from the left bank to the right but Zeke’s old friends wave at him from the right bank, is visually confusing. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

Despite visual hiccups, this much-needed tale of cooperation and inclusivity will be welcomed by readers of all ages. (Picture book. 4-7)

NO VACANCY
Cohen, Tziporah
Groundwood (144 pp.)
$16.95 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-77306-410-9

Is it a bad thing when a Jewish girl fakes an apparition of the Virgin Mary? Miriam, a white, Jewish 11-year-old from Manhattan, is plunked into a ramshackle motel upstate when her father loses his job. Now she’s helping them turn the dilapidated old place into a functional business. But nobody has a reason to visit Greenvale, New York (population 514), so nobody stays in the motel. Miriam’s finally settling in—she’s made friends with the Mexican American hotel cleaner and with a white girl whose grandparents own the diner next door. It’s a little uncomfortable being in an apparently all-Catholic town, but Miriam just tells people she’s a vegetarian to avoid being served bacon. That’s normal, right? And it’s probably
Grit and imagination combine to turn “No” into a definite “Yes.”

A THOUSAND NO’S

Cochran, DJ
Illus. by Dougherty, Dan
Sourcebooks eXplore (48 pp.)
$17.99  |  Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-7282-1919-6

Cochran and Dougherty combine talents in this metaphorical tale of creativity, resilience, and growth mindset.

This book’s noseless, bristly-ponytailed protagonist has a great idea (never named but represented visually as a glowing egg), but like many ideas, it runs into hiccups along the way to fruition, including daunting opposition. What seemed like a simple and clever idea at first quickly meets many, many “No’s.” The naysayers and critiques are heavy and painful at first and quickly become overwhelming until “No’s in a dizzying variety of typefaces litter the page. But when she decides to solicit feedback, at first reluctantly, she becomes curious about her idea and how the “No’s might help it along, turning 1,000 “No’s” into one big, brilliant “Yes.” The message is straightforward without being heavy-handed: Even though feedback can be difficult to hear, it ultimately leads to positive results. The black-and-white line-drawn illustrations have a Tim Burton vibe at the start, but they grow more colorful as the protagonist’s attitude changes and “No’s pour in, expanding the allegory visually. The final, humongous, multicolored “YES” is made up of all the myriad “No’s. Characters are uniformly depicted with paper-white skin, but hairstyle hints at racial diversity, and one character uses a wheelchair. This will surely find a home alongside similar favorites from the likes of Peter H. Reynolds and Kathryn Otoshi.

“A thousand no’s

MY LIFE IN THE FISH TANK

Dee, Barbara
Aladdin (320 pp.)
$17.99  |  Sep. 15, 2020
978-1-5344-3233-8

When her older brother develops bipolar disorder, a seventh grader must cope with its effect on her family.

When Zinnia’s parents get the call that her older brother, Gabriel, has been in a car accident, time, like Gabriel’s new diagnosis of bipolar disorder, seems to take on a life of its own. Chapter headings that mix vague and specific days and times reinforce this notion. Likewise, flashbacks to odd and even scary events with her brother help Zinny see that Gabriel’s condition was not a sudden onset. Although the story focuses on how Zinny deals with this conflict on a personal level, such as retreating from friends, it also explores the effects of mental illness on Zinny’s entire family (who seem to be white).
Gabriel recovers in a treatment center, Zinny's narration reveals that her mom wants to keep everything secret, her dad's working longer hours, her older sister feels guilty, and, with attention elsewhere, her younger brother is neglected. There's no single savior who helps Zinny but instead a string of people and events that work together: a lunchtime therapy group at school (both group and student body are diverse), a school counselor who notes the harm of “crazy” language, scientific experiments that reframe her thinking, forming new friendships and salvaging old ones, and finding humor where she can. The last brings levity to this tough topic.

A carefully crafted blend of realism, age-appropriate sensibilities, and children's interests. (Fiction. 9-13)

Luci Soars
Delacre, Lulu
Illus. by the author
Philomel (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-984812-88-9

Who needs shadows anyway?

Luci certainly doesn't. But soon people start noticing that even in the brightest of sunlight, Luci is missing hers. From the time she is a baby, she is hyperaware that people are judging her. As a toddler, she learns to walk in the shadows of others. However, one day at school she stops huddling in the gloom and ventures into the light. The cruel taunts of classmates drive her first to tears and then to rebellion.

Finding herself no longer anchored to the ground by shadows of people or things, she soars through the city and experiences the liberating power of just being herself, of consciousness than a story. Punctuated by a smattering of powerful observations: “Mean shadows pointed. / Mean shadows laughed. / Mean shadows stared / their icy stares.” The illustrations are serviceable but colorful and vibrant color that contrasts with the black-and-white world around her. Delacre’s sparse text reads more as a stream of quietude and listening but is unconvincing. A mechanical contrivance comprised of found bits isn't required for mindful attention: Isn't a careful listener one's own “listening machine”? How does the machine actually work anyway? The story also never indicates that others become so taken with Myra Louise's ideas they permanently adopt her method of engaging with the world, and Jeremy's joining in on the machine ends the proceedings abruptly. The illustrations are serviceable but colorful and present freckled, wide-eyed, brown-haired Myra Louise and her mother as white; some classmates are racially diverse.

Well-meaning but misses the mark. (Picture book. 4-7)

Why Are You So Quiet?
Desforges, Jaclyn
Illus. by Hugo, Risa
Annick Press (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Sep. 8, 2020
978-1-77321-434-4

Is it better to listen than to be noisy? Quiet Myra Louise thinks so. Soft-voiced, she enjoys silence and is rewarded by attending closely to sounds. Her silent nature leads Mom, classmate Jeremy, and her teacher each to ask the titular question. Others' frustration heightens Louise's own: She can't answer. But she has an idea: Gathering various items and poring over books, Myra Louise builds a listening machine complete with earpiece and becomes a better listener. Adding another earpiece to the contraption enhances other people's aural experiences, too: Mom hears the enchanting sound of the story she reads aloud—then reads extra chapters. At school, Myra Louise invites Jeremy to listen to a ladybug. The tale conveys a positive message about the joys of quietude and listening but is unconvincing. A mechanical contrivance comprised of found bits isn’t required for mindful attention. Isn't a careful listener one’s own “listening machine”? How does the machine actually work anyway? The story also never indicates that others become so taken with Myra Louise's ideas they permanently adopt her method of engaging with the world, and Jeremy's joining in on the machine ends the proceedings abruptly. The illustrations are serviceable but colorful and present freckled, wide-eyed, brown-haired Myra Louise and her mother as white; some classmates are racially diverse.

Well-meaning but misses the mark. (Picture book. 4-7)

The One Great Gnome
Dimardo, Jeff
Illus. by Ortiz, Jhon
Red Chair Press (128 pp.)
$12.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-947519-59-4

An 11-year-old girl falls into a parallel world of fantastical creatures in this illustrated novel for readers.

Kindhearted, book-loving Sarah is resolved to make the best of her family's move from New York City to her parents' dream home in rural Connecticut. While exploring the shed in the backyard, she discovers Vesper, a gnome that she inadvertently revives from a frozen statue state, and is compelled to follow him back to his homeland, which is plagued by a struggle between his fellow gnomes and their presumed enemies, the trolls. Plot-driven chapters that emphasize characters over worldbuilding will draw a variety of readers into this adventure, and straightforward, humorous third-person narration keeps the twisting, turning story moving. Though character development is minimal, the situations that are presented allow Sarah's empathy and understanding to take on a pivotal importance in a way that
feels fairly natural, if a bit unsubtle in its messaging. Black-and-white vignettes are interspersed throughout, providing fuzzy, soft-edged imagery for the creatures. The humanoid beings in the story seem to assume a white default, and there are no textual details about Sarah's race or culture, though her surname is Arroyo, suggesting that her family may be of Hispanic descent. A brief fantasy tale that may appeal to readers who aren't usually fans of the genre. (Fantasy: 8-11)

**STUDENT AMBASSADOR**

*The Missing Dragon*

 Estrada, Ryan  
 Illus. by Eneas, Axar  
 Iron Circus Comics (150 pp.)  
 $15.00 paper | Aug. 18, 2020  
 978-1-945820-60-1  
 Series: Student Ambassador

Joseph is an unreliable narrator with a flair for the dramatic and plenty of humor in this middle-grade graphic novel. After winning an improbable essay contest, Joseph Bazan has the honor of meeting the U.S. president. After his quick wit and smooth talking prove he is a natural diplomat, Joseph is thrust onto the international stage to connect with the young monarch of the fictional country of West Rhutar, which seems to be somewhere in Asia. There, young King Nang has his sights set on revenge against East Rhutar, which he blames for leaving him orphaned, and Joseph must help broker peace. All is going well until a late-night heist sets off a globe-trotting quest for the truth behind the tensions between East and West Rhutar, as Nang and Joseph traipse across East Asia. Though Joseph is identified as Mexican American, the real cultural highlight is on Korea, where Joseph and Nang end up by accident and where Joseph's fondness for Korean comics comes in handy. Some astute readers may note the similarities between the fictional East and West Rhutar and the tensions between North and South Korea. Meanwhile, Korean language and lore yield clues to help Nang and Joseph track down the bad guys and solve the mystery. Illustrations and storyboard are inspired by Korean manhwa comics, with a dash of Japanese manga and American graphic traditions. This creates a fast-paced adventure sure to appeal to reluctant readers.  
A Korean travelogue with madcap antics and adventures.  
(Graphic adventure: 8-12)

**CONSENT**

 Evans, Keisha & Gonsalvez, N.B.  
 Illus. by Chan, Jenny  
 James Lorimer (34 pp.)  
 $22.65 | Aug. 1, 2020  
 978-1-4594-1506-5  
 Series: Deal With It

This installment of the Deal With It nonfiction series strives to communicate an understanding of consent. Consent is something that can be expressed, informed, applied, and, with clear examples, this guide shows what consent means and what it can look like. Sometimes a situation is clear, as with being touched, but blurrier examples include borrowing something or sharing someone else's story. A mixed delivery engages readers with illustrations, comics, quizzes, Q&As, and lists of do's and don'ts. This ensures the book never feels dense; it has both good pacing and opportunities to pause and contemplate the information being shared. Using these different formats, the book offers tools while building on understanding. When it explores what it means to be a witness, for instance, the quiz presents five different levels of intervention that one could take, showing that all could be correct depending on the situation. Written with a Canadian audience in mind, the text mentions that the age of consent in Canada is 16 but not other countries’ or jurisdictions’. Canadian resources are given but are Toronto-heavy. Illustrations show a diverse cast of skin tones and abilities.  
Empowering and useful. (further reading)  
(Nonfiction: 9-14)

**THIS IS THE PATH**

 The WOLF TOOK

 Farina, Laura  
 Illus. by Ellis, Elina  
 Kids Can (42 pp.)  
 $18.99 | Sep. 1, 2020  
 978-1-5253-0153-7

A big brother tries to entertain his little sister with fairy tales. Gabriel imagines himself as the hero of “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Little Pigs,” but as he reads these versions to little sister Mia, he bowdlerizes them to make sure that “nothing bad happens.” He’s afraid of the big bad wolf, despite Mia’s clambering for more danger in the tales. When she goes off in disgust in search of ice cream, Gabriel realizes that he’s casting himself as the hero in only “very boring” stories. He slowly finds his bravery through storytelling, and, of course, they all live happily ever after. The bold, inventive illustrations carry the tale, with the two brown-skinned, curly-haired children encountering cute piglets, a fiery dragon, and a wolf with teeth “the size of T. rex teeth—if T. rex teeth were the size of mountains.” Despite a strong start and well-executed, poetic prose, the story itself
The slender tree trunks, each a different color to smoothly spreads viewed at 49% of actual size.)

A tame attempt to rewrite and take control of familiar stories. (Picture book. 4-7)

**SMART GEORGE**

Feiffer, Jules
Illus. by the author
Michael di Capua/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 2, 2020
978-0-06-279099-6

The perverse pooch of Bark, George (1999) is back, obstinate as ever.

“One plus one equals what, George?” the pup’s patient mother asks. But George isn’t playing that game and instead of answering demands to be fed. “Two plus two equals what?” and subsequent posers are likewise stonewalled…until George falls asleep and dreams of trees—first one, then two, and on up to 10—demanding to be added up. “I don’t have time for this,” George complains. But as Feiffer, ever the master of psychological insight, well knows, the temptation to count is too strong for George, or young viewers, to resist for long. The slender tree trunks, each a different color to smoothly facilitate the arithmetical operations, line up against pale monochrome backdrops. In the characteristic minimalist cartoon illustrations they are joined in teasing the reluctant pup on to numeracy by a cat, a pig, a cow; the veterinarian first met in George’s debut, and finally George’s mother. She wakes her puppy up, and off they go for a walk so that George can show off those new counting skills. Where Bark, George mined the sight of the vet pulling animal after animal from George’s gullet for laughs, this follow-up is more quietly thoughtful, but Feiffer’s linework is as fine and fluid as ever, and his canny placement of speech balloons gives even the trees personality. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-22-inch double-page spreads viewed at 19% of actual size.)

Arithmetic is as easy as one, two, three with the right approach. (Picture book. 4-6)

**CUBS IN THE TUB**

The True Story of the Bronx Zoo’s First Woman Zookeeper

Fleming, Candace
Illus. by Downing, Julie
Holiday House (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-0-8234-4318-5

In the 1940s, Fred Martini, a zookeeper at the Bronx Zoo, brought a newborn lion cub home to his wife.

The cub had been rejected by its mother and desperately needed care. Though childless, Helen was well prepared with baby supplies on hand. She bathed it, fed it baby formula, and sang it to sleep. MacArthur became a loving, playful, cuddly pet until he was placed in another zoo. It was lonely without him until Fred brought home three baby tigers, and the joyful process began again. When it was time to return these babies to the zoo, Helen went with them. She created a cozy space in a glass cage where visitors could see them. She expanded her work by establishing a nursery in an unused storeroom, painting and decorating, curtains and all, where the tiger cubs could sleep at night. When zoo officials finally discovered her, they realized the value of what she had accomplished and offered her a permanent, paid position as the first woman zookeeper, caring for many species of animal babies. Telling the tale with great attention to detail, Fleming perfectly captures both time and place as well as the loving, determined woman who forged her way in a man’s profession. Downing’s illustrations in a wide variety of sizes and hues will keep readers’ attention glued to the pages and are in sync with the text in every way. The Martinis present white, and the animals are cuddly and packed with personality.

A lovely homage to a little-known woman and her quiet achievement. (afterword, bibliography, source notes) (Picture book/biography. 4-9)

**JUMBO**

Gall, Chris
Illus. by the author
Roaring Brook (48 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-250-13580-1

In a properly lap- and eye-filling format (it has a 2-foot wing-span), a soaring tribute to the “Queen of the Skies.”

Following Go for the Moon (2019), Gall pays homage to another outsized triumph of engineering wizardry and industrial might. A mammoth machine two and a half times larger than any other jet liner of its time, Boeing’s 747 is so big, he claims, that the Wright brothers could have made their entire first flight in its fuselage without leaving the coach section. It debuted in 1968 and, though now retired from domestic use, is still the fastest commercial passenger plane in the world. Drawn with Gall’s customary clean precision, a mix of dramatically angled full-body portraits, glimpses of workers in a gigantic assembly plant, cutaway views of cockpit and spacious seating areas, detailed sectional diagrams of wings and engines, and flocks of smaller aircraft from a paper plane to a suddenly dinky-seeming 737 combine to underscore the scope of the technological achievement as well as both the sheer scale of the jet and of the effort that went into building it. There is also a dream-come-true element, as a red-haired, pale-skinned child frequenting the pictures through each stage of the leviathan’s design and assembly makes a final appearance in the pilot’s seat and turns out to be Lynn Rippelmeyer, the first woman to captain a 747. Clad in late-20th-century attire,
Young audiences sure that the young bunny was about to become a menu item will happily request repeat readings. This mischievous bit of topsy-turvy is a thoroughgoing delight.”

— Kirkus Reviews, July 2019 (Starred Review)

Named a Best Book of 2019

The Wolf Will Not Come

His growing imagination “almost” gives him a fairy-tale ending. But… it’s still good to be bored every once in a while. Slight and silly—but not too boring.”

— Kirkus Reviews, March 2020

978-0-7643-5794-3
32 pp. | $14.99

“The Bathysphere

BOYS: The Depth-Defying Diving of Messrs. Beebe and Barton

Per the series promise, a slightly “unhinged” celebration of daring diving developments.

Kirkus Reviews—Aug. 1, 2019, issue

I THINK I CAN

A well-structured and deceptively simple dose of encouragement for emerging readers.

Kirkus Reviews—Jan. 15, 2019, issue

C Jumped Over Three Pots and a Pan and Landed Smack in the Garbage Can

A nifty caper showcasing teamwork, letter recognition, and word formation.

Kirkus Reviews—Aug. 1, 2019, issue

C Jumped Over Three Pots and a Pan

His growing imagination “almost” gives him a fairy-tale ending. But… it’s still good to be bored every once in a while. Slight and silly—but not too boring.”

— Kirkus Reviews, March 2020

978-0-7643-5794-3
32 pp. | $14.99

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the small human figures clustering throughout add a sense of period but are nearly all white.

A blast from the past, sure to transport fans of all things big and loud. (glossary, source list, “fun facts,” afterward) (Informational picture book: 7-9)

**DARK WAS THE NIGHT**
Blind Willie Johnson’s Journey to the Stars
Golio, Gary
Illus. by Lewis, E.B.
Nancy Paulsen Books (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-5247-3888-4

When NASA scientists compiled a recording of sounds to send into space representing Earth and humanity, those sounds included thunder, crickets, classical pieces, and a short wordless song by musician “Blind Willie” Johnson.

Willie Johnson’s mother died while he was still a boy, and shortly thereafter he lost his sight. Now young Johnson’s light came from singing in the church choir and playing the guitar. He traveled to cities throughout Texas, where he sang and played for money. One day, an adult Johnson was given the opportunity to record an album of his songs. One of the songs was “Dark Was the Night,” a haunting yet hopeful tune marked only by Johnson’s humming and characteristic slide-guitar playing. The second-person narrative is brief but evocative. In the backmatter, Golio shares with readers that this song was chosen for the Golden Record placed on Voyager 1 in 1977 because “Johnson powerfully conveyed the sense of loneliness that all people feel—something very important to know about human beings and life on planet Earth.” Lewis’ illustrations have a soft, blurred effect to them, conveying both the bygone time and Johnson’s vision loss. They are washes of mostly blue and violet, with punches of bright yellow and gold. The author’s note also discusses the challenges of researching Johnson and provides a bit more information on Voyager 1. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 65% of actual size.)

An ode to a too-little-discussed musician and an excellent introduction to his amazing musical talent. (Picture book/biography: 5-8)

**THERE WAS A TURKEY ON THE FARM**
Gorbachev, Valeri
Illus. by the author
NorthSouth (40 pp.)
$17.95 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-0-7358-4425-4

Turkey gets by with a little help from her friends.

At the start of Gorbachev’s farm tale, Turkey laments her friendless state to Cow. After hearing Turkey’s criticisms of Pig, the ducks, Goat, Hen, and Rooster, Cow says, “You will never find any friends if you are so choosy.” Miffed, Turkey leaves the barnyard to try to find friends elsewhere. Gorbachev’s trademark scratchy, full-color illustrations show frogs and fish ignoring her, but then she catches a fox’s eye. “I’m Fox, and I want to invite you to the dinner party,” he says. No silly goose, this time Turkey isn’t being critical and choosy when she rejects the invitation; she’s understandably alarmed as Fox tries to drag her by the wing to the forest. She yells for help, and luckily, the farm animals she’d earlier rebuffed hear her and come to her rescue. Fox flees into the forest, and an un-gobbled Turkey is left behind with the farm animals, who bear no ill will toward her and are happy she’s unharmed. When Cow asks her, Turkey admits she was wrong about them but not that she did any wrong herself. The result is an ending that falls a bit flat, with no evidence of real growth, just good fortune that her community was patient with such a turkey.

E-i-e-i-hum. (Picture book: 3-5)

**KAMALA HARRIS**
Rooted in Justice
Grimes, Nikki
Illus. by Freeman, Laura
Atheneum (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-5344-6267-0

Eve, a young black girl from Oakland, wants to be president one day, and her mother tells her all about Kamala Harris to show that it is possible.

The story’s opening, closing, and occasional exchanges between Eve and her mom are italicized while the lengthy narration of Kamala’s life is not. The latter begins with the meaning of her name and her parents’ origins in Jamaica and India before they met in Oakland, Kamala’s birthplace. Densely packed lines of free-verse text trace her biography, scenes detailing the settings that made Kamala who she is, including the marches her parents attended, the school to which she was bused, the cultural center she frequented after school, her matriculation at a historically black college, and her career beyond law school, with the two penultimate spreads briefly covering her presidential run through the ending of her campaign. The brightly colored illustrations offer memorable moments for listeners to linger over while the extensive text is read aloud (few children will sustain interest in the story to read it independently to the end). Eve’s story frame seems useful in the beginning, but it peters out midway through to become an awkward add-on to this in-depth biography, potentially confusing readers. Despite some weaknesses in its execution, this thorough portrait of the background and hard work that brought this biracial, black woman to her campaign for the presidency is worth sharing with children. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 65% of actual size.)

A one-time read for most, but a worthy addition to the reference shelf. (timeline, sources) (Picture book/biography: 7-10)
NEW RELEASES
from Star Bright Books!

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When one of the worst oil spills in history threatens the endangered diamondback terrapins, the Sizzling Six rush into action. Join their adventures to help protect wildlife!
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The Little Red Crane
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Dex the Little Red Crane is called for a very big job far away. Along the way, he meets different cranes doing their incredible jobs.
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Ceri & Deri: Good To be Sweet
Ceri the cat and Deri the dog are best friends—and they both LOVE candy. Can they find way to share a bag of treats equally?
36 pp. • 8” x 8” • Ages: 3-6 yrs
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Ceri & Deri: Time for Clocks
Deri is late to meet with Ceri, again. Fortunately, Gwen Green has a solution: keep a clock nearby! Join them to learn how to tell time.
36 pp. • 8” x 8” • Ages: 3-6 yrs
HC: 978-159572-868-5 • $16.99
PB: 978-159572-869-2 • $6.99

The Magic of Clay
“...an introduction to clay ... [with] colorful illustrations and clear text...”—Ceramic Monthly
Perfect for readers of all ages who are interested in the almost magical material called clay!
32 pp. • 10” x 8” • Ages: 8 and up
HC: 978-159572-861-6 • $17.99
PB: 978-159572-854-8 • $7.99
Eleven wild creatures model mud, oil, dead ants, poop, and other fashion-forward accessories.

Though the conceit has at least as much promise as that of her *I See Sea Food: Sea Creatures That Look Like Food* (2019), Grodzicki shows an odd reluctance to own it. She characterizes both the iron-rich muck that bearded vultures rub into their feathers and the anal-gland oil that flamingos rub into theirs to make them even more “Pretty in Pink” as actual adornment. However, she contradicts her own language to note that wild boars aren’t wallowing in “muddy body paint” to “make a fashion statement,” and even after heading an entry “BLING! BLING!” she explains that the pile of “jewelry” (i.e. bits of plant and animal debris) that lacewing larvae carry around for protection “isn’t sparkly or flashy.” Overall the author’s comments about how various found or excreted substances play roles in predation, defense, or attracting a mate (just like with people, not that she makes that connection) are spot-on, and the big, sharply focused, close-up stock photos will be a strong draw. But the ready way she abandons her premise muddles the presentation and will likely leave readers feeling confused or let down.

Steer young naturalists first to the similar but more bounteous *Creature Features: 25 Animals Explain Why They Look the Way They Do* by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page (2014). *(This book was reviewed digitally with 20- by 20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 60% of actual size.)*

Sashays down the runway but fails to make any lasting impression. *(summary fact boxes, glossary)* *(Informational picture book. 7-9)*

**SWEET CHILD O’ MINE**

*Guns N’ Roses*

Illus. by Zivoin, Jennifer

Jimmy Patterson/Little, Brown (40 pp.)

$18.99  |  Sep. 1, 2020

978-0-316-49335-2

A rock band’s 1988 hit makes a tender love note from parent to child.

This print version pairs the original song’s lyrics—stripped of lead singer Axl Rose’s wails and most of the repetitive closing breakdown—to neatly composed scenes of a child’s day with loving adults. The outgoing child, first met singing expressively into a flashlight, and an androgynous guitar player step out of their country home to meet a smiling woman, then end up on an outdoor fairground stage before a diverse family audience of a dozen or so. Aside from references to rain reflected in a quick thunderstorm, the plotline is entirely in the pictures. From the opening “She’s got a smile that it seems to me / reminds me of childhood memories” to the climactic “Where do we go now? //

Where do we go? // Sweet child,” the sparse but heartfelt lines, as is typical in picture books based on pop songs, don’t make much literal sense. Still, aided by an occasional subtle change in type size, they create a gentle rhythm that suits the overall intimate tone. If Zivoin methodically tucks roses into nearly every illustration, there seem to be no guns. The characters and family situations are portrayed with enough ambiguity to allow multiple interpretations: The guitar-playing caregiver has light skin, and the woman has brown skin; the child’s skin is a smidge darker than the guitar player’s. *(This book was reviewed digitally with 10- by 20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 52% of actual size.)*

Stronger in feeling than storyline, but the lovin’s only lightly tinged with sentimentality. *(Picture book. 6-8)*
Such A Library!
by Jill Ross Nadler
Illustrated by Esther van den Berg

“Repetition, action verbs, and onomatopoeia make this a fun read-aloud.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“...this imaginative retelling is an absolute delight.”
—School Library Journal

“...the good-natured, buoyant cartoons chronicle a cumulative comic cacophony with subtle nods to the story’s shtetl origins... Stevie, for his part, learns two important lessons: he didn’t know how good he had it, and librarians are indeed magic.”
—Publisher’s Weekly

New from Intergalactic Afikoman

Asteroid Goldberg: Passover in Outer Space
by Brianna Caplan Sayres
Illustrated by Merrill Rainey

“Rainey’s redheaded protagonist and good-natured cartooning have an animation-style energy and eagerness... The lesson is clear: Passover is wherever you hang—or float—your hat.”
—Publisher’s Weekly

“Asteroid Goldberg: Passover in Outer Space is a delightful picture book, and a choice pick for Jewish families to read aloud and share with their children. Highly recommended.”
—Midwest Book Review

“With Brianna Caplan Sayres’ lively rhyme and Merrill Rainey’s interstellar illustrations, imaginations will soar.”
—Jewish Standard

www.IntergalacticAfikoman.com
Using a vocabulary of fewer than 60 words and their variants, Henkes creates an impeccably designed story that’s rewarding for toddlers and early readers alike.

**SUN FLOWER LION**

**HOW DOES SOAP CLEAN YOUR HANDS? The Science Behind Healthy Habits**
Hayes, Madeline J.
Illus. by Bassani, Srimalie
Flowerpot Press (32 pp.)
978-1-4867-2073-6
978-1-4867-2074-3 paper

A recipe for health-conscious behavior, with some currently applicable additions.

The author and illustrator of How Do Molecules Stay Together? (2019) range beyond the title’s implied focus to deliver standard-issue remarks on the benefits of trying for a better balance of food groups while getting plenty of sleep and exercise. Especially timely material, however, includes urging readers to “do a dab” for coughs and sneezes, practice “social distancing,” and especially to wash hands both often and long enough for a double chorus of “Happy Birthday.” Along with explaining how soap’s hydrophilic and hydrophobic ingredients help wash off what she redundantly refers to as “germs and bacteria” (viruses get separate mention), Hayes describes the differences between vaccines and what she calls “symptoms medications” and “T reatment medications.” Also, though the current pandemic isn’t mentioned, some of the leering microbes in the cartoon-style illustrations at least resemble coronaviruses. Occasional slides into drollery, notably a suggestion that sleep builds brain power because “little elf librarians” sneak into bedrooms at night to share books (“unfortunately, that has never been proven”), lighten the message, as do a racially diverse array of human figures, nearly all of which are children or doctors, who dance energetically throughout, gesticulating broadly and repeatedly demonstrating “doing the dab” for those who aren’t in the know. A simple, soapy experiment and a smoothie recipe add hands-on elements. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 65% of actual size.)

A bubbly blast of science and common sense, timely as well as timeless. (glossary) (Informational picture book. 8-11)

**CATCH THE SKY Playful Poems on the Air We Share**
Heidbreder, Robert
Illus. by Dove, Emily
Greenwillow (40 pp.)
$17.95 | Sep. 29, 2020
978-0-06-286610-3

Thirty short poems celebrate what might be seen in the “air we share” around the world in this Canadian import.

From a rosy dawn to moonlit night, Heidbreder lyrically limns the sunshine, clouds, northern lights, and snowflakes; the insects, birds, and bats; and even human contributions, including helicopters, paragliders, and fireworks—examples of “sky’s treasures” we see and share. His quatrains are simply titled and carefully arranged, not only across the day, but in clear pairs: wind and leaves, squirrels and starlings on electric wires, kites and birthday helium balloons (tethered but still unfortunate in a collection celebrating the environment). A longtime writer of poetry for young people, this Canadian author makes the rhyming, alliteration, and scansion seem effortless, and the verbs do double duty. A dragonfly’s “gleaming wings / glitter the air”; a “rumbling storm train / thunders the sky.” The imagery is memorable: “Black on black, / swish-soft swirls. / Night bats feast / in whirling twirls.” Dove’s colorful illustrations support the title’s message, showing children with varying skin tones, hair, and head coverings in a wide variety of settings. Two different children use wheelchairs. There are city apartments, parks, a tropical beach, and a snowy Arctic village, all shown in spreads that reinforce the sense of a passing day.

Deceptively simple but clever and effective for the pre- and primary school nature shelves. (Picture book/poetry. 3-8)

**SUN FLOWER LION**
Henkes, Kevin
Illus. by the author
Greenwillow (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sep. 22, 2020
978-0-06-286610-3

A sun, a flower, and a lion. They look similar, no?

Introduced in a wordless panel before the title page, the three figures bear at least two shapes in common. They’re also the same combination of warm yellow and (somehow just as warm) white, outlined in thick black line that pops against the muted yellow background. The text, divided into six short chapters, goes on to introduce the figures in isolation: “This is the sun. / Can you see it?” the narrator asks before going on to proclaim that the sun “is as bright as a flower.” When the flower is introduced, it’s compared to a lion. The lion? He isn’t compared to anything but instead smells the flower and warms himself in the sun. In the next chapter, the lion dreams that the flowers are sun-sized cookies. He wakes up hungry and runs home as fast as he can. Can readers spot him on the page? Using a vocabulary of fewer than 60 words and their variants—and a visual vocabulary of even fewer shapes and colors—Henkes creates an impeccably designed story that’s rewarding for toddlers and early readers alike. The repetitive structure and tone call to mind the playful simplicity of Mem Fox and Judy Horacek’s Where Is the Green Sheep? (2004). With imagination at its center, this participatory read-aloud also cleverly introduces the concept of simile (“It looks like a lion”) and metaphor (“The flowers are cookies”).

As brilliant as can be. (Picture book: 3-6)
BIRDS
Hickman, Pamela
Illus. by Gavin, Carolyn
Kids Can (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
Series: Nature All Around

“...In this book, you’ll find out...about birds...from those you see every day to strange birds, and you’ll discover how you can become a bird-watcher.”

Following Plants (2020), Bugs, and Trees (both 2019), Hickman and Gavin have produced another worthy addition to children’s nature shelves, this one focusing on birds that can be observed in Canada and the United States. The text is accessible and graceful. Each short chapter, illustrated with Gavin’s signature, appealing watercolors, has just enough information to whet the appetite for more. Readers are unlikely to forget, for example, that baby herring gulls tap on that red spot on a parent’s beak to release the chick’s food. As in other books in the series, chapters about each season provide an organic way to introduce or flesh out such basic concepts as migration, pollination, and camouflage. Less-common concepts are also clearly explained, as in “determinate versus “indeterminate layers.” (Yes, some birds keep replacing damaged eggs until they reach a set number.) Occasional sidebars entitled “Strange Birds” mention highly unusual behaviors of specific varieties, including the northern shrike’s impalement of edible victims on thorns to compensate for its tiny, weak feet. Other than that possibly shudder-inducing fact, the text spends most of its time on birds that eat fish, insects, and seeds. Following a formula that works, other pages devote themselves to human threats and remedies, hints for elementary bird-watching, and a craft project. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9—22)

Excellent for fledgling naturalists. (contents, glossary, index) (Informational picture book: 7-10)

THANKS TO FRANCES PERKINS
Fighter for Workers’ Rights
Hopkinson, Deborah
Illus. by Caldwell, Kristy
Peachtree (36 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2020
978-1-68263-136-2

Why do we all owe Frances Perkins a thank you?
Framed with the questions “How many years will it be until you turn sixty-two?” and “What year will that be?” this straightforward selection covers the accomplishments of workers’ rights advocate Frances Perkins, from her fight for safe and fair treatment of working men, women, and children to her Great Depression-era achievements as FDR’s Secretary of Labor. The detailed artwork effectively portrays the world in which she lived and the situations she sought to improve. It’s noted that her education was unusual for a woman of her time and that she was the first American woman to serve in a presidential Cabinet, though the text stops short of providing an explicit description of the position of other women of the time. The childhood influence of various family members is addressed while her husband and child are briefly referenced (the mental illness that affected both is not), and her same-sex relationship goes unmentioned. What ultimately emerges is an engaging portrayal of a dedicated and influential woman who strove to improve the lives of others through various reforms, all succinctly explained, and the text returns to the initial questions, showing how Social Security is relevant to all. Perkins and those around her are depicted as white with few exceptions, but a closing scene set in the present day includes a multiracial and multiethnic gathering of people celebrating her legacy.

An informative portrait of an activist and advocate whose accomplishments are still evident today. (author’s note, online resources, bibliography, source notes) (Picture book/ biography: 6-10)

A JOURNEY TOWARD HOPE
Hinojosa, Victor & Voorhees, Coert
Illus. by Guevara, Susan
Six Foot Press (40 pp.)
$18.95 | Jul. 7, 2020
978-1-64442-008-9

The paths of four migrant children from different Central American countries cross as they enter Mexico, and together they continue their journey to the United States.

Though their reasons for undertaking the perilous journey are different, their hopes are not: They all hope for asylum in the U.S. Ten-year-old Alessandra, from Guatemala, hopes to reunite with her mother, who left four years ago. Thirteen-year-old Laura and her 7-year-old brother, Nando, from El Salvador, are going to live with relatives in the U.S. And 14-year-old Rodrigo, from Honduras, will try to join his parents in Nebraska rather than join a local gang. Along the way they encounter danger, hunger, kindness from strangers, and, most importantly, the strength of friendship with one another. Through the four children, the book provides but the barest glimpse into the reasons, hopes, and dreams of the thousands of unaccompanied minors that arrive at the U.S.–Mexico border every year. Artist Guevara has added Central American folk art–influenced details to her illustrations, giving depth to the artwork. These embellishments appear as line drawings superimposed on the watercolor scenes. The backmatter explains the reasons for the book, helping to place it within the larger context of ongoing projects at Baylor University related to the migration crisis in Central America.

An emotional entry point to a larger, necessary discussion on this complex and difficult subject. (Picture book: 7-10)
CONE CAT
Howden, Sarah
Illus. by Mok, Carmen
Owlkids Books (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-77147-361-3

After awakening at the vet’s wearing a cone, a cat discovers it holds advantages.

A period of disgruntled adjustment finds Jeremy “knocking into doorjams and backing his way down the stairs with all the grace of a fat squirrel.” He unsuccessfully engages in usual pursuits: spider-stalking, “redecorating” (i.e., un-stuffing the couch), and hiding from “little human” Ava. Fortuitously, during Jeremy’s tabletop encounter with Ava’s breakfast leftovers, the cone catches the bowl’s edge, tipping Fruity O’s and milk into both Jeremy’s mouth and cone—a snack “for later!” Jeremy’s conical capers culminate at Ava’s birthday party, where he joins a line of children waiting for ice cream. Ava’s distracted dad plops a scoop right onto Jeremy’s head—and into that catchall cone. Naturally, the day of liberation soon arrives, when “one of the tall humans” whisks the cone away. Resuming his usual antics, Jeremy wonders if anything will rival his “glory days with the Cone.” The answer comes immediately, in a mishap involving a fly, a potted houseplant, and the draperies. A last illustration delivers the visual punchline: Cone Cat’s back, sporting a bandaged forepaw. Howden’s wry telling is matched by Mok’s simple pastel illustrations, accented with red and gold. Children appear with varied skin tones and hair textures, uniformly D-shaped mouths, and dot eyes. Ava presents Asian.

This amusing, essentially one-joke tale should resonate with cat-loving kids and families. (Picture book. 3-7)

1,001 CREATURES
Järvinen, Aino
Illus. by Merz, Laura
Trans. by Jeremiah, Emily
Yonder (64 pp.)
$22.00 | Sep. 29, 2020
978-1-63206-268-0

Wielding crayons and broad, inked brushes, a Finnish artist offers freestyle images of 26 wild animals of land and sea.

The free-verse poetic flights (or Jeremiah’s translations) that Järvinen pairs to each of Merz’s animal portraits are technically accurate but sound fanciful: “Here comes the multi-purpose marvel of the jungle, / Elephant and TRUNK!” And: “The bear combs through the ant hill with its big paws / and pops its occupants into his mouth.” Sharing a like disregard for the conventional approach, the art, inspired (as the artist explains) by dim childhood memories rather than actual models, is largely composed of semi-abstract jumbles of geometric shapes and shadowy blobs, disconnected or oddly jointed limbs rendered with a few quick strokes, and scribbles or washes of thin primary hues. The creatures are largely unrecognizable without the printed cues adjacent, but the overall effect is one of lively activity with occasional surprises, such as a clump of sinuous, scary-looking jellyfish on a vivid blue background—think H.P. Lovecraft à la Henri Matisse—and a trio of polar bears, two of which are pitch black (as polar bears are, beneath their fur), to give viewers pause. Leading questions or suggestions at each poem’s end (“Have you tried walking like a camel?”) will provoke further reactions from fledgling animal lovers. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9.8-by-24-inch double-page spreads viewed at 52% of actual size.)

Natural history from decidedly offbeat angles. (Picture book/poetry. 6-8)

PRETTY TRICKY
The Sneaky Ways Plants Survive
Kaner, Etta
Illus. by Barron, Ashley
Owlkids Books (48 pp.)
$18.95 | Sep. 15, 2020
978-1-77147-369-9

Over a dozen plants—each with an unusual adaptation in terms of defense, reproduction, or food supply—are presented in colorful double-page spreads with fascinating information.

A beautifully rendered table of contents features a passionflower vine winding across its aquamarine pages and indicates three chapters that divide plants into the categories mentioned above. The introduction, which sports a brilliantly colored flytrap against bright purple hues, is clear and concise, ending with this sentence: “Prepare to be surprised as you ‘leaf,’ through the pages of this book!” Throughout, the text continues to be conversational and humorous, although liberal with rhetorical questions and exclamation points. Each short chapter begins with a double-page spread that mentions characteristics typical to most plants, an excellent segue into the atypical facts to come. For example, after a brief explanation of pollination, readers learn that snapdragons ensure that their nectar will also acquire pollen to take to the next blossom. How? Tiny flies Kaner calls “cheater” insects” are not heavy enough to push down the lower “lip” and access nectar, but big, heavier bumblebees get access—and get covered with pollen to spread around, too. Readers are introduced to concepts including symbiosis and photosynthesis as well as the inspiration for Velcro. The layout is excellent, and the collages are extraordinary. For best results, start at the beginning, but read only one or two pages a day; there’s lots of information here.

Plant this one on your bookshelf. (sources) (Informational picture book. 6-9)
**New Release Picture Books from Flowerpot Press**

**Cheer**
Format: Dust Jacket • Age: 4–8

“A enthusiastic tribute to multigenerational family members and community helpers is an ideal preschool-storytime choice to spark discussion, appreciation, and, yes, cheers.”
—Kirkus Reviews

**Walter the Whale Shark**
Format: Dust Jacket • Age: 4–8

“A timely celebration of individual difference.”
—Kirkus Reviews

**This Raindrop**
Format: Case Hardcover • Age: 5–8

“An excellent, child-friendly introduction to a global issue.”
—Kirkus Reviews

**Who Is Ana Dalt?**
Format: Dust Jacket • Age: 4–8

“An excellent, child-friendly introduction to a global issue.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“A must for picture book collections.”
—Booklist Starred Review

**The Forest Man**
Format: Case Hardcover • Age: 5–8
A quietly affecting portrait of an aspiring activist logophile as a black Philly girl.

THE TRUE DEFINITION OF NEVA BEANE

HELLO, ARNIE!
Keller, Laurie
Illustrated by the author
Christy Ottaviano/Henry Holt (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sep. 29, 2020
978-1-250-10724-4
Series: Adventures of Arnie the Doughnut

A new arrival forces Arnie the doughnut to think outside the pastry rack.

Kicking off another exciting day at the bakery, Arnie exuberantly greets every other mouthwatering treat by name—“Hi, Plain! Hey, Long John! Top of the morning, Jelly!”—until he breaks the fourth wall by looking up from the page: “AHHHHH!!! You’re...the biggest doughnut...I’ve ever seen!” But what kind of doughnut? Arnie goes about methodically gathering clues: “1. You’re not round. 2. You don’t have filling coming out of your head. 3. You don’t have a hole in the middle. 4. You don’t have frosting or sprinkles.” Arnie ultimately arrives at a stunning insight. “I’m starting to think you’re NOT a giant doughnut.” Mind blown, his pop eyes turning into big spirals in Keller’s high-calorie cartoons, the goofy gumshoe blurts out the obvious conclusion: “You’re a GIANT COOKIE!” Would that all newcomers, to school or elsewhere, whatever their differences, received the same warm collective welcome Arnie and his fellow baked goods thereupon offer in the luscious climactic spread. Readers of Arnie’s eponymous 2003 debut or his chapter-book newcomers, to school or elsewhere, whatever their differences, received the same warm collective welcome Arnie and his fellow baked goods thereupon offer in the luscious climactic spread. Readers of Arnie’s eponymous 2003 debut or his chapter-book outings in Bowling Alley Bandit (2011) and its sequels may be disoriented to find him back in the doughnut case and without human pal Mr. Bing or chip companion Peezo, but that doesn’t make the spirit of this offering any less sweet. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 56.3% of actual size.)

Don’t expect this to pass young audiences without causing a sprinkle of giggles. (Picture book 5-7)

HELLO, BETTY!
Kuhn, Sarah
Illustrated by Bone, J.
Little Bee (128 pp.)
978-1-4998-1054-7 paper
978-1-4998-1055-4
Series: The Riverdale Diaries, 1

New life is breathed into old characters.

Betty and Val have been best friends since Val moved into the neighborhood years ago. They’ve grown up doing everything together, including creating the epic fantasy world of Sparklespacelandia! But the new real world of middle school threatens to be the end of both Sparklespacelandia and their friendship. Betty had expected that she and Val would take the library science elective together, so she’s puzzled when Val says she needs to follow her passion and take music as her elective, leaving them with no classes together. Now Betty is stuck in drama with the rest of her friends who didn’t get their first choices. Miserable, Betty wants nothing more than to keep the spark of Sparklespacelandia alive even if it’s not what she expected. Betty will need to learn how to listen to her friends and come to understand that it’s OK to let people be creative in their own ways. If she does, maybe Betty and Val’s friendship can survive. Realistic illustrations are reminiscent of the older Archie comics but with softer lines and preteen shapes giving them a younger appearance. Backgrounds are sparsely drawn, allowing young readers to focus on the characters’ faces and interactions. This straightforward, fun story lightly teaches readers to navigate changing friendships and the importance of trying new things even if it means doing it alone. Betty presents white, Val is cued as black, and the supporting cast of characters is diverse.

A lighthearted coming-of-age story. (Graphic fiction. 8-12)
Nonbinary teen Ciel deals with friendship, romance, and internet drama in their first year of high school.

Ciel's gender confuses the teachers, all the bathrooms are gendered, and even the Gender and Sexuality Alliance isn't the safe space it should be, but Ciel remains optimistic. They are saving to buy a camera and take their YouTube channel to the next level. But as their channel gains popularity, it also gains attention from trolls who disparage nonbinary identities and say Brazilian Canadian Ciel should "go back to [their] country." Meanwhile, the Montreal teen and their best friend, Stephie, seem to be growing apart, and their long-distance boyfriend Eiríkur (he lives in Iceland) takes weeks to respond to their emails. Refreshingly, Ciel is not the only trans character in their story; both friends and foes are trans or queer. The most vicious attacks on Ciel's gender come from a believable trans character, not a transphobic straw man. Ciel's voice. In particular, Ciel sounds like a technological dinosaur with their reliance on email communication. The translation from the French seems to commit only halfway to recasting threads, and language choices that weaken the authenticity of Ciel's voice. In particular, Ciel sounds like a technological dinosaur with their reliance on email communication. The translation from the French seems to commit only halfway to recasting the story into an English-speaking setting, landing on a confusing middle ground. However, Ciel's heart shines through the stylistic issues.

This charming novel depicts a realistic slice of life as a nonbinary teen. (Fiction. 9-14)

Being a voice for the voiceless in her small Alabama town has some consequences that Atty Peale had not foreseen. While accompanying her stepmom on a freelance writing gig, 12-year-old Articus Tutwiler Peale and her younger stepbrother, Martinez, fall in love with an injured dog named Easy at the local animal shelter. When a man claiming to be Easy's owner arrives, accusing the dog of biting him and demanding the dog's destruction, Atty intercedes, first with the woman who runs the shelter and then in court, using the legal smarts she's gained from listening to her lawyer father to present an original brief on Easy's behalf. Easy gets a stay, but Atty and Martinez have to work at the shelter all summer. The media attention the incident attracts from as far away as England earns Atty an anonymous cyberbully. Defending an alligator while simultaneously trying to (secretly) prove her father's latest client innocent further complicates the start of middle school. In his debut novel, Lockette deftly juggles issues of race (Atty and her father are white; Atty's stepmother and Martinez are black), parental loss, bullying, animal rights, and much more in this touching and at times laugh-out-loud tale of a lawyer-to-be. Atty's voice is authentic, and her trials (both in court and in school) will resonate with readers.

A double-must-read for all animal lovers. (Fiction. 8-14)
A vaguely horse-shaped drawing goes on a vague, drawn-out journey.

Randy is a blobby, beige quadruped with wide, staring eyes and a cheerful crayon grin. Centered on a blank white page, he proclaims immediately upon his creation that he is beautiful and loved by all and that his given name must be “reserved only for the most special of creatures.” A disembodied speech-bubble conversation between the young artist and their mother extolls Randy’s skills and preferred activities, and Randy replies with varying degrees of narcissism and sarcasm, unheard by the child in the book but potentially enjoyed by a child reading it. A lunch break results in the white void Randy occupies being interrupted with photographed drops of what appear to be peanut butter and strawberry jam, leading into an “adventure” through construction-paper obstacles, popsicle-stick forests, and a run-in with the book’s gutter. The journey ends anticlimactically at a pool of water, wherein Randy discovers his reflection, which reveals him to be without long, elegant legs, a gorgeous mane, or glossy coat. After the brief existential crisis this triggers, the child’s proclamation that “I love Randy, my beautiful horse,” soothes Randy into acceptance of his appearance. Endpapers feature an “in-depth and comprehensive guide” for how to draw a horse, featuring a Victorian illustration as the final step (scribbled out on the rear endpapers).

A self-image story about as three-dimensional as its title character. (Picture book. 4-6)

**FIRST PRIZE FOR THE WORST WITCH**
Murphy, Jill
Illus. by the author
Candlewick (192 pp.)
$14.99 | Sep. 22, 2020
978-1-5215-1101-6
Series: Worst Witch, 8

At the end of Year Four at Miss Cackle’s Academy, prizes are awarded—will Mildred and her friends win anything?

Heading into Summer Term, Mildred has high hopes: She secretly hopes to be chosen as next year’s head girl. But it’s unlikely because, as pal Maud points out, “if there’s a Hallow in the school, it always goes to them, and we’ve got Ethel Hollow.” Meanwhile, villainous Ethel wants to make sure she also claims the best-flying prize and finds a way to attack the key ingredient to Mildred’s flying success: Mildred’s dog. Star, who became Mildred’s broom companion in *The Worst Witch and the Wishing Star* (2013). Learning that Star is a missing circus dog, Ethel brings this to the authorities’ attention, and Mildred tearfully surrenders Star. When Mildred and friends visit the circus to make sure Star’s happy, they learn that, though none of the circus animals are mistreated, they are not happy, either. The girls engineer a swap of magical tools for the animals. The nostalgia-inducing art and classic British children’s story feel mesh exceptionally well with the circus storyline’s subtle messaging about alternatives to animals in circuses—and it’s done so without casting the circus owners as villains and without judging circus fans. Even bully Ethel and her henchgirl, Drusilla, receive occasional flashes of sympathy—but not so much as to take away from Mildred’s triumph over them! In illustrations, the characters are depicted as white.

**Easily meets the series’ high standards.** (Fantasy. 8-12)

**HOCKEY NIGHT IN KENYA**
Mutinda, Danson & Walters, Eric
Illus. by Dávila, Claudia
Orca (104 pp.)
$7.95 paper | Sep. 15, 2020
978-1-4598-2361-7

Kenyan orphan Kitoo discovers ice hockey through his love of reading. When the librarian at the orphanage offers Kitoo some old books that will be discarded, he is thrilled to own books. One of the books about sports shows people playing ice hockey. The librarian, Mrs. Kyatha, explains what ice is and tells him that people play roller hockey in a park in a nearby city. Kitoo is enthralled, but even with his active imagination and hopefulness, he is sure he will never get to see hockey in real life. But on his next trip to the city with the orphanage’s driver, he finds a way to go to the park and watch the hockey players, and on his way out, he finds discarded roller blades in the trash. He brings the skates home, gets help fixing them, and practices skating until he is skilled. His best friend, Nigosi, encourages him to hope that he may see ice one day, but Kitoo’s imagination won’t stretch that far. But with some help from mentors and his friend, he gets to visit the only ice rink in all of East Africa. This simple story of discovery, sport, and friendship is filled with likable characters and innocently joyful moments. Its basis in the real-life Hope Development Centre orphanage (founded by co-author Mutinda’s parents) makes its themes of hope, hard work, kindness, and triumph all the more memorable. Full- and half-page black-and-white illustrations bring the boys’ adventures to life.

**Delightful.** (Fiction. 5-10)
Wisdom Tales

Available
June 2020

Award-winning author, Demi, presents the miraculous life of Lord Shiva, one of the central gods of Hinduism.

ISBN: 978-1-937786-83-0
Ages 4 and up
Price: $17.95

See these other Wisdom Tales titles by Demi!

DEMİ is the author of over 130 best selling children’s books including, The Fantastic Adventures of Krishna, Mahavira, and Talking to God. Her titles have sold over a half a million copies. Find out more about Demi by visiting www.wisdomtalespress.com
Deeppan cartoons capture both the silliness of the animals’ preparations and the magic of a game of shinny under the stars.

**HOCKEY IN THE WILD**

Oldland, Nicholas

Illus. by the author

Kids Can (32 pp.)

$16.99 | Sep. 1, 2020

978-1-5253-0241-1

Series: Life in the Wild

It’s hockey night in the Canadian woods...almost.

Initially the beaver is headed to the lake for his morning dip. But after checking the wind speed and donning his floaty and pulling on his bathing suit, he jumps...onto the ice. The beaver calls his moose and bear friends. They strap on their skates and grab their sticks and jump—through the ice. However, these are determined hockey players. The next day, they return with lifejackets only to discover you can’t play hockey waist deep in freezing water. Waiting for the ice to set is not easy, but competitive napping, karaoke, and comfort food help. When the freeze has finally taken hold...the friends are out of shape. After a rigorous exercise regimen (and lots of kale), they finally get to hit the ice. Then it is game on! And on. And on. Deeppan cartoons capture both the silliness of the animals’ preparations and the magic of a game of shinny under the stars. Oldland’s seventh Life in the Wild title will be most comfortably familiar in northern climes, but the tale of persistence, friendship, and devotion to sport with its understated humor and anthropomorphic north woods critters will charm readers in warmer latitudes just as much as its predecessors did. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8- by-16-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

“**He shoots, he scores!”** Again. (Picture book. 2-7)

**THE COMEBACK**

O’Brien, Alex

James Lorimer (122 pp.)

$8.99 paper | $27.99 PLB | Aug. 1, 2020

978-1-4594-1480-8

978-1-4594-1482-2 PLB

Hockey player Chris learns to battle his depression while learning a new sport in this Canadian import.

Fourteen-year-old Chris has suffered from severe depression for months. This may have been exacerbated by a hockey injury that led him to quit before the championship game. Chris’ psychologist suggests that he can improve his mood through sports, but he is hesitant due to his lack of energy and because the hockey season has ended. When Chris confides in his best friend, Keiko, she suggests he joins her brother’s soccer team. Chris signs up but is also joined by Trent, captain of his former hockey team and, more importantly, a bully. Chris strives to improve his mental health and his soccer skills, finding an unexpected ally in the gruff coach of the regional team. While the plot points are commendable, the execution is humdrum. The stilted dialogue is reminiscent of low-budget after-school specials, and the characters are one-dimensional. Young readers affected by depression or who know someone affected may be sympathetic, but it’s doubtful they’ll stick around long enough to reach the cheesy Hollywood-style conclusion. A note to readers provides contact information for a Canadian mental health organization for children. Characters are default white, with diversity indicated primarily via naming convention (as with presumably Japanese Canadian Keiko).

Red-card this book. (Fiction. 10-12)

**FRANK AND THE SKUNK**

Rae, Elspeth & Rae, Rowena

Illus. by Gutiérrez, Elisa

Orca (160 pp.)

$14.95 paper | Aug. 18, 2020

978-1-4598-2493-5

Series: Meg and Greg, 2

Meg and Greg’s summer-camp exploits lend themselves to fun phonics stories for emerging readers. Buddies Meg and Greg are spending two weeks at sleepaway camp. Each of the four segments in the book details a different camp misadventure and heavily features the phonogram du jour: nk, ng, tch, or dge. This is the second book in a series designed for children just learning to read or readers who are struggling due to dyslexia or other learning difficulties. The format of each chapter features stories related in prose on the left-hand side of the double-page spread and comics-style panels, with illustration labels, cartoons, and speech bubbles, on the right. Extension activities at the end of each segment offer further opportunities for practice. Meg, Greg, and the other campers get mixed up in pranks, humorous surprises, and even a disastrous canoe trip, which will work to hold older readers’ attention without feeling too predictable. The story in some sections suffers under the burden of including as many phonograms as possible: When Meg and Greg must devise a skit for a contest using words that end with “ng,” they perform “The King’s Long Fangs.” Dyslexia-friendly features are integrated into the book, and strategies for using the text features are clearly explained. Meg and Greg present white; there is some diversity among secondary characters indicated in the illustrations.

A thoughtfully designed storybook adds another helpful tool to the box for readers who need support. (glossary, tips) (Graphic/fiction hybrid. 6-9)
Candlewick Press celebrates our books with PRIDE!

- Julian is a Mermaid by Jessica Love
  - Coming October 2020!
- Julian at the Wedding by Jessica Love
- The Mermaid Witch of the Sea by Maggie Tokuda-Hall
- Starworld by Audrey Cukt and Dee Laine
- Beyond Magenta by Sarah Frye
- Fat Angie by Erin Bowman
- Over the Shop by See Lin Quek and Viva Lee
- Echo After Echo by Anjali Byrd and Viveca Gray
- Honor Girl by Maggie Stiefvater
- Big Bob Little Bob by Janet Howe and Laura Ellen Anderson
- It Looks Like This by Elsa Moustached

New paperback edition coming September 2020!
This therapy dog narrates her perspective on grief.

Curly Noodle the goldendoodle knows firsthand about loss, having lost two families already. She now lives on the campus of a local university, happily greeting others on her long walks. Noodle has been officially trained to be a “world-famous Helper Hound.” Her current case concerns a young boy named Gabriel, who won’t cry over his grandfather’s recent death. Gabriel’s family is supportive, and their unnamed but described Catholic faith teaches that “one day [they] will all be together again,” but Gabriel opens up only in Noodle’s comforting presence. He’s helped by other humans sharing stories of loss and a metaphor of Noodle’s left-behind curly hairs as traces of a loved one’s lingering love. Positivity and a surprise reunion supply a happy ending to this somber lesson. Noodle’s narration is compassionate and sincere, like her doggy personality, and appropriate for readers who may be going through similar life events. The text discoursing dog breeding: “Rescued is the best breed!” Noodle’s narration is compassionate and sincere, like her doggy personality, and appropriate for readers who may be going through similar life events. The text discoursing dog breeding: “Rescued is the best breed!”

A positive message of hope and love. (Fiction. 6-9) (Robot Helps Max and Lily Deal With Bullies features a Rottweiler who provides support for a pair of bullied siblings.)

**NOODLE HELPS GABRIEL SAY GOODBYE**

*Rivadeneira, Caryn*
*Illus. by Alpaugh, Priscilla*
*Red Chair Press (72 pp.)*
*$6.99 paper | $12.99 PLB | Aug. 1, 2020*
*978-1-63440-918-6 PLB*
*Series: Helper Hounds*

**THE BARREN GROUNDS**

*Robertson, David A.*
*Puffin/Penguin Random House Canada (256 pp.)*
*$17.99 | Sep. 8, 2020*
*978-0-73526-610-0 Series: Misewa Saga, 1*

Two uprooted Cree children find themselves in a dreamlike adventure in this series opener. The edginess 13-year-old Morgan feels runs deep. As a First Nations kid whose whole life has been lived in one white foster home after another, she feels little reason to get excited about anything. Two months in to her new foster home placement, she inherits a new foster brother, Eli, a young Cree boy who spends his time quietly drawing in his sketchbook. After a blowup with their earnestly well-intentioned white foster parents, Morgan and Eli shelter themselves in the attic, where a drawing in his pad seems to come to life, creating a portal into the wintry Barren Grounds of Misewa, where the passage of time is, Narnia-like, different from in Winnipeg. After Eli disappears into this world, Morgan is determined to go after him to bring him back. When she finds him, they discover that the Misewa community of animal beings needs their help to survive the White Time. Robertson (Norway House Cree Nation) carefully establishes Morgan’s anger and feelings of alienation, her resentment at their foster parents’ clumsy attempts to connect her to her culture culminating when they awkwardly present a gift of moccasins. The shift into a contemporary Indigenous fantasy is seamless; it is in this world that these foster siblings discover hope and meaning that sustain them when they return to Winnipeg.

This middle-grade fantasy deftly and compellingly centers Indigenous culture. (Fantasy. 10-14)

**DIANA AND THE ISLAND OF NO RETURN**

*Saeed, Aisha*
*Random House (288 pp.)*
*$16.99 | $19.99 PLB | Jul. 14, 2020*
*978-0-593-17447-0 PLB*
*Series: Wonder Woman Adventures*

Princess Diana of Themyscira sets off on a middle-grade adventure. Twelve-year-old Diana loves her island home and her Amazon community dearly, but she longs for one thing: permission to train in the art of combat with her fellow warriors. Diana’s mother, Queen Hippolyta, has long told Diana that the battlefield is no place for her, but Diana hopes this might be the year she can finally convince her mother to let her train. In the meantime, eagerly awaited guests are arriving on the island: The best and brightest women in the world have been invited to Themyscira for a festival of ideas, food, and culture. Among these visitors is Sakina, Diana’s best friend, and a mysterious stranger warning Diana of a threat not just to Themyscira, but to the entire world. The author does an admirable job creating an adventure for young Diana to embark upon without breaking the established canon of the Wonder Woman mythos. Diana’s characterization lines up with her comic counterpart’s, but Sakina’s character seems a bit thin by comparison. The book’s real Achilles heel is the ending, a boilerplate tee up for a future installment that promises resolution and answers to the story that readers are entitled to now, particularly after 250 pages. Diversity is suggested through names and cultural references.

Frustrating ending aside, a solid start to a promising middle-grade series. (Fantasy. 9-12)
Donut miss this delightful diversion.

**DONUT FEED THE SQUIRRELS**

**Song, Mika**
Illus. by the author
Random House (112 pp.)
$12.99 | $15.99 PLB | Sep. 29, 2020
978-1-984896-53-7
978-1-984896-54-4 PLB

Squirrel pals go on a stealth mission to procure much-desired donuts in this charming intermediate graphic novel.

Norma and Belly are two brown squirrels who love tasty treats! When Norma burns their pancakes one morning, the two discover something even more exciting: a food truck dedicated exclusively to donuts! Determined to bring a sweet treat for themselves and their squirrel friends, they approach the donut maker hoping to trade chestnuts for donuts only to be spritzed with water and shooed away. Undeterred, the duo recruit the bespectacled squirrel Gramps and Little Bee, a short squirrel whose profile looks like the letter B, for an incognito mission to steal the donuts they long for. They’ll have to overcome their small stature, an overenthusiastic donut machine, and their potential discovery by the donut maker in order to procure their tasty treats. A happy ending involving a new squirrel-invented donut flavor reassures readers that the owner of the donut truck doesn’t hold a grudge. Norma is a go-getter; her triangular-shaped head and body reflect her willingness to be a bit sharp to get the job done. Belly, thimble-shaped, is optimistic and conflict-averse. A natural color palette and watercolors that comfortably bleed outside thick black lines are fitting for this soft story and let the characters and dialogue shine.

**Donut miss this delightful diversion.** *(Graphic fiction. 5-8)*

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**MARGARET’S UNICORN**

**Smith, Briony May**
Illus. by the author
Schwartz & Wade/Rand om (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Sep. 15, 2020
978-1-984896-53-7
978-1-984896-54-4 PLB

Imagine what it would be like to find a mythical creature.

Young Margaret doesn’t have to imagine. After she and her parents move to a mountain cottage, she explores her new surroundings. Walking back, she discovers a baby unicorn tangled in weeds and carries it home. Margaret nurtures the lovely creature, assuring it of its herd’s family present white; her new pal has brown skin. The baby unicorn, now grown, returns briefly, sometimes later, while playing with a new friend, Margaret is astonished when her unicorn, now grown, returns briefly, then disappears; Margaret takes this well. Children with a taste for the fantasy world who wish for magical encounters should enjoy this sweet, gently told story with an old-fashioned feel.

Unicorns are popular among young readers, and this offering will satisfy. *(Picture book. 4-7)*

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**SOLID, LIQUID, GASSY!**

**Spires, Ashley**
Illus. by the author
Crown (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Sep. 8, 2020
978-0-525-58145-1 PLB
978-0-525-58144-4

Like its predecessor, series opening *Fairy Science* (2019), this outing is an informative science book masquerading as a cute little book about a curious fairy.

Protagonist Esther is a brown-skinned, purple-pigtailed, skeptical sprite believing wholeheartedly in hypothesis and experimentation over magic and wishes. While her classmates learn spells, Esther studies the law of density, and if there’s a choice to be made between a microscope or a wand, Esther, of course, would choose the microscope. Through lively digital illustrations and an airy story, Spires gives young readers a conceptual invitation to the scientific method. Esther and her buddies ask questions, research, make and test a hypothesis, examine their results, then draw conclusions. As their schoolmates prepare for the spring magic fair, the young scientists hope to debut their findings on the wonders of condensation. But no one, including the teacher, wants to hear about silly logical theories when everyone knows that ice disappears in the spring due to the moon’s sneezes. With drollery and humor, Spires introduces scientific terms and theory. Included in the back of the book is an experiment about the water cycle that uses everyday household items, creating an interactive experience beyond the book.

A solid choice for both storytimes and STEM curricula. *(Picture book. 4-7)*
A WOLF FOR A SPELL
Sutton, Karah
Illus. by Hannuniemi, Pauliina
Knopf (320 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Sep. 22, 2020
978-0-593-12165-8
978-0-593-12166-5 PLB

The lives of a wolf, a witch, and an orphan are intertwined in this fantasy. This story inspired by Russian fairy tales is told in alternating chapters by three characters: the witch Baba Yaga, a young female wolf named Zima, and an orphan girl named Nadya. Nadya, wandering in the forest near the orphanage, is determined to escape her life of drudgery, but she is torn between her need for freedom and her longing for a home. Meanwhile, Zima the wolf is also struggling with feelings of restlessness and insecurity. Her older sibling has told the pack to kill humans, but when Zima comes upon Nadya in the forest, she doesn’t kill her; and worse, Zima brings a younger wolf sibling, injured by a human, to the feared and hated witch, Baba Yaga, to be healed. Baba Yaga agrees on the condition that Zima switch bodies, through a spell, with her. Thus begins the enmeshing of the three main characters’ destinies. The plot’s many interesting twists are, however, undercut by a less-than-clear delivery. Italics rather than quotation marks are used to denote when animals are speaking (why?), which makes things confusing when Zima and Baba Yaga switch bodies and thus modes of speech; moreover, clunky contrivances jar the finer originality of the whole. The theme of the value of family and friends seems too thin and ordinary for such a complicated plot—something more revelatory is expected. The black-and-white illustrations, however, have a stark, effective beauty.

High marks for ambition, middling for delivery. (Fantasy. 9-13)

IF A TREE FALLS
The Global Impact of Deforestation
Tate, Nikki
Orca (48 pp.)
$19.95 | Sep. 15, 2020
978-1-4598-2355-6
Series: Orca Footprints

This nonfiction title takes a close look at deforestation and its consequences.

Four chapters focus, in turn, on defining a forest, how we harvest trees, current uses of forests, and how choices we make today can affect the future of trees. The importance of forests as carbon sinks, as participants in the water cycle, and as homes for the majority of land species and many Indigenous peoples sets the stage for this exploration of the various kinds of forests found on Earth and their role in human and natural life. Each chapter is organized into short sections and subsections, with sidebars, labeled stock photographs, and “Tree Trivia” features, all of which introduce fascinating facts, concepts, and terminology relevant to trees and forests. Words printed in boldface in the narrative are defined in a glossary. The text takes a measured approach to the issue of deforestation, pointing out that each of us uses trees for ease of living while also showing how better choices can lead to a healthier Earth and more sustainable solutions for generations to come. Presented more like a magazine than a cohesive narrative, this volume offers a wealth of historical and contemporary information, inspiration from concerned people who have made a difference, tips for contributing to conservation efforts in daily life, and resources for learning more.

Impressively detailed, this is a valuable addition to the nonfiction shelf. (index) (Nonfiction. 9-14)

I WANT TO DANCE
Toyofuku, Makiko
Illus. by the author
Kane Miller (32 pp.)
$12.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-68464-130-7

Bunnies can be ballet dancers, too. Deep in the forest, a bunny rabbit is drawn to a brightly lit building filled with the sounds of music. Curious, she peeks inside and sees a group of girls performing ballet steps. Bravely, she asks to join the class and is welcomed to learn those steps while standing at a makeshift barre fashioned from three books in a pile. Some are difficult to execute while some are natural. “She was the best at leaps and jumps.” In a double spread, she happily soars high in a “Grand jeté!” Soon, the one bunny is joined by many friends. Then disappointment follows; the girls alone are to present a recital. Not to be outdone, though, the rabbits work hard to create costumes and perform their own recital “on the night of the full moon” and are joined by the girls from the studio. All is happiness. Stories with animals as ballet dancers are popular, but this title, previously published in Japan, does not add to the genre. It is sweet through one reading. The illustrations are softly hued, with the girls all pale-skinned with straight hair of varying colors. Unfortunately, the text does not always match the artwork, which is an issue when depicting steps. And one must ask, where are the boys and the brown-skinned children?

Pleasant but not balletically satisfying. (Picture book. 3-5)
Dinner is served... and you're invited!

“... captures the wonder of developing unique friendships.”
- School Library Journal, starred review

Beast’s friends have sent their RSVPs to his invitation for dinner. But Dinner has other plans ...! Readers will relish unfolding the flap replies in the latest from Nibbles award-winning creator Emma Yarlett.

More books by Emma Yarlett from Kane Miller
VIRGINIA WAS A SPY
Urdahl, Catherine
Illus. by Kelley, Gary
Creative Editions/Creative Company (32 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-56846-348-3

The only woman awarded the U.S. Distinguished Service Cross during World War II, Virginia Hall (1906-1982) was always “most original.”

Growing up in Baltimore, Virginia “was different from most girls of her time,” hunting, fishing, and collecting wild animals. Virginia’s “hunger to explore” led her to work for the U.S. Foreign Service in Turkey, where she shattered her left foot in a hunting accident, resulting in amputation below her knee. Undaunted, Virginia learned to walk with a wooden prosthesis, moved to Paris, and witnessed the German invasion and occupation of France. Volunteering as an ambulance driver until Paris surrendered, Virginia then became the first female undercover agent for the British, gathering information and assisting British pilots. Fleeing France, Virginia hiked over the snow-covered Pyrenees into Spain but eventually returned to France as an American spy disguised as a French milkmaid, transmitting radio messages about German troops and leading a French resistance group until the war ended. Repetition of the refrain, “Virginia was Virginia,” punctuates the factual text, introducing each amazing stage of her life. The book opens with a photo of Virginia’s passport, and Kelley’s realistic illustrations, appropriately rendered in somber hues, stark outlines, and arresting angles, highlight dramatic episodes. Suspenseful close-ups of animals. Virginia’s “hunger to explore” led her to work for the resistance group until the war ended. Repetition of the refrain, “Virginia was Virginia,” punctuates the factual text, introducing each amazing stage of her life. The book opens with a photo of Virginia’s passport, and Kelley’s realistic illustrations, appropriately rendered in somber hues, stark outlines, and arresting angles, highlight dramatic episodes. Suspenseful close-ups of Virginia spying on German soldiers in the French countryside add to the wartime atmosphere. (This book was reviewed digitally with 12-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 75% of actual size.)

A fascinating introduction to a remarkable life. (author’s note) (Picture book/biography, 6-10)

IF YOU WERE NIGHT
Văn, Muron Thi
Illus. by Pousette, Kelly
Kids Can (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-1-253-0014-1

A child explores a busy nocturnal world.

“If you were the night / and you saw the moon / tiptoe past your window,” begins this poetic story; “would you nestle under the covers? / Or would you stretch and rise / and step out, too?” The beige-skinned child in a gray, hooded jumpsuit observes a host of nighttime animals and joins in their activities; a raccoon rooting through trash, frogs singing, an owl hunting. The gorgeous, shadowy illustrations leap off the pages, three-dimensional paper constructions that manage to balance the darkness of night with the brightness of nature. The text attempts an ethereal style, reminiscent of Julie Fogliano’s If I Was the Sunshine (illustrated by Loren Long, 2009), but never quite makes the leap into the loveliness it’s clearly aiming for. The central conceit, personifying “you” as “night,” is promising but also stops short of making sense; night does not “skitter like a startled mouse,” “shrink from the cold,” or “hide behind a shadow,” and a sudden shift to first person, in the form of a quiet deer, never resolves. Despite these issues, the overall tone of the book and the calming, soothing arc, will help this find some success as a bedtime story. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 19% of actual size.)

An ambitious idea that slightly misses the mark. (Picture book, 3-7)

KEVIN DURANT
Wetzel, Dan
Illus. by Baez, Marcelo
Henry Holt (176 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-250-29583-5
Series: Epic Athletes, 8

In this middle-grade biography of top basketball talent Kevin Durant, readers learn the passion, persistence, and self-discipline that have made him one of the greatest offensive players ever.

Kevin Durant is both one of the most skilled basketball players of his generation and an incredible inspiration for many. Greatness doesn’t come without a bit of backlash, as much of his record-breaking, hall-of-fame-in-the-making–NBA career has been reduced to one decision he made in 2016 to leave the stagnating Oklahoma City Thunder to join a successful Golden State Warriors team. Wetzel here resets the narrative by taking the long view on the incredible work ethic and discipline that earned Durant all types of accolades along his journey from Prince George’s County, Maryland, to the top of the basketball ranks. Readers meet the community behind the man, including coaches Charles Craig and Taras Brown and, of course, his beloved mother, Wanda Durant. Wetzel, who works as a columnist for Yahoo Sports, draws the details of Durant’s life story from published reporting done throughout the years, disregarding much of the commentary to focus on the words and framing offered by KD himself. Baez’s comics-style illustrations are dotted throughout the chapters, concluding with a spotlighted final sequence of the dagger three Durant sank over Lebron James on his way to his first championship ring in 2017.

Young hoop dreamers will find this a highly engaging read about one of today’s most skilled players. (Biography, 9-12)
Wiesner’s robots endearingly look like vaguely anthropomorphic piles of random jet-engine parts and old vacuum cleaners.

**ROBOBABY**

Wiesner, David  
Illus. by the author  
Clarion (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | Sep. 1, 2020  
978-0-544-98731-9

Robo-parents Diode and Lugnut present daughter Cathode with a new little brother—who requires, unfortunately, some assembly.

Arriving in pieces from some mechanistic version of IKEA, little Flange turns out to be a cute but complicated tyke who immediately falls apart...and then rockets uncontrollably about the room after an overconfident uncle tinkers with his basic design. As a squad of helpline techies and bevy of neighbors bearing sludge cake and like treats roll in, the cluttered and increasingly crowded scene deteriorates into madcap chaos—until at last Cath, with help from Roomba-like robodog Sprocket, stages an intervention by whisking the hapless new arrival off to a backyard workshop for a proper assembly and software update. “You’re such a good big sister!” warbles her frizzled mom. Wiesner’s robots display his characteristic clean lines and even hues but endearingly look like vaguely anthropomorphic piles of random jet-engine parts and old vacuum cleaners loosely connected by joints of armored cable. They roll hither and thither through neatly squared-off panels and pages in Infectiously comical dismay. Even the end’s domestic tranquility lasts only until Cathode spots the little box buried in the bigger one’s packing material: “TWINS!” (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-22-inch double-page spreads viewed at 52% of actual size.)

A retro-futuristic romp, literally and figuratively screwy.  
(Picture book. 5-7)

**PLEASED TO MEET ME**

Wilson, S.G.  
Random House (272 pp.)  
978-1-9848-9755-2  
978-1-9848-9756-9 PLB  
Series: Me vs. the Multiverse, 1

A paradigmatically average middle school student discovers a portal through the multiverse and confronts variations of himself from alternate Earths.

Meade Macon, an unaccomplished white boy, pretty much stinks at everything except origami. He dreads the impending Student Showcase, which will highlight all his failures. When Meade receives a series of mysterious origami invitations, he finds himself attending Me Con, an event hosted by and for the versions of himself from 99 different dimensions. At Me Con, every Meade receives a nickname based on an identifying characteristic; protagonist Meade is labeled “Average Me.” One of the first other selves the protagonist meets, Motor Me, is fat and uses a mobility cart. Motor Me is quick to give up and treated like a joke by other characters. His use of a mobility aid is depicted as an indulgent, bad habit. Other Meades get their personalities from extremes (Sensitive Me, Meticulous Me) and cultural appropriation (Kabuki Theater Me). Resist Me is an angry, opinionated transgender girl from a world that hates her, and Monk Me spouts platitudes about peace. The cast is overwhelmingly white, a context that makes Resist’s assertion that Me Con should solve problems like “racism and discrimination” feel hollow. Use of the modern-day dog whistle “Don’t Tread on Me” as a chapter title adds a further sour taste. Overall, the narrative requires a heaping dose of suspended disbelief, but it feels like a minor flaw to swallow compared to the other elements of the story.

Calling this book “average” would give it too much credit.  
(Science fiction. 8-12)

**THE ONE WITH THE SCRAGGLY BEARD**

Withey, Elizabeth  
Illus. by Scarfield, Lynn  
Orca (32 pp.)  
$19.95 | Sep. 15, 2020  
978-1-4598-1855-2

A boy seeks connections with his uncle, who’s experiencing homelessness.

In the first double-page spread, a boy and his mother shake a colorful quilt that, on the opposite page, transforms into water flowing by a bridge where a man sleeps. The boy calls him the “One With the Scraggly Beard.” This visual connection carries through the boy’s questions to his mother about this man, his uncle, and how he looks and lives. The boy worries one day he will be like his uncle, because of what they share in common: pockets full of treasures, a missing tooth, even a fear of the dark. His mother reassures her anxious son, saying her brother wanted one life but ended up living another because life can contain unexpected trials. Her straightforward answers acknowledge the boy’s concerns and also humanize her brother. Later, readers see them together as a family. Lush, textured illustrations depict leafy parks where the boy and his uncle stroll, and tree-lined streets near the bridge, reminding readers of the life inside each character in this story, no matter how they live that life. The family presents white, exposure rendering the uncle’s skin browner than the others. An author’s note reveals the autobiographical origin of this story. Withey’s honest tone and simple language offer educators and caregivers empathetic ways to talk with young children about homelessness. The French version is a faithful translation, using plain language that is age-appropriate and still emotionally thoughtful.

A complex topic painted with care and told with empathy.  
(Picture book. 4-8) (L’Homme à la barbe hirsute: 978-1-4598-2478-2)
A helpful and practical read for big siblings–to-be.

HOW BIG IS BABY NOW?

Cocca-Leffler, Maryann
Illus. by the author
Sourcebooks eXplore (16 pp.)
$10.99 | Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-4926-9145-7

Cocca-Leffler explains fetal growth by comparing the baby to various plants, animals, and objects, month by month. Pregnant parents are well versed in comparisons between babies in utero and such measures as a watermelon and basketball, but this board book is geared toward older siblings–to-be. Featuring a cutout window effect, the book begins when Baby is three months. Growth is tracked by month to No. 9, each page featuring a growing silhouette of a pregnant belly and the question “How big is Baby now?” These silhouettes extend further and further into each successive die-cut window so that when the book is closed, there is a rainbow of pregnant bellies visible. Cocca-Leffler does a nice job of choosing items that are familiar to young children, like an egg, a cupcake, and a “jug of milk” (a one-gallon plastic bottle is depicted). Each spread includes several other comparison items, appearing as outline drawings around the page border. Unsurprisingly, the final page marks Baby’s arrival, declaring, “Hello, Baby!” with a simple illustration of a white-presenting sleeping newborn. The colors are bright and appealing, but there are no pictures that include the baby until the very end, which might make the comparisons a bit tough for children to visualize. That said, overall this book makes for a useful tool in helping caregivers explain a new baby’s growth to a young child.

A helpful and practical read for big siblings–to-be. (Board book. 6 mos.–2) (My First 101 Animals: 978-1-4413-3310-0)

MY FIRST NUMBERS
Illus. by Abbott, Simon
Peter Pauper Press (20 pp.)
$5.99 | Jan. 25, 2020
978-1-4413-3308-7

Insects and animals help readers count from one through 10. In this number-focused board book, each themed double-page spread invites readers to practice counting. A cartoon puppy looks down at a scattering of bones, for example, and declares, “I can count NINE bones,” on the left-hand side of one such layout; over the gutter, there is a stock photograph of nine tennis balls and a large 9 along with text inviting readers to count. Each turn of the page follows this pattern, progressing by one number higher. The format is familiar and formulaic, conventional and utilitarian. That said, it serves its purpose of presenting new learners with a clear and recognizable tool for number recognition and counting practice. The cartoons have the impersonal look of clip art, and the photographs presented against a stark white background are simple and repetitive. The number five page, for example, shows five identical turtles as opposed to five different turtles or one turtle in five different positions or environments, a missed opportunity for visual interest. In contrast, companion title My First Colors introduces a color and then shows photographs of different items in that color, displaying more illustrative depth but following the same predictable format. While neither of these books does anything groundbreaking, they do a competent job of presenting these timeless concepts for pre-readers.

You can count on this one to be a bland yet passable learning tool. (Board book. 1-3) (My First Colors: 970-1-4413-3307-0)

MY FIRST 101 WORDS
Illus. by Abbott, Simon
Peter Pauper Press (24 pp.)
$5.99 | Jan. 25, 2020
978-1-4413-3309-4

A picture dictionary conveyed in a mix of stock photos and simple illustrations. Each double-page spread organized by theme presents an abundance of captioned photos and a few illustrations to introduce youngsters to new words. Little ones can learn about the four seasons; animals found on farms, in zoos, and in homes; and various vehicles. The concluding “myself” spread, focused on feelings and body parts, spotlights five racially diverse infants and toddlers. Approximately eight or nine labelled images are featured on each of the thematic spreads, framed by brightly colored borders. Many of the objects selected are quite baby- and toddler-friendly; including the snowsuit, the stroller, and the sippy cup. A cutsey, cartoon image representing the theme appears on each spread with a speech bubble announcing the uniting concept; this is slightly jarring when paired with the hyper-realistic photos. The companion title, My First 101 Animals, follows the same pattern to depict animals grouped by their biomes, such as the jungle, grasslands, and desert, as well as pets, farm animals, and baby animals. There is a nice mix of the expected (a lion, a tiger, and a bear) and the downright obscure, at least for many American children (an emu and a quokka from Australia).

A clear but unremarkable first-words primer. (Board book. 2-4) (My First 101 Animals: 978-1-4413-3310-0)
Get Ready for NEW Books!

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by Tim Blackburn
Illustrated by Sara Ranches

9781680101928 • $17.99 US
One ordinary Monday morning, Elliot meets Ruby. But Ruby is no ordinary girl. With a sprinkle of imagination, she shows Elliot how to take everyday boring things and turn them into adventures!

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**Weasel Is Worried**
by Giada Gravin
Illustrated by Tim Warnes

9781680101935 • $17.99 US
Weasel is scared of the storm outside, so he builds a fort to hide in. But then he meets Mole, who loves the rain. Can Mole help him overcome his fears?
SPACE ADVENTURE
Hayes, Susan
Illus. by Rumiz, Susanna
What on Earth Books (36 pp.)
978-1-999679-8-7
Series: Zoom

Space adventurer Ava explores the solar system and gets home in time for supper.

This spectacular space jaunt is a top-tier blend of adventure and information, creatively conveyed. Bright colors, inventive use of die-cut pages, and one spectacular pop-up tableau provide eye-catching scenes, almost every one offering a window onto the scene to follow. Ava, a brown-skinned young astronaut-in-the-making, has a bedroom filled with models of rockets and planets. “This is Ava. Today she is going on a big space adventure. / Ava climbs into her rocket ship and waits for the final countdown.” The next five double-page spreads depicting levels of staging around Ava’s rocket are die-cut in the shapes of numerals, inviting kids to join in the countdown: “5 / 4 / 3 / 2 / 1 / 0 / LIFT OFF.” Ava and her imperturbable cat blast off into space as the crew in the control room monitors the operation. First stop is the International Space Station. After Ava makes a “daring spacewalk” to repair a solar panel, she heads for the moon, then around the sun, through the asteroid belt, and past each of the eight planets in the solar system, with cutaways in every scene previewing the coming destinations. The text is accessible for young readers yet rich in information and detail. In companion title Ocean Adventure, a black boy named Noah has an equally thrilling undersea expedition.

Absolutely stellar. (Board book: 2-6) (Ocean Adventure: 978-1-999680-0-7)

FLAMINGO FLAMENCO
Jorden, Brooke
Illus. by Zhdanov, Alex
Familius (16 pp.)
$8.99 | Mar. 17, 2020
978-1-64170-235-5

Everybody can dance? Silly wordplay delivers a not-so-subtle message to value each person’s unique moves.

The brief story plays off the similar pronunciations of “flamingo” and “flamenco” but does not confine itself to that dance form, introducing seven different sorts of animal and an equal number of different dances. On the versos of the ensuing sequence of six double-page spreads, hippos dance hip-hop, wallabies waltz, tigers tap, a bear performs ballet, “camels can cancan in a long chorus line,” and sloths slow dance; a flamboyant flamingo on the right side of each spread outshines each with flamenco moves. Unfortunately, the book itself does not shine. A design decision to introduce the animals in a different order than originally shown is confusing, and the animals seem to have been chosen for their alliterative possibilities and improbable dance skills rather than for genuine animal characteristics. Toddlers unfamiliar with dance styles will not appreciate the flamingo’s contortions, much less the other animals’ moves, especially in their dance costumes. The rhyming text lacks rhythm; words and pictures don’t always match. For example, one bear is shown while the text reads “bears.” The ending, with the animals changing partners and the lines “We each have a dance, / so dance well your part. / Dance with all of your heart... /...even if it’s not the flamenco,” lands with something of a thud.

This clumsily executed extended dance metaphor doesn’t make the cut. (Board book: 2-4)

NANA’S GARDEN
Juliano, Larissa
Illus. by De Luca, Francesca
Clever Publishing (16 pp.)
$8.99 | Mar. 10, 2020
978-1-949998-98-6
Series: Clever Family Stories

An ideal day in an idealized garden with a doting grandma. “Every Sunday, Mommy and Daddy take me to Nana’s garden,” proclaims a smiling, brown-haired child wearing turquiose boots, a yellow sundress, and a flower-adorned hat. On subsequent pages, child and blue jeans-clad grandmother, shaded by her own sun hat, gather tomatoes and basil, chase butterflies, catch bugs, pick flowers, and water plants. Though the book is not directly instructional, six colors are highlighted in colored type, and the girl counts flowers and rocks as she collects them. The child’s grandfather (gray haired but still rather young-looking) is a peripheral character, glimpsed working in his workshop on a willow tree edging the book toward fantasy. Caterpillars and adult insects smile throughout, even when pent-up in jars, some of which, distressingly, have no visible air holes. (Sharp-eyed readers will also note that the word “brown” is not set in colored type—a small but distracting detail.) Nana presents white, as do the child’s grandfather and father; the child’s mother and the child both have beige skin a smidge darker.

Useful for sharing with gardening grandmas but not essential. (Board book: 2-4)

TIME TO GO HOME
Lv, Shasha
Illus. by the author
Chronicle (32 pp.)
$9.99 | Jul. 28, 2020
978-1-4521-8358-9
Series: Little Snail

A class of cheery animals leave school with their caregivers, minus Little Snail, who carries a secret on their back.
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LET’S BE KIND

/TE AMO, BEBÉ / LOVE YOU, BABY/
Pixton, Amy
Illus. by Lomp, Stephan
Workman (12 pp.)
$5.95 paper | Mar. 31, 2020
978-1-5235-0988-1
Series: Indestructibles

How many ways can a baby be loved? This bilingual book shows a few of them, in Spanish and English.

Bold, vibrantly colored animal pairs—an adult and baby—are depicted against solid-colored backgrounds engaging in loving ways. A scarf-wearing panda hugs a baby, a hedgehog plants a kiss on baby’s head, and a rabbit holds a baby aloft as it nuzzles its nose. The other animal pairs include pigs, raccoons, and owls. The last page shows a bear cub with an adult on each side expressing their love: “¡Te amo, bebé! / I love you, baby!” Paired with each charming illustration is a simple three-word sentence, first in Spanish, followed by English in a smaller font: “Abrazar al bebé / Hug a baby,” and so on. Companion book /Hola, granja! Hello, Farm!/ illustrated by Maddie Frost, shows farm animals in a colorful cartoonish style. While the text accompanying each animal is spare—“Hola, caballos. / Hello, horses. // Hola, vacas. / Hola, cows”—readers will find much to look at and discuss in the illustrations. What makes these two books, like others in the series, particularly attractive for the littlest of readers is the indestructible paper, literally. The thin pages are made from a nontoxic material that is chew proof, rip proof, and washable.

A book babies can read on their own, though snuggling is always best. (Board book. 6 mos.-2) (Hola, granja! Hello, Farm!: 978-1-5235-0989-8)

WHAT CAN YOU SEE?

AT NIGHT
Ware, Kate
Illus. by Perera, Maria
Tiger Tales (12 pp.)
$9.99 | Aug. 11, 2020
978-1-68010-615-2

Get an insider’s look at nocturnal life in this die-cut board book.

Touching briefly on various facets of human and animal nightlife, pages range from a farmer milking cows “before sunrise” while the rooster cock-a-doodle-dos to more natural settings, such as wetlands with bats hunting and frogs singing. There’s plenty to see on the busy pages—perhaps too much. Besides the primary text of accurate but generic statements about night, small bubbles filled with questions such as “What noise do frogs make?” or small factoids informing readers that “Frogs like to sing at night” hover arbitrarily about the page. With the different typefaces and text formats, pages lack visual focus, especially when print is sprinkled among the many mildly anthropomorphized animals and hectic backgrounds. Some die cuts are equally strained. While the largest center die cut effectively creates the illusion of a layered night sky, the fiddly.

LET’S BE KIND
Illus. by Trukhan, Ekaterina
Workman (60 pp.)
$5.95 paper | Mar. 31, 2020
978-1-5235-0987-4
Series: Indestructibles

Family members practice kindness simply throughout the day.

The latest in the popular Indestructibles series shows members of a family being polite, helping one another, and sharing. Marketed as “books babies can really sink their gums into,” Indestructibles are baby- and toddler-friendly with paper-like, washable pages that hold up to little hands and mouths. Depending on the child’s small-motor development, the pages may be harder to turn than the rigid pages of its cousin format, the board book, but its lightness means it is easier to carry and hold. After asking, “How can we be kind today?” the text suggests sharing, “help[ing] around the house,” and “spend[ing] time together.” The brevity of the text makes it an appropriate length for babies, with enough supporting visuals that caregivers can point out depicted household objects. The family is presented as interracial, and the book cover features two children, one black-presenting and one white-presenting. Trukhan’s illustrations are two-dimensional and geometric, with bold colors. There are nice details, like the family’s pup that readers meet on the first page appearing in a photo on the kitchen fridge later on. While the story itself is ordinary, the real win here is the baby-friendly format that encourages reading and play.

Honors both family diversity and the ways babies explore books. (Board book. 6-18 mos.)
Inspiring and fun non-fiction for children of all ages!

Discover big ideas in STEAM, practice a growth mindset and get creative with these hands-on gardening & cooking projects.

“Bright and stylishly retro... readers will come away with plenty of new vocabulary, plus nodding acquaintances with Einstein and other greats, Schrödinger’s cat, and the central role of quantum physics in current and future tech.”

—Kirkus Reviews

AAAS/Subaru SB&F Prize for Excellence in Science Books Middle Grade Science Book category ★ Longlisted ★

“Cheerfully delivered, this array of projects should inspire adults ready to dig into gardening adventures with kids.”

—Kirkus Reviews

"A memorable flight for prospective space travelers."

—Kirkus Reviews

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teeny die cuts sporadically placed across the page are too small to show much clearly and are sometimes misaligned from the picture underneath. Semirealistic illustrations with a Little Golden Book vibe are competent and capture the night environs reasonably well, and the extra-thick cardboard pages seem ready for tough toddler handling. Another book in the series, What Can You See? On the Farm, shares the same whimsical animals and chaotic format.

Adequate if overly busy. (Board book. 2-4) (What Can You See? On the Farm: 978-1-68010-614-5)

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Benton, Jim
Illus. by the author
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(Graphic biography. 8-12)
Adib Khorram
The YA author brings back the lovable queer protagonist of his debut novel in a sequel, Darius the Great Deserves Better

By Megan Labrise

When readers met Darius Kellner, star of Adib Khorram’s standout YA debut novel, Darius the Great Is Not Okay (2018), sophomore year was off to a rocky start. Smart, funny, fractional Persian (on his mom’s side), tea enthusiast, Trekkie, and diagnosed with a major depressive disorder, Darius was light-years beyond the comprehension of the Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy (i.e. bullies) at Chapel Hill High School in Portland, Oregon. He had more enemies than friends, more questions than answers. He’d never been kissed.

On a life-changing trip to Iran, he learned about his heritage, grew closer to his family, and met Sohrab Rezaei, a soccer-loving Bahá’í boy who became his first best friend.

Darius was better than OK, Kirkus wrote in a starred review: “This tear-jerker will leave readers wanting to follow the next chapter in Darius’ life.” The only problem was the story was conceived as a stand-alone.

“I never intended for there to be a sequel,” Khorram tells Kirkus by phone from Kansas City, Missouri. “During the writing process, I certainly had ideas of where Darius’ life would take him after the novel, because it helped me bring realness to his life and to his arc, but it was always intended to be a stand-alone.”

By the time he began touring in support of the book, he was working on a new novel with a completely different cast of characters. But at a charity event in Washington, D.C., an audience member asked when Darius was getting a sequel and what it was about. Speaking extemporaneously—and hypothetically—about this sequel, Khorram noticed Dial editor Dana Chidiac giving a thumbs-up from the back of the room.

Darius was soon on route to an encore.

“It was the cleanest first draft I’ve ever written,” Khorram says of the sequel. “We were all surprised by how quickly it came together, which was a really exciting experience. Maybe somewhere, deep inside, I had, in fact, been thinking I needed to tell more of his story.”

Junior year is off to a promising start in Darius the Great Deserves Better (Dial, Aug. 25). Darius has a fresh look (classic fade), a spot on the varsity soccer team (Go Chargers!), and some surprising new friends. He has a perfect first kiss with dreamy Landon Edwards, whose father owns the tea shop where he interns on the weekend. And best of all, he can hop on his laptop and call Sohrab, in Yazd, to tell him all about it.

Sohrab was the first person I told about Landon. Actually, Sohrab was the first person I told I was gay.

It was super scary, even though I knew he would be cool with it.

(I hoped he would be cool with it.)

Sohrab is more than cool with it, and it’s a pleasure to behold their friendship in full flower. The honesty and vulnerability it takes to be a true friend was a focus of Darius the Great Is Not Okay and the hardest part to get right, Khorram told Kirkus in 2018. The No. 1 challenge of Book 2, he says, was depicting teen romance, hookups, sex, and love.

“I didn’t come out in high school, I didn’t date in high school,” says Khorram, who just turned 36. “Trying to authentically depict a high school relationship I hadn’t experienced was very challenging for me. A lot of it was
trying to ask myself what would I have wanted to be like. What would the reality have actually been like versus my idealized version? And how would Darius have experienced those things?”

Informed by conversations with queer high school students at events around the country, Khorram’s insightful writing captures the important exchanges teens are having with one another and their parents. Like the sex talk that arises after Darius’ father, Stephen Kellner, sees him making out with Landon in his bedroom:

Dad nodded. “Okay. You know it’s healthy and normal if you do [want sex]. And healthy and normal if you don’t. Right?”

I nodded and stared at my feet.

Dad let out a slow breath. “Did you tell him?”

I shook my head. “We were kissing.”

“Okay.” He stared out my window for a second. The curtains were open, and dusk was settling over the neighborhood like a blanket. “First, it’s okay to hit pause on kissing so you can communicate. Relationships, or even just casual, you know, whatevers, need communication.…”

Despite the cringe factor, Darius recognizes his father is doing his best, and he’s grateful for it. “As hard as it was to have conversations like this, he never made it seem like he didn’t want to do it,” Darius reflects. “I felt it was vital to show what people should be doing as best I could,” Khorram says. “Especially having Darius’ dad have the uncomfortable, necessary conversation with him, because I like to think that is a job for parents—to teach their kids correctly. One thing Stephen learned over the course of the first book is how important it is to be open and honest and where he had failed in that. He’s definitely trying to make up for it now.”

Another vital piece of Darius’ education comes from a surprising source: After a brief mention in the first book, his married grandmothers (on his dad’s side) come to stay with the family for a few weeks. Initially reserved, they eventually impart powerful lessons in queer history and activism.

“I didn’t have a queer network around me until I was an adult and on my own, and I wanted to show what it can be like,” Khorram says. “Young people today didn’t live through Stonewall, they were maybe in cribs during the fight against Prop 8, and that’s important history.

“T...
GEESE ARE NEVER SWANS
Dev. by Bryant, Kobe;
written by Clark, Eva
Granity Studios (288 pp.)
$18.99 | Jul. 21, 2020
978-1-949520-05-7

Sixteen-year-old Gus Bennett lives in the shadow of his older brother, Danny, a former Olympic swimming hopeful who recently died by suicide.

Gus does not have an easy home life: He has a strained relationship with his mother, a single parent who’s still struggling after Danny’s death; and his older sister, Darien, has a drug addiction and abandoned her now 18-month-old child to the care of their mother. But Gus hopes to train with Coach Marks, the renowned trainer who worked with his brother. He even sneaks into the country club to get access to the pool, willing to do whatever it takes to succeed.

He has his eye on qualifying for the national team and seems poised for success, but he soon experiences a downward spiral and engages in reckless behavior. Although the side characters are underdeveloped, Gus’ first-person narration carries the story along smoothly. Conceptualized by the late Academy Award–winning basketball player Bryant and written by Clark, this emotional novel contains lyrical prose that beautifully captures the energy of swimming and short chapters that will keep readers engaged. Physical descriptions are limited, suggesting a white default, but naming conventions suggest some diversity among the swim team members.

An earnest examination of mental health in sports.
(resources) (Fiction. 12-18)
old house right next to a cornfield and the shuttered Baypen corn syrup factory, complete with a creepy mural of Frendo the clown, who also serves as the town mascot. Quinn notes the town’s dated feel and the palpable tension between teens and adults, which is especially stark at Kettle Springs High. Quinn meets cool kids Cole Hill, whose father owns Baypen, and Janet Murray, who loves to stir things up. When Quinn joins them at a party in a remote cornfield, the fun turns to terror: A murderous army of Frendos armed with crossbows crashes the party. Cesare’s twisty prose and believable, easy-to-root-for characters makes this blood-drenched tale of extreme societal unrest disturbingly plausible. Dark humor peppers this clever homage to retro-horror classics, and Cesare barely lets up on the gas once the bloodletting begins. Most main characters, except Janet, who is described as generically Asian, seem to be white.

A pulse-pounding thrill ride for retro-horror fans who are not faint of heart (or stomach). (Horror . 14-adult)
Pride parades are yet another unfortunate casualty of pandemic life. While people cannot gather in person to celebrate and we contemplate a world filled with continuing struggles, there may be no better time to escape into other worlds that are gloriously and joyfully queer. Being able to do so at all is cause for celebration: LGBTQ+ people are no longer relegated only to realistic fiction and now get to see themselves in the genre fiction that is providing so many readers with much-needed escape in these stressful times. Realistic stories are critically important, of course, but straight and queer readers alike deserve to see real-world diversity reflected in science fiction and fantasy as well. Imaginary worlds are products of our human minds—with all their biases—so the recent explosion in diverse genre fiction that breaks down one more barrier is a reason to rejoice.

*Always Human* by Ari North (Little Bee, May 19) is a lush, dreamy graphic novel set in a world where nanobot technology allows individuals to change their appearances at will. Girlfriends Austen and Sunati have a swoony romance that includes honest, vulnerable conversations about the immune system condition that prevents Austen from making these modifications to her looks, Sunati’s initial impression of her as “brave,” and Austen’s initial fear that she was only interesting as a curiosity.

The *Once & Future* duology is ideal for fans of Arthuriana with a twist. Ari finds herself on Old Earth, where she pulls Excalibur from a tree and discovers her destiny and interplanetary adventure. Co-authored by real-life partners Cori McCarthy and Amy Rose Capetta, *Once & Future* (Jimmy Patterson/Little, Brown, 2019) and *Sword in the Stars* (April 7) move this classic legend to outer space, where a cast that is diverse in race, gender, and sexuality takes on corporate evil.

Our review called *Belle Révolte* by Linsey Miller (Sourcebooks Fire, Feb. 1) a “bursting-at-the-seams stand-alone empowerment story.” The author has created a fantasy world reminiscent of France during the Revolution but with magic consisting of noonday and midnight arts. The central premise of the novel is an intriguing identity swap between a poor commoner who is asexual and a noble girl who hopes against the odds to become a physician and falls for a trans boy.

The first entry in Adam Silvera's *Infinity Cycle* series, *Infinity Son* (Harperteen, Jan. 14), is an urban fantasy set in a New York City featuring magical technology and an ongoing struggle between Spell Walkers and Blood Casters. Emil and Brighton are brothers whose relationship is strained when only one of them turns out to be a celestial, someone with magical powers. Emil is gay, and there is rich diversity in this #ownvoices title by a gay Latinx author.

Imperial China provides the inspiration for *Girls of Paper and Fire* (Jimmy Patterson/Little, Brown, 2018) and *Girls of Storm and Shadow* (2019), the first two entries in the *Girls of Paper and Fire* trilogy by Natasha Ngan. In this world, the Moon, Steel, and Paper castes play varying roles. Lei and Wren, two Paper Girls (concubines) who were chosen by the king, meet in the royal palace and fall in love. Their relationship is explored with sensitivity, and the two confront a cruel oppressor.

*Beyond the Black Door* by A.M. Strickland (Imprint, 2019) has a well-developed asexual protagonist, Kamai, who is a soulwalker like her mother, along with a cast that features diversity in gender identity, sexual orientation, and race. Soulwalkers are able to journey through people’s souls as they sleep, and while doing so Kamai finally succumbs to the allure of the mysterious black door that repeatedly appears to her—without knowing the danger that awaits on the other side.

Audrey Coulthurst’s *Of Fire and Stars* series—*Of Fire and Stars* (Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins, 2016) and *Of Ice and Shadows* (2019)—will satisfy fans of character-driven stories, sweet lesbian romance, and equine adventures. Princess Denna becomes engaged to Princess Mare’s brother and moves to their kingdom, but things become complicated when the two young women fall for each other instead. Denna also must reckon with the full extent—and potential dangers—of her magical abilities.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
CONNOR MAJOR’S SUMMER BREAK IS TURNING INTO A NIGHTMARE.

“Layered and gripping, Surrender Your Sons is at once a haunting thriller, a celebration of queer resilience, and a profound look at the strength required to love oneself and break the cycle of trauma.”

—Caleb Roehrig, author of Last Seen Leaving and The Fell of Dark
a servant and sneaks out to the market, where she meets Frederick and they have an instant connection. Adela entertains the idea of falling in love with a poor farmer, but her family has arranged suitors from noble families. When Frederick gets caught up in a plan to kidnap the duke’s daughter for ransom, secrets are revealed, and Adela and Frederick must decide how to cope with the truth. The story has many elements of “Cinderella,” altered just enough to make it feel original. The characters are charming and the plot is engaging. The text is heavily laced with Christian references and prayers, as both main characters have strong faith. Frederick’s family experiences domestic violence at his father’s hand. Fans of the series will enjoy the references to characters from previous entries, but the novel functions as a stand-alone story. All characters seem to be white.

Simple, endearing period Christian romance. (discussion questions) (Historical romance. 12-16)

Prelude for Lost Souls
Dunbar, Helene
Sourcebooks Fire (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 1, 2020
978-1-4926-6737-7

Welcome to St. Hilaire, New York, a town that speaks to the dead.

Daniel “Dec” Hampton, still reeling from the deaths of his parents two years ago, feels suffocated by the rules and regulations set forth by the Guild, the authoritarian town council, and anxiously awaits the day he can leave. Russ Griffin, Dec’s best friend, struggles with his mother’s abandonment and desperately wants the coveted spot of Student Leader, a placement that will lead to a permanent Guild position after high school. Talented teen pianist Anastasia Krylova has recently lost her mentor, whose last request is that Annie find the missing portion of the Unfinished Prelude, a composition with an enigmatic history. When fate brings Annie to Dec’s door, the lives of all three teens are upended in unexpected and mysterious ways. How is Annie connected to Tristan, the ghost who occupies Dec’s home—and how is Tristan linked to the Prelude? Will Dec leave St. Hilaire, or will he be trapped here forever? Can Russ pass muster as a medium to gain his place with the Guild? Dec, Russ, and Annie share the first-person narration; each has a distinct voice. Dec’s is brooding and Annie’s is grief-stricken; the story may resonate with readers who have experienced loss. The setting is inspired by Lily Dale, the spiritualist community in upstate New York. All characters are assumed white.

A quietly compelling story. (Paranormal mystery. 14-18)

Harrow Lake
Ellis, Kat
Kathy Dawson/Penguin (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-0-8037-4523-1

A teenage girl obscured behind her single father’s scary stories fights to get her own last word.

The daughter of iconic horror film director Nolan Nox, 17-year-old Lola has only sardonic quips for comfort after she finds her father stabbed. His assistant sends her away from New York City to stay with her maternal grandmother while her father is in the hospital. Lola’s prickly attitude and macabre imagination fuel the narrative as she explores Harrow Lake, Indiana, the creepy hometown of a mother she hasn’t seen since she was 3. After Lola’s mother, Lorelei, starred in a film her father shot there, she got the hell out and never came back. Years later she left her husband and child and disappeared. After Lola arrives, her suitcase mysteriously vanishes, leaving Lola to wear Lorelei’s old film costumes in ominous homage. Lola knows her dad’s movies inside and out, and she’s full of classic scary movie references: Pennywise, Chucky, even Ellen Ripley. A sympathetic, quick-witted heroine, she at first refuses to be terrified as Harrow Lake presents her with all the trappings of a malevolent place: skittering bugs, disappearing girls, disembodied hands, a living doll, and a nightmare figure who goes by Mister Jitters. Her unflinching devotion to her absent father, whose stern voice rings in her head, tells a sinister story that slowly builds to a heart-pounding climax. Main characters are white.

A satisfying quasi-supernatural thriller. (Thriller. 14-18)

Cut Off
Finlay, Adrianne
HMH Books (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 11, 2020
978-0-358-00645-9

Teenage contestants. Unfamiliar wilderness. A reality show pushing the boundaries of viewership. What could go wrong?

Cut Off is a new survival show with a revolutionary three-dimensional component. Contestants, injected with virtual reality ions that transmit their biological data to viewers’ devices, are trailed 24/7 by drone cameras as they attempt to outlast one another to claim a $10 million prize. Trip Johnson—a clinically anxious gay boy—is a contestant as well as the millionaire inventor of the show’s 3-D immersive tech. Other contestants include defensive, jaded California girl Cam Jaimes; solitary, outdoorsy orphan River Adan; and practical, mysterious Liza Rojas. After the competition is wiped out, these four survivors team up when they discover that their emergency GPS trackers don’t work and they are isolated from the showrunners. As they

Simple, endearing period Christian romance. (discussion questions) (Historical romance. 12-16)
navigate a remote British Columbia island, hoping to rejoin civilization, they begin to suspect the wilderness has a mind of its own...and that it’s manifesting their worst nightmares, from spiders to earthquakes to abandonment. The stakes rise ever higher as Cam and River’s mutual attraction heats up while Trip considers the broader implications of his 3-D streaming app. The narrative begins a day after the first earthquake and is told from several contestants’ third-person perspectives, interspersed with interview transcripts and official documents. Whiteness is situated as the default for most characters; Liza is cued as Latinx.

**Strikes a delicate, and ultimately optimistic, balance between action, suspense, and philosophy.** *(Thriller. 12-18)*

**THE BURNING KINGDOMS**

Green, Sally

Viking (400 pp.)

$19.99 | Aug. 25, 2020

978-0-425-29027-9

Series: Smoke Thieves, 3

Picks up right where *The Demon World* (2019) left off: with a battle won, but the real fight is still to come.

Catherine finds herself Queen of Pitoria after lying about her marriage to King Tzsayn. With Tzsayn injured, she is left to run the country and manage an army ravaged by illness. Knowing she cannot visit him in the infirmary, a wounded Ambrose nevertheless desperately misses Catherine. Edyon, now Prince of Abask and heir to the throne of Calidor, faces the monumental task of convincing local lords of the dangers of Aloysius’ boy army, fueled by demon smoke. Will he be outmatched in a political game? All seems lost for March as he finds himself in Brigant with
There's a thing called the glass closet, and it's the idea that you can come out of the closet, but you're still in this other closet, and it's invisible. Straight people will love you the moment you come out—"I love gay marriage, I love gay people!"—but the moment you try to become a full-fledged human being, it becomes, "You're too in my face. You're not who I want you to be." When straight culture does that to you, especially during those formative teenage years, it takes away that ability to try stuff on and figure out who you are that straight kids get.

Many readers expect queer stories featuring a triumphant ending. What led you to write a more nuanced resolution?

Even today in queer YA novels, coming out is the end of the story; I try to always show that coming out is the beginning. It's not all rainbows and happiness. It is often about knowing how much of your queerness you can unleash when you're around certain people. You can be proud, you can be satisfied with your life, but if you're a teenager and your parents are essentially saying, "Don't wear nail polish or else you'll become one of those queers, and we don't want one of those queers in our house," then don't wear the nail polish around your parents. I don't mean for that to sound disempowering, but a kid's safety is more important; food on the table is more important. It's a privilege to be able to wear that nail polish whenever you want, because it means that you are unafraid of being beaten, kicked out, deprived of something that you need to live.

It's rare for queer teens to have access to sex-positive information such as you provide. Have you encountered any push back?

There was definitely editorial push back on the sex scene in Camp. I don't think it goes much further than many straight sex scenes in YA, but I understand [that the response] came from the fact that it was definitely a real sex scene. It has things that aren't usually portrayed in gay romance novels, all the messiness. I wanted to show a real but healthy and fun sex scene rather than an easy erotic thrill.

What's worse than push back is silence. I'm married to a librarian, I've taught at schools, and I've seen parental drama at
its finest, so I understand that. [The silence] hurts way more than the drama does for an author, because it's like you don't exist. We rely on librarians, teachers, book bloggers, social media to get this stuff into the hands of teenagers, and that can be extremely difficult when people are a little afraid of the book. We write these books because we know that they will help, because we have been these kids, and it sort of sucks that that there's this wall of silence.

You write for adults and younger kids, too. What do you find rewarding about writing YA?

Adults love a good story, for sure. But young adults love a book—they are the people who are most excited to really experience the story you're trying to tell. It becomes very personal and special in a way that you're sort of blasé about by the time you're an adult, and you haven't quite formed enough of an identity of your own as a middle-grade person.

What are your thoughts on straight people writing queer stories?

I'm not a stay-in-your-own-lane person, I'm a get to the back-of-the-line person; it's about centering #ownvoices. When it comes to young adults, if you look around for representations of yourself, and the ones that you find are created by people who are writing not for you but for themselves—to give themselves pleasure in some way, and that could be sexual, it could be emotional—then you are going to see this fetishized version of yourself. You're trying to find yourself and the reflections coming back at you aren't even really reflections. It's the glass closet again.

Who's your first audience? That's the question, and almost always the answer is going to be yourself, even if you think it isn't. Really separating yourself from that and thinking about that is hard and requires a level of commitment and self-reflection. I don't think that there's anything wrong per se with straight women writing queer men, it's just about their intention. And we can always tell—because I'm an adult now. If I'm a teenager and I read that? It really screws you up.

Camp was reviewed in the March 1, 2020, issue.
A sequel that gets better and better the longer it steeps. 

(Fiction. 12-18)

This coming-of-age masterpiece packs a multitude of truth and heart.

DARIUS THE GREAT DESERVES BETTER
Khorram, Adib
Dial (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
Series: Darius the Great, 2

A second chapter for the endearingly sweet, Star Trek–loving “Fractional Persian” Darius Kellner.

Visiting Iran. Scoring the internship of his dreams at Rose City Teas. Playing on his high school’s varsity men’s soccer team—where his awesome teammates keep the bullies at bay. Having a lot of fun kissing Landon, a prospective first boyfriend with “television cheekbones.” But even all these highs can’t keep Darius’ depression at bay. Landon might be cute—and Darius’ Persian mother certainly approves of Landon’s cooking abilities—but he keeps pressuring Darius to go beyond kissing when he isn’t ready. Darius also worries about his terminally ill grandfather and best friend, Sohrab, both “half a world away” in Iran. Family troubles and confusing feelings for a teammate only exacerbate the “burning plasma reactor feeling” in Darius’ chest. With rich characters and multilayered storytelling, Khorram’s sophomore effort deepens the complexity of Darius’ world. Blending broad themes like consent and toxic masculinity with the specificity of Darius’ intersectional identity (gay, white and Iranian), this coming-of-age masterpiece packs a multitude of truth and heart. As “super white” as the Portland, Oregon, setting may be, Khorram takes care to incorporate the diversity that does exist within the city. While the first volume focused heavily on Darius’ relationship with his dad, this one expands the focus, balancing tough situations with a hopeful undercurrent.

A sequel that gets better and better the longer it steeps.

THE NEMESIS
Kincaid, S.J.
Simon & Schuster (416 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-5344-0983-9
Series: Diabolic, 3

After narrowly surviving The Empress (2017), Nemesis is pulled back into imperial intrigue to stop a madman.

Rather than a traditional start (either a recap or where the previous left off), the book opens with Tyrus’ boyhood, when he makes a personally painful decision for the greater good, with ramifications that set him on the path that finds him, 15 years later, a mad tyrant declared to be a God-Emperor. Meanwhile, Nemesis, left by Neveni after Nemesis botched an assassination attempt on Tyrus, lives in hiding in a desolate mining colony with the only other surviving Diabolic, Anguish, who’s dying. As “Nemesis lives has been taken up as a rallying cry by those opposing the tyrant, she loses anonymity and returns to Tyrus, who finds he misses her, in exchange for medical care for Anguish. But, unable to go along with Tyrus’ cruelty, Nemesis and Anguish must leverage every connection they have to enable Tyrus’ opponents to take him down. In doing so, they uncover some of the empire’s deepest secrets. The intrigue-and betrayal-packed plot never feels like twists for the sake of twists because character decisions are rooted in their complex, often contradictory, emotions. Nuanced social commentary and philosophical musings give thematic weight to a story grounded in a passionate, tragically antagonistic relationship. As appearance is easily and routinely altered via technology, the diversity focus is firmly on classism.

Intense and captivating; a pitch-perfect ending for a strong trilogy. (Science fiction. 13-adult)

ELATSOE
Little Badger, Darcie
Illus. by Cai, Rovina
Levine Querido (368 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-64614-005-3

A teenager with supernatural gifts must solve her cousin’s murder before it’s too late.

Aside from the fact that she owns a ghost dog named Kirby, Ellie is like any other comic book–loving, ice cream–eating Lipan Apache teenager. Her non-Native friends include her childhood buddy Jay, who is white, and her cousin Trevor’s Latinx wife, Lenore. Yet Ellie does have traits that set her apart: She has inherited the talents of Six-Great-Grandmother, her powerful Lipan Apache forebear, and plans to skip college to work as a paranormal investigator. When Trevor dies in what appears to be a car accident, his ghost appears to her briefly, begging that she protect his wife and child. Ellie must call upon her strong lineage to rid her ancestral land of an ancient curse. Even as she discovers some of her own tribal relatives have been complicit in historic wrongdoing, she must save her family, animals, and community from destructive forces and restore balance to the world. A fast-paced whodunit set in a contemporary world like our own, this is a creative fusion of Indigenous cultural influences and supernatural fantasy. A brilliant, engaging debut written by a talented author, it seamlessly blends cyberstalking with Vampire Citizen Centers and Lipan Apache stories. This groundbreaking introduction to the fantasy genre remains relevant to Native histories even as it imaginatively looks to the future.

Educates about settler colonialism while also entertaining with paranormal twists. (Speculative fiction. 13-18)
MEET OUR STARS!

★“Fiercely fantastical.”
—Publishers Weekly
★—Booklist
★—Kirkus Reviews
★—Shelf Awareness
★—School Library Connection

★“Heartfelt.”
—Booklist
★—BCCB
★—Publishers Weekly
★—The Horn Book
★—School Library Journal

★“Unforgettable”
—Publishers Weekly
★—Booklist
★—BCCB
★—BookPage
★—The Horn Book
★—School Library Journal

★“Engaging.”
—Kirkus Reviews
★—Publishers Weekly
★—Booklist
★—The Horn Book
★—School Library Journal

★“Beautifully told.”
—Kirkus Reviews
★—BCCB
★—Booklist
★—Shelf Awareness
★—Publishers Weekly
★—Shelf Awareness

★“Four★ Stars!”

★“Heartfelt.”
—Kirkus Reviews
★—Publishers Weekly
★—Booklist
★—The Horn Book
★—School Library Journal

★“Beautifully told.”
—Kirkus Reviews
★—BCCB
★—Booklist
★—Shelf Awareness
★—Publishers Weekly
★—Shelf Awareness
Life on Earth is MariNaomi’s aptly named YA graphic trilogy, a Rashomon-like tale of friendship, family, loyalty, loss, and possible alien abduction at Blithedale High. The last installment, Distant Stars (Graphic Universe, March 1), ties the series’ storylines together and includes a burgeoning queer relationship. Our reviewer called Distant Stars “a tremendous finale to a singular trilogy.” MariNaomi’s comics and paintings have been featured by the Smithsonian, and she is the founder and administrator of the Cartoonists of Color, the Queer Cartoonists, and the Disabled Cartoonists databases. Here we talk with her about adolescence, seeing the world in color, and character development. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Life on Earth covers a lot—first kisses, unwanted pregnancy, rape, gun violence, friendship, loyalty, crushes, UFOs, coming out. What drew you to tackle the full spectrum of teenage life?

I don’t think I tackled the full spectrum at all. My own adolescence contained a lot more drama than I dealt to these teens—namely drugs, race issues, bullying, running away from home. OK, now that I list it out like that, I can see that I included a lot of this stuff in this series. [Laughs.] I guess that I’m just writing what I know, plus trying to look at the issues from different angles.

Other than in the portrayal of the otherworldly Claudia Jones (who some speculate was abducted by aliens), color is used somewhat sparingly. When do you use color?

In this series, I meant the colors to represent each narrator’s essence (their auras, perhaps), which Claudia not only sees a fuller spectrum of, but also helps bring to the forefront and helps each person see as well. I consider her almost like an undercover spiritual guide.

In my experience growing up, I saw the world in mostly blacks and whites, good or bad, happy or sad. As I got older, I started to understand the world in shades of gray. It’s possible for someone to be good and bad! Happy and sad! I figure the next logical step to that is seeing the world in colors, which would represent a higher maturity, or awareness, of self and others.

Was it important to you to integrate—rather than foreground—the queer romance in your trilogy?

Although there are certainly a lot of romantic things that happen in this story, as in life, I didn’t want it all to be about romantic love. Friendships and familial relationships are just as important, if not more so, as romantic relationships, especially in formative years. At least for me, romance was idealized as a kid, whereas my other relationships were more true.

These characters are somewhere in between, learning about themselves and toeing the line between idealization and truth. I feel like the relationship between Paula and Johanna is the most truthful out of all the romances in these books. I feel like their relationship signifies Paula’s growth as a person, which is why it’s important.

The series digs into all of the characters’ inner lives; Paula, for example, wonders: “When did I become such a moody bitch?” Each character feels so fully realized. Thank you! I initially based each narrator on someone I’ve been close to, then let the characters develop from there. Most of my work in the past has been memoir, and at first I was worried about all the characters ending up being me. But
having real-life inspirations made it easy to determine what they'd do and think in each situation. They are their own people, with bits of me mixed in at times.

Can you tell me about the Cartoonists of Color, Queer Cartoonists, and Disabled Cartoonists databases that you founded?

I started the Cartoonists of Color database in 2014. At the time, I was tired of hearing that there were no people of color in the comics industry (folks would say this in response to criticism of creators of color not getting the same opportunities as white creators), and I wanted proof, for myself, that that was not the case....As our sheer numbers overwhelmed me, I found myself getting upset that there wasn’t a resource of creators of color online, and then it hit me. I had the list. And so I had to make it available to the world.

Once I got that going (it started as a very simple HTML page and now is something much more elaborate), I decided to use my newfound superpower to create the Queer Cartoonists database. Then, recently, inspired in part by my mentee Rus Wooton, a quadriplegic comics pro, and in part by my friend Patrick Dean, who has ALS and is documenting his experience via powerful cartoons, I decided to create the Disabled Cartoonists database.

As of this date, there are 1,398 creators in the Cartoonists of Color database, 1,145 creators in the Queer Cartoonists database, and 99 creators in the Disabled Cartoonists database. Some of these folks appear in more than one database.

Karen Schechner is the vice president of Kirkus Indie. Distant Stars was reviewed in the Jan. 1, 2020, issue.

Fiction

SALVATION

Lix, Caryn
Simon Pulse/Simon & Schuster
(432 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-1-5344-5643-3
Series: Sanctuary, 3

After Containment (2019), Kenzie and her fellow survivors are stranded on a strange planet.

Through Kenzie’s borrowing of Liam’s teleportation power, she and her friends (plus the remaining Legion bounty hunters) find themselves on a desert planet. The abandoned city they find could easily be mistaken for a post-apocalyptic Earth—right down to the English writing. Rune theorizes about co-evolution and some sort of invisible link between races. Soon, tensions between the characters must be set aside as they face suspicious, increasingly desperate locals, who are running out of supplies. Despite major reservations about the trustworthiness of their chief contact among the locals, Kenzie, in particular, argues for trusting them and working together. After all, the same aliens attacking Earth in the previous books have long been in this world, giving them a deadly common enemy. Moreover, stopping the creatures here would help prevent the imminent invasion of Earth. How well plot twists land depends on how much suspension of disbelief readers are willing to give for some questionable character reasoning—some will find there isn’t a plausible enough story foundation to support the twists and big revelations. Those invested in the characters, though, will enjoy the exploratory breather offered in the first act and the high stakes of the second. Most characters are assumed white aside from Taiwanese twins Cage and Rune and hijabi Imani.

A conclusion on par with the rest of the trilogy. (Science fiction. 12-18)

FACING THE SUN

Mather, Janice Lynn
Simon & Schuster (416 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 11, 2020
978-1-5344-0604-9

Can four friends weather the storms of friendship?

KeeKee, Nia, Faith, and Eve want to save the beautiful Bahamian beach they’ve grown up on from developers who want to build a hotel, blocking local families’ access. However, saving the beach is complicated. Faith’s father works for Parliament and supports the development. Nia’s mother is a local journalist who writes about protests against the hotel. KeeKee’s father is an architect working on the new hotel. Eve’s father’s beachfront church is a pillar in the community. To top it all off, KeeKee’s three friends harbor a crush on her brother, Toons. Each girl
When a suspicious and devastating fire reduces the church to ashes, the girls must navigate friendship as their world changes. The author skillfully portrays tensions between maintaining community control and flavor against economic expansion. The protagonists have varied talents and interests, exhibit creativity and drive, and offer nuanced insights into the diversity of black communities outside the U.S.

A heartwarming and sincere journey following four girls as they mature into their friendship. (Fiction. 14-18)

THE WHITSUN DAUGHTERS
Mesrobian, Carrie
Dutton (224 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-0-7352-3195-5

Three young women in a rural Minnesota town navigate a pivotal summer under the watchful eye of a spirit with intimate ties to the land.

Midwife Carna and her daughter, Poppy, live with Carna’s Unitarian minister sister, Violet, and her daughters, Daisy and Lilah. The younger cousins love Poppy as a sister. Jane, a long-ago Irish immigrant whose spirit watches over the girls, thinks of them in the “colors of horses.” Poppy is a “golden palomino, prancing, arrogant.” Lilah, the second oldest, is a “flossy white unicorn, shimmering in her slightness,” and Daisy, the youngest, a girl whose eyes are always watching.” Jane, who narrates, focuses largely on 15-year-old Daisy, who dreams of Jane. After all, Jane was only 15 herself when she lost her sister, Bess, while aboard a ship to America. She married Bess’ intended, who couldn’t truly love her as a wife, and fell wildly, disastrously in love with Patrick, a stable hand in her husband’s employ. Emphasis is placed on the parallels between Jane’s life and the lives of the Whitsun girls: the complexities and joys of love and sex, unplanned pregnancies, mental illness, and the trials that women and girls often endure at the expense of their minds and bodies. All characters are assumed white.

A lush and beautifully written treat for readers of historical and contemporary fiction alike. (Historical sources) (Fiction. 14-18)

BRIGHT RAVEN SKIES
Pérez, Kristina
Imprint (464 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4594-1510-2 PLB
Series: Sweet Black Waves, 3

The final volume of a trilogy transforms a tragic legend into a feminist triumph.

Branwen’s deal with Dhusnos, the god of death, may have saved King Marc’s castle but at the cost of the peace for which she sacrificed everything. Tristan and Eseult stand accused of treason, and Branwen still owes Dhusnos a murder. In the conclusion to this sprawling retelling, Branwen and the rest of the huge, intertwined, ethnically and sexually diverse cast race from combat to trials to duels to sea battles, from lies to trysts to betrayals to marriages to funerals, only pausing to wallow in guilt and spectacular self-loathing. Pérez’s alternative medieval world is immersive and detailed, her prose lush with mystical symbolism. Despite their worldly power, men function mostly either to admire or obstruct Branwen (sometimes both) while all the women are complicated and authentic, with independent (if not always admirable) agendas and rich narrative arcs. Within this oppressively patriarchal society, it is the bonds of mentorship, respect, trust, and love among women that make a difference. Although the messy, overwrought love triangle (heptagon, really) is eventually more-or-less resolved, the real climax occurs when Branwen learns to accept her own intrinsic worth and destiny. By the bittersweet ending, she has earned her choices.

Readers will find inspiration in a young woman claiming her identity. (Dramatis personae, glossary) (Fantasy. 12-18)

P.K. SUBBAN
Rondina, Catherine
James Lorimer (144 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $27.99 PLB | Aug. 1, 2020
978-1-4594-1508-9
978-1-4594-1510-2 PLB

Follows a black Canadian ice hockey player’s career.

As a child in Toronto, Subban declared that he wanted to be a professional hockey player. His Caribbean immigrant parents were die-hard hockey fans who helped foster Subban’s love of the game. With the support of his family—including his four siblings, two of whom followed in his professional hockey playing footsteps—and active encouragement from the family with whom he was billeted, Subban became a force to reckon with. He even became the first black recipient of the Norris Trophy in 2013, the peak accolade for defensemen in ice hockey. Subban’s journey has had trials and challenges, many of which have involved dealing with racism. As a black hockey player, Subban has been exposed
YA Reads from Month9Books

"This complex fantasy hits the ground running and never slows down, with complicated twists, turns, and discoveries in every chapter." -- Kirkus Reviews

"A dazzling, emotional story of love, loss, and living in the moment." -- Kirkus Reviews

"The narrative follows the beats of a video game, including plot tokens, puzzles, and side quests." -- Kirkus Reviews

@month9books
to much vitriol in this mostly white sport. Still, he has remained undeterred and focused on his goal of being a role model and change-maker. His career stats and charity work demonstrate success in both arenas. With the help of quotes from his parents, coaches, teachers, and friends, Rondina gives readers a concise overview of Subban's athletic career that reads much like a highlight reel. This will prove to be an easy read even for those who are not hockey fans.

An accessible treatment of a remarkable ice hockey career. (glossary, photo credits, index) (Biography. 12-18)

**IT CAME FROM THE SKY**
Sedoti, Chelsea
Sourcebooks Fire (312 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 1, 2020
978-1-4926-7302-6

A nerdy teen loses control of an out-of-this-world lie.

Sixteen-year-old Gideon Hofstadt has predicted his future: college at MIT, career at NASA, and, somewhere along the way, a discovery that forever alters human knowledge. For now, he’s vying to graduate as valedictorian and running a backyard laboratory on his family’s ancestral Lansburg, Pennsylvania, farm. When Gideon rigs an explosion to test a homemade seismograph, his goofball brother Ishmael’s interference results in a blast larger than either anticipated. Under interrogation, Ishmael ad-libs, eventually alleging extraterrestrial visitation—and, shockingly, people buy it. The astonished brothers watch as the prank takes on a life of its own with townspeople, ufologists, and media contributing otherworldly additions to the hoax. Though pacing occasionally sags, Gideon’s first-person confessional is buoyed by deadpan humor and interstitial text messages, interviews, blog posts, and news articles. Things finally grow dangerous when J. Quincy Oswald, the predatory con man behind a multilevel marketing scheme, decides Lansburg is the perfect launch site for a phony immortality elixir. Gideon’s struggles— with introversion and insecurity; commitment issues with his boyfriend, Owen; and habitual mistreatment of his friend Arden—complement this central narrative tension. Can Gideon come clean while his life is still worth salvaging? Or has he ultimately conned himself? Excepting Gideon’s best friend, Cassidy, who is black, all characters are assumed white.

A balanced exploration of maturity, vulnerability, human connection, and our innate desire to believe. (Fiction. 14-18)
A YA STORY ABOUT COMING-OUT
AND COMING OF AGE IN SPORTS

MAN UP’s compelling story
of David’s journey as a varsity
baseball player gives an
authentic voice to the
closeted athlete, teammate,
ally, teacher, and parent.
Today, studies show almost
every one of your high school
sports team will have a
closeted student athlete.
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“...EXPLORES THE CHARGED PLAYING FIELDS OF HOMOPHOBIA AND HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS...
Oclon thoughtfully develops David’s and Tyler’s INNER TRANSFORMATIONS
WHEN IT COMES TO SELF ACCEPTANCE...”
—Kirkus Reviews
ring with roots in Mexico and the U.S., Sara pins all her hopes on Emiliano, who now holds the all-important cellphone with incriminating data linking the powerful officials and criminals involved in the abduction and captivity of las Desaparecidas. Emiliano, meanwhile, heads off on a harrowing journey of his own, struggling to reconnect with his estranged, Americanized father while striving to elude danger at every corner, including the looming threat of deportation. Switching from third-person narration to a less enthralling first-person alternating narration, this sequel piles on the suspense and twists. Though there's some muddled political commentary, Stork offers a bit-ting indictment of the U.S. government's immoral apathy to the refugee crisis within its borders. Strong character development, however, reigns supreme.

A brilliant, penetrating follow-up. (Thriller. 12-18)

A magical triumph.

SIA MARTINEZ AND THE MOONLIT BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING

Vasquez Gilliland, Raquel
Simon Pulse/Simon & Schuster (432 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 11, 2020
978-1-5344-4863-6

Sia's mother was deported three years ago by the town sheriff; she disappeared after trying to make her way back across the Sonoran Desert to her family.

Grieving Sia is plagued daily by the sheriff's hateful son, but the Mexican American teen is bolstered by her Haitian American, questioning best friend, Rose; her loving park ranger father, who has a Ph.D. in biology; and the spirit of her late grandmother, who continues to communicate with and guide her. She falls for a mysterious, poetry-loving white boy, and, together, they spot a spacecraft bearing Sia's mother. What follows is an electrifying, high-stakes adventure filled with shady government agencies and conspiracy theories come to life. Vasquez Gilliland adeptly balances first love, Mexican American cosmology and Catholicism, X-Files-level intrigue, and undocumented immigration. She doesn't shy away from frank explorations of trauma; interrogation of whiteness; and sex-positive, swoon-inducing make-out sessions that center a young woman’s perspective. The poetic prose elevates the story into a magical triumph. Sia is a vulnerable, sympathetic protagonist who, despite a past traumatic sexual experience, the deportation of her mother, and the constant barrage of egregious micro- and macroaggressions, finds hope in her relationships, culture, and connection to her ancestors. Spirituality is woven into everything Sia does and will resonate with many readers. The whip-smart humor lends the novel a breeziness that keeps the narrative lighthearted in between the truly hair-raising moments.

Luminous, genre-bending, and out of this world. (Science fiction/contemporary. 14-adult)
An epic fantasy focuses on a brutal usurper and a princess on the run.

At the age of 15, Radia inherits the throne of Tyrnael. Tyrnael has a long history of peace and tranquility, and it seems that Radia should be able to maintain this tradition. The people of Tyrnael rarely die of anything but old age. This all comes crashing down when Radia's wicked brother, Zaibos, seizes control of the realm in a bloody coup. Radia has no choice but to flee with a loyal guard named Demacharon. But Zaibos is determined to see Radia destroyed. He goes so far as to task a reclusive assassin named Eros with bringing back Radia's heart. So begins Radia's journey as a hunted girl in a world that will hold some uncomfortable realities. She is no mere princess but an earthy, highly empathetic beauty who often sees little need for clothing and even less need for killing. In fact, Demacharon, though sworn to protect Radia, must also promise her he won't kill anyone. Meanwhile, Zaibos is determined to expand his power while also crushing the spirit of anything breathing. He even makes use of simple, brutal subterranean creatures called bogrens. The bogrens, who have names like Grumblestump and Bloodsnot, seem to find nothing funnier than watching one of their own fall into underground magma. Don't bother asking them if they know what the word “friend” means.

And so the forces of good and evil are pitted against each other in a story that includes extremes ranging from a child hearing a bedtime story to a number of ghastly forms of execution. If readers think this will be a simple tale of a kind princess (who says things like “If given a chance, people are generally good”) removed from power only to have her returned to glory after some cheerful hack-and-slash escapades, they are mistaken. Alimonos' novel, his second book set in the world of Aenya, takes a number of unexpected, even wild turns, many of them involving combat, torture, or more information on the main players. The bad guys certainly have a lot of background. Zaibos establishes himself as a supreme villain, a tyrant who goes so far as to wear some elaborate, wartime headgear even in the comfort of his own throne room. Likewise, Eros proves a sophisticated part of the plot. With his deadly spiders and his love of his mother, he has more depth than readers might expect from a figure who makes his living by killing people. But some of the good guys are not quite as intricate. While Krow...
RELATIVELY LIGHT
FARE: QUEER EDITION

Indieland editors recommend the following novels as upbeat escapes for Pride month. In one, a gay man rallies his down-on-its-luck town to strive for better. In another, a gay high school student lands in Los Angeles and falls for a fellow wannabe actor. And in the third, a lesbian romance, a road trip in pursuit of medicinal weed leads to love.

Charlie Suisman’s debut novel, Arnold Falls, takes place in a small town in upstate New York full of appealing crackpots. Jeebie Walker, gay and in his 40s, wants to motivate his fellow townspeople to get it together. Our reviewer says, “Suisman’s prose is often incredibly funny, and his characters are charming in their varying degrees of ridiculousness while still maintaining a realistic, human sensibility.”

In her lesbian romance novel A Light on Altered Land, Becky Bohan writes about second-chance love when a widowed lesbian falls for a recent divorcée—who’s inconveniently straight. But orientation be damned when these two take a road trip to a “marijuana farm in California to score some illegal cannabis oil for a friend with Lyme disease, with a stop in Yosemite National Park for sightseeing and snowshoeing.” The verdict? Our reviewer calls it a “luminous story of rejuvenating love.” —K.S.

an aptly named, speaking birdlike figure, may be a skilled sailor, his origins on the crew of an airship do not add much to the larger story. Nevertheless, the tale, with its many violent shifts, will have readers constantly wondering if there will ever again be peace in Tyrnael.

A heroine’s trials make for a winding, bloody adventure with plenty of surprises.

THE MIT MURDERS
Bruneau, Stephen L
iUniverse (334 pp.)
Nov. 4, 2019
978-1-5320-8738-7
978-1-5320-8737-0 paper

A series of brutal murders in Boston tests the police and terrifies a book club. As Bruneau’s debut mystery begins, Augusta “Gussie” Watkins races to her fifth-floor Cambridge apartment after work because she will host book club that night. Reaching her building, she takes the elevator, which suddenly stops between floors. A hatch atop the lift opens, and a hand emerges. That night, police find Gussie’s body with her eyes cut out. Near the body is scrawled the message, “Justice is blind.” Two days later, an elite runner is discovered dead in Boston Common with a knife in her back. A note nearby reads, “Justice is swift.” Chief Homicide Investigator Dimase Augustin realizes he’s hunting a serial killer, and he soon discovers both murdered women were in the same book club—a club that has more members, and they all are in danger. The killer, revealed early on, dishes out payback for an injustice he felt was dealt to him years ago when he was a university biology professor at MIT. Did mutilating Gussie bother him? No, he “just thought of her as a big mouse.” For years he played the long game in terms of going off the grid. Now, when Augustin suspects the former prof, he’s gone without a trace. Bruneau doesn’t rush the book club members’ backstories, likes, and routines. The reader feels they know these women, which raises the stakes. A believable time frame, intelligent dialogue, an abundance of twists, and escalation in the psychopath’s violence lead to quick page turns. Characters are intelligent, and a mix of races is represented. Augustin, a smart, albeit chain-smoking, middle-aged African American chief cop, deserves prominence in a sequel.

A sharp-witted detective hunts a psychopath schooled in murder; highly recommended.
ENGAGED
Designing for Behavior Change
Bucher, Amy M.
Rosenfeld Media (320 pp.)
Mar. 3, 2020
978-1-933820-42-2

A comprehensive debut book demonstrates the application of behavioral psychology to digital design.

“Behavior change designer” may well become a widely recognized job title thanks to this breakthrough work. Bucher, who describes herself as a psychologist applying her knowledge to the design of behaviorally based digital experiences, has created a volume that is absorbing, timely, and (not surprisingly) impeccably designed. This tightly organized book begins with an authoritative overview of behavior change design and then logically addresses how to “achieve desired outcomes.” The rest of the book focuses not on design elements but design strategy as it relates to users. For example, one chapter discusses how to make choices easier while another covers how to help users overcome obstacles. Later chapters move into broader issues, such as how technology encourages connections and trust, how an organization benefits from behavior change design, and what the future holds for this emerging discipline. One especially strong aspect of the work is the author’s use of numerous examples in the form of full-color screen images accompanied by pertinent captions and detailed descriptions. Every one of these examples is relevant and illustrative of the text. Another valuable addition to the book is a feature at the end of each chapter called “Perspective,” in which the author introduces an expert and includes answers to questions that directly relate to the chapter. The insights of these individuals serve to further illuminate the author’s own writing by providing a different yet supporting viewpoint. Bucher also intersperses intriguing “Notes” and “Tips,” highlighted in color type to differentiate them. For example, in one tip, she provides a solid definition of the term “good decision” while a note reveals the importance of “Accessibility in Design,” or “making your products usable to people with disabilities.” Bucher’s explanations and observations are cogent, incisive, and research-based; they are often in easily readable bulleted form, augmented by the occasional useful chart. By the end of this superb book, readers will get the feeling that no aspect of behavior change design has been neglected.

Destined to become a seminal work on innovative digital design.

COMMUNITY SERVICE ON PLANET WEIRDO
Carney, Patricia
Lulu (188 pp.)
$2.99 e-book | Aug. 1, 2019
978-1-68470-672-3

A realistic YA story follows a teen's journey from caving in to peer pressure to finding her own path.

Carney’s debut novel opens with 14-year-old Jennifer Shaw making a poor decision to help her friend and fellow student Sammy steal a purse from an older woman. From the very beginning, the author highlights Jennifer’s thought processes; the girl feels reluctance about the endeavor but also assumes that Sammy knows what he’s doing. Jennifer is caught by authorities and sentenced to community service in the Pine Rest Care Center. There, she’ll interact with many elderly people, as the judge wants her to learn to respect her elders. The teen begins a journey of self-discovery that alternates between negative influences and new, positive ones. For example, she later teases Tom Goodhue, her classmate and math whiz—until she realizes that she has more in common with him than she thought. Carney effectively shows how Jennifer gradually progresses from a state of somewhat numb unhappiness to a warmer attitude that includes growing respect for the seniors of Pine Rest as well as for the many adults who support her. (The teen even grudgingly helps plan a dance inspired by her comment that Tom is from “Planet Weirdo”—a mean concept that’s transformed into a creative story.) At the same time, she enjoys the attention of Sammy, who’s fallen in with a suspect group of people, and eventually she must choose a side. The smooth pacing of the text admirably sets up Jennifer’s relationships, and Carney ably develops many characters as she muses on the nature of community service. Overall, the book’s concepts aren’t new, but readers will enjoy how the author portrays Jennifer’s spark, creativity, and growth as she faces changes in her life.

An often powerful intergenerational story that overcomes its commonplace life lessons.

MURDER AT THE ESTATE SALE
Charles, Lily
Manuscript
$13.99 paper | Aug. 15, 2020
978-1-64437-244-9

Buck Hubbell wasn’t the most popular book dealer in Atlanta, but it appears that someone disliked him enough to murder him in Charles’ debut mystery tale, which also involves the disappearance of an antique spell book.

The world of book-dealing can be treacherous, it seems. While browsing at an estate sale, Molly O’Donnell and Emma Clarke discover Hubbell’s dead body in a cellar that’s lined with shelves
of antiquarian books. A mysterious note found beside the corpse reads, “Whosoever readeth this boke without leave of the Circle, let him BEWARE.” A closer look reveals that the note, which appears to be from the Elizabethan or Jacobean era, is a piece of ephemera that’s fallen from the aforementioned volume, written by someone with the initials “SF.” Intrigued, Molly pockets the note before the police arrive and, with Emma’s help, sets about finding the book, identifying the author, and working out exactly why it was worth killing for. After Emma temporarily steals the rare book Against the Diabolical, by C.S. Lewis, from the private stock of another antique bookseller, a further clue is revealed: In the text, Lewis refers to a small, 17th-century book of spells that had been shown to him by a student who mysteriously died soon after. Further investigation leads Emma to Shirley Parnell, a professor of religion who seems to know more about the spell book than she’s willing to admit. Charlene Ball and Libby Ware, who write together under the pen name Lily Charles, have crafted a charming pastiche of the age-old body-in-the-cellar mystery genre—one that’s full of hidden passageways, occult rituals, and, of course, amateur sleuthing. It treads a fine line between homage and cliché, and the rather bland title probably won’t inspire a great deal of confidence in prospective readers. However, skeptics should take note that this book manages to rise above much of the competition owing to its consistently jovial and easygoing narrative style as well as its informative discussions of Renaissance sorcery.

A fun, lightweight read for mystery fans that will also keep occultists and bibliophiles happy.

Standout tale, though, is “The Tire Swing”; it’s simple and evocative as it follows an elderly man as he relearns his youthful ability to be fully present in his body and in the world. Its prose is lyrical but direct, with a shift to a second-person point of view that heightens the empathy between readers and the protagonist. Overall, Connell’s stories are insightful while maintaining a keen sense of humor. The most striking aspect of his writing is his ability to capture the beauty and intrigue in mundane elements of his characters’ lives. However, the stories often end abruptly, and a few of the endings are certain to leave readers wanting more.

A powerful, thought-provoking selection of fiction from a talented author.

A LITTLE CHATTER
Connell, Terry
Self (119 pp.)
Oct. 18, 2019
978-1-70039-765-2

A collection of reflective, slice-of-life tales.

Connell, the author of Slaves to the Rhythm: A Love Story (2010), presents a diverse anthology of short stories that are simple yet affecting. In “Quiet Time,” teenage Lena navigates her life in a treatment facility following an accidental overdose; in “What’s Your Pleasure?” Russ works at a bar in Philadelphia and wrestles with a self-proclaimed prophecy that he’ll forever be a loser; Cecelia comes to terms with her closeted gay husband’s leaving her in “At Arm’s Length.” Some stories center on compelling everyday encounters, such as “More Than Welcome,” in which a man must go to the local health clinic after he cracks his tooth. Other pieces have their protagonists experience weighty, influential moments; for example, Vera in “Black Habits” discovers her sexual orientation and fights off a predatory nun. The stories are often dense with vivid imagery, particularly “The Creepy,” set in Cartagena, Colombia: “The humidity hung so thick in the air he could barely take a breath when he stepped onto the balcony...He could smell their perfume and peppermint gum as they click-click-clicked beneath the balcony on high heels.” The

SEE YOU IN MY DREAMS
A Daughter’s Journey With Her Father Through Dementia in Sonnets
Dargis, Julie R.
Self (54 pp.)
$5.99 e-book | Nov. 11, 2018

A daughter remembers her father, his dementia, and their last times together in this collection of poetry.

The morning of the day she received the call informing her that her father had died, Dargis was inspired to write a sonnet about caregiving. Her father developed dementia after experiencing a serious fall, which was followed by a rapid decline in his health. The book is divided into two parts, with the first section recalling his period of rehabilitation in a hospital. The second portion recounts his time in hospice. The collection’s title refers to the parting phrase the author spoke to her father when visiting hours ended. Dargis’ poetry captures a broad range of aspects of life as a caregiver to an elderly parent. The opening poem, “A Contradiction,” effortlessly depicts the brutal reality of dementia: “Not known for its precision. Like an old / Timex ticking well enough, but still not / Ready to cease.” The volume describes her father’s moments of unexpected lucidity, other patients on his ward, and his gradual slipping away: “I missed him, even though I was with him.” Dargis’ sonnets plainly describe the everyday experiences and fluctuating anxieties of a caregiver, as in “The Time Traveler”: “James, the nurse, came in with the / Blood pressure machine. It was lower than / Normal. Could he be in a state?” She is nevertheless acutely aware of the toll that these experiences have on her and that she must fortify herself, as demonstrated in “Sparring With Pugs,” an example of her understated yet impactful use of imagery: “I slip my mind into the mottled glove / And tighten the strings.” This is a deeply personal document, and those unacquainted with the poet’s family are left to guess the identities of individuals mentioned throughout: “Roger and Shirley smiled. / I bowed to Tamiko.” This does not detract significantly from the volume’s wider appeal, as Dargis succeeds in exploring the spectrum of emotions felt by all caregivers, from hope to resignation. Offering a list of caregiver resources at its close, this tenderly observed and moving collection will
The two “Stoner Dudes” (Steve Miller and Stan Miller) who “Please call me Tillie” adds delightful, laugh-out-loud comic relief.

Philip, a police officer working the graveyard shift, hasn’t seen five miles to Tori’s Costa Mesa home. There, she finds Philip seriously hung over and has no recollection of how she wound up on the floor. The last thing she remembers is being out for drinks with her best friend, Tori Carlton, and Tori’s “mysterious cousin,” Randall. Em hopes desperately that her husband, Philip, a police officer working the graveyard shift, hasn’t seen her passed out. It turns out that Philip never came home. Em’s repeated attempts to reach Tori by phone to find out what happened last night go straight to voicemail. Concerned that she and her friend may have been secretly drugged, Em bikes the five miles to Tori’s Costa Mesa home. There, she finds Philip and Tori passionately entangled on the couch. A knockdown, drag-out fight between Tori and Em spills outside, is witnessed by neighbors, and is broken up by the police. Which is very bad news for Em when, later that night, Tori is murdered and Em discovers the body. She is concerned about the police suspect, which means it will be up to her to find the real killer. But first she must help her twin sister, Carrie, who is catering an elaborate chili dinner the next night. Em also widowed, raise the 16-year-old daughter, Juliana, who’s never been told the truth about her mother’s death. The story unfolds in short, alternating chapters, each focusing on a different character, with many in diary or letter form. Ana discovers her late husband’s journal, which reveals his long-held desire to travel to the New World, and then finds Juliana’s diary, which she kept after she fled her childhood home. Her father had killed a man who’d raped her but then aimed to kill Juliana, as well, because he couldn’t bear the loss of “honor.” The book’s second part shifts to 1992, when Rachel, who’s pregnant, reveals to her dying mother that she’s about to have a girl. Rachel, who teaches Spanish at a university, later finds a packet of documents that continue Juliana’s story, including her escape to Mexico City and her life in a convent, which also shelters her daughter.

In Edgington’s sequel novel, a high-achieving schoolboy submits a short story for an assignment, and the grade that he receives comes back to haunt him.
A colorful fantasia that feels like what would happen if Franz Kafka and David Lynch teamed up on a reboot of *The Muppet Show.*

Fifteen-year-old Jack Hankins is used to being at the top of the class, so when he receives an F for a creative-writing assignment, breaking his run of As, he’s more than a little confused. The nine-line story that he submitted presented a brief scene of a boy running away from an unnamed person. In real life, Jack was adopted by a wealthy, caring family, and he seems like the last person who would flee his good life. Soon, the shocking grade begins to materialize in all corners of his life. For example, during an art class, he finds, to his horror, that he’s unwittingly covered his canvas with large red F’s, and it begins to seem like he’s suffering from mental illness. Then his friends and family are drawn into a series of increasingly peculiar occurrences; at one point, for example, red F’s appear in a video game that his good friend Ishvara is playing. It soon becomes obvious that something is fundamentally disrupting the nature of reality itself. Edgington’s debut novel, *Happy Jack* (2018), was concerned with Jack’s spiritual and emotional awakening as a child, and it was aimed at a younger audience. This time around, Jack is older, and the narrative has matured with him, transitioning from innocence to experience in a way not dissimilar to that in Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn.* In this second novel, *Happy Jack* itself becomes a book within a book, taking the form of a sacred text that Jack needs to track down in order to understand his own identity. It’s an intriguing experiment that considers the roles of the character, the author, and fiction itself, and the narrative drifts between fantasy, bildungsroman, and surrealism in an ultimately accessible way.

An unpredictable story about childhood, fate, and fiction, written with warmth and a light touch.

**THE BULLY AND EMILY DICKINSON**

* Fishel, Dennis E.
* Self (306 pp.)
* $14.95 paper | $2.99 e-book
* Apr. 2, 2020

Two Seattle teenagers in 1960 conceive pranks that sometimes backfire in this debut YA novel.

In the last moments of English class before summer vacation begins, 13-year-old Dennis Fishel can barely pay attention to his teacher’s reflections on an Emily Dickinson poem: “Even the smallest things we do in kindness for others can not only help us feel better about ourselves, but make our world a little brighter.” Though Dennis isn’t a bully like Russell Fomler, a neighbor kid and notorious lunch stealer, he doesn’t go out of his way to be kind. When Jay Walters, a boy his age, moves next door, Dennis is more interested in his model-airplane hobby than friendship. But Jay also builds model planes, and the two soon become pals and partners in crime. While Jay’s pranks lead to trouble, he and Dennis often wiggle out by blaming Russell, whom they’re delighted to see punished in their stead. But over time, Dennis learns that appearances aren’t always what they seem—and starts listening to his conscience in a new way. In his tale, author Fishel conjures up one scenario after another of hijinks and schemes that have much anarchic appeal, such as flying a kite armed with dog turds to bomb an enemy. The temptation to follow Jay’s lead is easy to understand. As an only child who’s often at loose ends, Dennis appreciates that “boredom didn’t hang around very long with Jay Walters nearby,” and he gains some courage from his friend. Although the boys do pull off some stunts, the story is balanced with consequences—as when they’re caught in a shoplifting plot and are tricked into performing hours of backbreaking unpaid work. When the resolution arrives, it feels earned, not preachy.

An amusing coming-of-age tale that nicely blends mischief with growing maturity.

**PUPPETS WIN TODAY**

* Fleming, David Wallace
* Self (344 pp.)
* $20.49 | $12.75 paper | $6.99 e-book
* May 15, 2020
* 978-0-9891247-6-8
* 978-0-9891247-5-1 paper

A self-conscious puppet struggles to become a real man in this raucous satire. Fleming’s fable unfolds on the planet Urftoo, which has a purple sun, a religion based on the orgiastic worship of a Christ-like lobster, and an economy run on the labor of sentient puppets. When puppet-maker Miltro Miggugen dies from eating a poisoned pistachio made by the Power Chemicals conglomerate, his creations, including a wizard puppet, a dinosaur puppet, and a urine-scented ant puppet, must fend for themselves with nothing but couch-stuffing to eat (and then vomit). Thrust to the fore is straight-arrow engineer puppet Felty FuzzPalace, who leads the others against attacking birds and human thugs who threaten to sell the puppets for scrap to pay off Miltro’s debts. Felty’s maturation accelerates when he meets a “squishy”—a silicone-bodied sex puppet—named Stephy, who demonstrates that sex and other emotionally fraught experiences can temporarily turn puppets into humans. Enjoined by Miltro’s bathroom-dwelling ghost to avenge his death, Felty takes a job at Power Chemicals, where the novel turns into a broad, jaundiced spoof of the corporate world, complete with an executive who’s literally an empty suit. Felty’s sense of engineering rectitude is offended when he’s tasked with designing a substandard plastic lid for machinery that makes a dangerous neurological drug—but he finds that his body is now attached to puppet strings hanging from the office ceiling and labeled “mortgage,” “fatherhood” and “promotion,” which make him unable to resist the company’s directives. Fleming offers up a colorful fantasia that feels like what would happen if Franz Kafka and David Lynch teamed up on a reboot of *The Muppet Show.* It’s dedicated to making the mechanisms of bourgeois conformism, which rob people of individuality and integrity, luridly visible, and the author shows a rich comic inventiveness in his puppet’s-eye view of the world. He also presents a brilliant
A triage system. This threat-assessment algorithm rates question-
ables of the time and place in which his characters live. The depic-
and full of action.

A security contractor learns that the U.S. government is using his company’s technology for sinister purposes in a new thriller from the author of *Maid of Bai-
kal* (2017).

After electromagnetic pulse attacks cripple much of the U.S., the country endures an intifada—predominantly, jihadi bombings and shootings. The Department of Homeland Security implements emergency security measures (ESM), ultimately selecting Zorn Security as a contractor for its triage system. This threat-assessment algorithm rates questionable citizens by category to determine a “propensity to commit political violence.” Unfortunately, Zorn Security CEO Roger Zorn spots trouble right away. DHS is essentially tweaking triage so that myriad people, including non-Muslims who have protested the ESM, rank in a high category, marking them for deportation. After Roger, who formerly worked for the CIA, hears that an old agency friend’s teenage, Muslim-supporting daughter is missing, he’s determined to find out what’s happening to deportees. This entails hitching a plane ride to a detention facility on a Caribbean island and, later, checking on detainees on another continent. Seems the only thing more alarming than the detainees’ treatment is the government’s apparent plan for the ESM to be the new security standard. Readers familiar with Fleming’s prior work will likely anticipate keen characterization and dialogue—and won’t be disappointed. Roger, for one, is multilayered; the 60-something is still establishing himself after his late, company-founding father made Zorn Security known for “brutal counterinsurgency campaigns.” Supporting characters are clearly drawn, like the Ibrahim family, whose patriarch is a government target merely for his son’s radical beliefs. Despite Roger’s spy past, there’s minimal espionage, as the narrative thrives on atmosphere stemming from individuals whom the protagonist quite understandably grows to distrust. Character exchanges, meanwhile, are intelligent and indelible.

A shrewdly written tale with a robust cast of characters and a frightening intifada in the U.S.

**FLIGHT OF THE WREN**

Fox, Winter
Self (421 pp.)
$20.00 | $0.99 e-book | Mar. 12, 2020

Fox’s novel of adventure and intrigue, set in Scandinavia at the turn of the 11th century, follows a young woman from Lapland on a quest to save her family.

As the story opens, 6-year-old Hilja is left alone after her mother and sister are kidnapped by Norsemen. Soon afterward, the local shaman, Taika—also called “the Lady of the Wood”—takes Hilja under her wing and trains her as an apprentice. The training gives the girl an intimate knowledge of the natural world and allows her to communicate with animals. Hilja’s final test, at the age of 14, is a journey to the Underworld, where she receives a cryptic mission from one of its spirits: “You must cross the water to save the bear, heal the devil, find your sister, and help your son unite your land!” Elsewhere, the rulers of the Scandinavian countries plot their alliances and futures. Denmark’s king, Svein Forkbeard, favors his elder son, Harald, as his heir, but he asks Thorkell the Tall, a warrior of renown, to train his younger son, Canute. In Canute, Thorkell sees the potential for greatness, but his wife, the powerful witch Hekka, has her own plans for Norway. Intrigue abounds as Thorkell and Gunnhilde, queen of Denmark, struggle to suppress their mutual attraction. Svein, meanwhile, aims to marry the widow Sigrid of Uppland, whose son is heir to the Swedish throne. Somehow, Fox manages to juggle all of these many and varied storylines with grace and even finds room to write evocatively of real-life customs and rituals of the time and place in which his characters live. The depiction of Beltane, an ancient May Day celebration, is especially vivid. Along the way, the author also artfully embroiders the novel with plenty of historical, cultural, and even religious context; for example, after a fight with a Russian warrior that partly hinges on the definition of the term “Viking,” Thorkell announces to his men, “We can either be Vikings or vassals of Rome, never both.”

An impressive and intricate novel that’s rich in character and full of action.

**THE GARDEN**

Perennial Reflections on Beginnings and Ends

Frode, Charles
Lulu.com (176 pp.)
$5.80 paper | Mar. 12, 2020
978-1-79483-116-2

A collection of meditative essays centered on the practical and spiritual aspects of gardening.

Frode, the author of the short story collection *Dreaming of Fish & Other Apocalyptic Stories of Foresboding and Grace* (2018), among other works, assembles 56 short reflections inspired by his life and his love of gardening. Each
chapter features small, full-color illustrations that include garden images. The mood for each essay is set by an opening quotation from a thinker and writer, such as Henry David Thoreau, Mohandas Gandhi, Wendell Berry, W.S. Merwin, or Thich Nhat Hanh. The entries cover a wide range of topics, from the practical to the sublime, making the volume of interest to both seasoned and novice gardeners. Frode explores the myriad possibilities of the garden’s revolving seasons, which he describes as “metaphors for life and death.” His reflections are sometimes highly personal, giving the volume a memoir-like quality. The chapter “Hands” features a photo montage of the author’s own hands, front and back, and reflections of what they’ve handled over a lifetime, including model cars, a concrete Japanese lantern, and, of course, garden vegetables. In another essay, he pays tribute to friendships and lessons that he learned during his younger days at a Trappist monastery. However, the volume is most successful when the reflections consider universal themes, such as the wonders of the natural world; the meanings of longing, memory, and healing; and the notion that “Gardening is an exercise in beginnings and ends.” The chapters vary in form, from original poetry in “Garden Poems” to spiritual instructions in “How To Grow a Garden.” Although the author suggests that gardening is a form of prayer, the emphasis throughout his book is on contemplative practice rather than religious faith. The work’s meditative qualities, attractive design, and evocative, graceful prose make it a treat for well-read gardeners. A lovely set of writings that draw inspiration from the natural world.

ZOANO ROMANTICA

Gilbert, James
Anaphora Literary Press (176 pp.)
$35.00 | $20.00 paper | May 19, 2020
978-1-68114-520-4 paper
978-1-68114-521-1 paper

A diplomat barely has time to unpack in a beautiful Mexican city when she finds herself involved in what looks like a high-profile kidnapping in this novel. Amanda Pennyworth has arrived in Puerto Vallarta to takecharge of the American Consular Service, her fourth posting. She is already becoming disenchanted with her career, but Puerto Vallarta should be a safe and pleasant place to spend a few years. There is a large American expatriate community with a literary bent, an attraction because Amanda has been working desultorily on a novel over the years. The star of that community is Joshua Talbot, whose first novel, many years ago, rocked the literary establishment on its heels, but—old story—he has not produced much since. That debut novel was a lodestar in Amanda’s childhood, and now Talbot has shown an interest in her, befriended her. Then, when he is supposed to meet her for dinner, he doesn’t show up. Hours turn into days, and the fear grows that he is hurt somewhere in the mountains backing the town or, worse, has been kidnapped. Sure enough, ransom notes show up on Amanda’s doorstep. Her best ally is Romero Morelos of the Tourist Police, a very solid guy (and single and sort of hunky). Will Amanda and Romero be able to save Talbot? Gilbert is an experienced and capable writer, and Amanda is a well-drawn and intriguing character. Readers will get a keen sense of the daily (and nightly) life in the Zona Romantica (a real area in Puerto Vallarta) and of the undercurrents of Mexican politics, especially the uneasy and unequal relationship between the local police and the arrogant federales. While not in Hammett’s or Chandler’s league, this enjoyable tale delivers the requisite red herrings while following the trail of the crime. But in the end, one of those herrings turns out not to be red at all. Who knew? Well, some readers will probably figure that out and even guess a key angle. The final plot twist has in fact appeared more than once in real life.

An entertaining mystery with a vibrant setting.

LUCKY CAT AND THE KAIJU HORDE

Gray, Wendelin
Self (304 pp.)
$12.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Feb. 26, 2020

A war involving possessed, monstrous dolls heats up in this fourth volume of a series. In a future world where three represive superstates control the globe, a rogue faction of enchanted dolls and fox spirits fought back in a guerrilla conflict known as the Doll War. Now, in 2139, although peace has been restored by treaty, the superstates are still wary. Recently, lethal yet beguiling white roses have reappeared in the French Alps. The flowers also have a connection with Chika Ando, who was killed because of her opposition to the government. The secret police travel to Chamonix, where the roses are said to be growing again despite having been destroyed in 2078. But the investigation leads them into a trap, breaking the treaty and providing justification for the dolls to wreak all-out war. Aided by the human resistance Movement, the dolls use their supernatural abilities to attack in the form of gigantic monsters. As in previous volumes, Gray offers a trademark blend, where gory fights and the Japanese monster genre—known as kaiju—are combined with descriptions of subtle delicacy. For example, an enchanted, human-size doll holding a fan is surrounded by the smell of plum blossoms. As she attacks an enemy, “the edges of the fan’s ribs glittered in the dying sunlight, revealing small, dagger-like, silver points.” Similarly, an appealing little maneki neko (beckoning cat figure) becomes “over 100 feet tall,” although “her fur seemed as fluffy as cotton candy…she would crush and kill anything in her path.” But events can be hard to follow even for those familiar with the series, and Gray leaves terms like kitsune (a Japanese fox spirit) undefined. Surreal and poetic, this SF/fantasy series installment can be puzzling but still charms.

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THE CIRCLE-A KILLINGS

Heary, Sean
Matador (256 pp.)

The world’s richest people are being systematically murdered, and an anarchist movement may—or may not—be to blame in this thriller sequel.

In Heary’s The Concordat (2018), Enzo Rossi, the head of the Vatican’s police force, was in Moscow on a mission to track down a rogue historical document. Now Rossi is trying to take things a little easier. He’s accepted a post as a visiting academic at the University of Cambridge in England and is enjoying the serenity of academic life, but the peace, inevitably, doesn’t last for long. He takes time out to join a pheasant-shooting party at the estate of a local aristocrat, but his impressive display of marksmanship is quickly overshadowed by that of a sniper, who murders a brash Russian new-money billionaire. The killer escapes, but he leaves behind “his calling card—a circle-A monogram and #27 spray painted in red,” the dead billionaire’s ranking on the Forbes “Rich List.”

It’s just the latest in a series of big-money assassinations. Rossi is drawn into the investigation and finds himself reunited with CIA agent Cathy Doherty, who’s gone undercover as a student and suspects start dying at an alarming rate, though, it begins to look like they may be following a false trail. Although Rossi and Doherty’s friends, colleagues, and suspects start dying at an alarming rate, though, it begins to look like they may be following a false trail. Although The Concordat delved deeply into the past, this series installment is more grounded in the present. The tone is a little different, but the overall plot is quite a tangle, and absorbing narrative. The sinister villains’ efforts to destabilize the world order, and particularly the European Union, are front and center, but the overall plot is quite a tangle, and it will require a lot of patience on the reader’s part. The ethics of the characters are sometimes questionable, as well, as Rossi himself acknowledges.

Another gripping thriller from a writer who continues to impress.

The 24-HOUR SOUP KITCHEN

Soul-Stirring Lessons in Gastrophilanthropy

Henderson, Stephen
Radius Book Group (240 pp.)

A New York–based journalist recounts his experiences in some of the world’s soup kitchens in this debut memoir.

Henderson was in France on a mission to buy an “absurdly expensive oven” when he was asked if he had ever come across the Frenchman Alexis Soyer, who became Victorian Britain’s most celebrated chef. Learning about Soyer, inventor of the soup kitchen, inspired the author to begin his own “gastrophilanthropic” journey. Interested in feeding large numbers of people but with no professional training, Henderson began utilizing his journalistic expeditions as a way of learning more. When visiting Delhi to write an article about India’s fashion week, he discovered that Sikh temples “operate 24-hour soup kitchens.” He later completed a five-day apprenticeship at one such kitchen. The author’s travels also took him to Iran, where he learned about nazr, a spiritual vow that can involve “voluntarily cooking for others.” Henderson then made his own vow to volunteer at a soup kitchen in Pittsburgh to celebrate each year that his niece completed in her Ph.D. program. The memoir details his experiences in Japan, where he stayed at a Buddhist temple; Mexico, where he cooked a meal for a group of “homeless street kids and transgendered sex workers”; Peru; Israel; and South Korea. The author also discusses volunteering at soup kitchens across America.

Henderson’s writing bubbles with enthusiasm. When describing feeding a group of seemingly nonchalant youths at a shelter in Los Angeles, he writes: “What I saw...over the next hour was how a home-cooked meal can transform a roomful of sullen teenagers into a group of cheerful children.” His narrative is also woven with a wealth of background data that underlines the gravity of the homelessness crisis: “It’s also estimated that there may be between one million and three million homeless children currently living on the streets in the United States.”

The author’s delightful descriptive skills that often draw on culinary metaphors add a sprinkling of levity to a serious subject (a road in the Andes is depicted as having the “consistency of pudding” and an Israeli tour guide had “hair dyed a shade of red best described as ‘medium rare’”). Henderson is conscious of how his approach to “gastrophilanthropy” is viewed by others. He candidly reveals that one friend referred to his journeys as “magical misery tours” whereas another nicknamed him “His Holiness” behind his back. Unafraid to introduce a broad range of perspectives to the memoir, the author admits that “making a meal is, after all, an imposition of your taste onto someone else.” He intelligently defends his position on feeding the poor, drawing on the French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s proposal that “charity is based on income inequity.” Henderson boldly dismisses this explanation as “a clever intellectual’s rationale for doing nothing.” The author draws courage from how his idol, Soyer, was also derided for his acts of charity but endeavored to make a change regardless. This book would benefit from a more determined effort to smoothly segue between chapters; it occasionally reads as a series of independent essays that do not fit together. But this detracts little from a graceful, well-balanced, and enlightening work.

An inspiring philanthropic account that deftly displays the author’s affability, knowledge, and passion.
MURPHY MURPHY AND THE CASE OF SERIOUS CRISIS
Hirshland, Keith
Beacon Publishing Group (308 pp.)
$17.99 paper | $4.99 e-book
May 1, 2020
978-1-949472-12-7

A detective with an aversion to redundancies works a theft case that spins off into a missing person investigation in this mystery.

Detective Murphy Murphy is a one-man show at the Department of Redundancy Department. His superior, Capt. David Hill, assigns him a new case: Someone may be stealing personal items from members of the popular rock band Serious Crisis. Frontman Walter “DeMaio” Turrell is missing his $1,800 lighter while keyboardist/guitarist/songwriter Lyndsay Howlund, who is Hill’s niece, can’t find a set of golf balls. Murphy individually interviews and looks into the band members, their manager, and several roadies. It’s not always easy, as the detective seethes at the entertaining narrative with romance (Murphy is interested in female bartender Charlie Carlucci) and humorous backstories, but the entertaining narrative with romance (Murphy is interested in a religious man who runs a church out of his house. While it may take readers a few pages to adjust to Sally and her ambition to be other people, Hunter’s text paints an intricately detailed picture. With the Detroit Tigers in the World Series and intriguing characters, like a girl who is described as little more than “human wallpaper,” Sally’s world is an entertainingly distinct one. But some aspects can be drawn out. Sally’s long obsession with an accomplished twirler named Barbie Robert comes with the takeaway that perhaps this successful teen’s life isn’t as perfect as it seems. Although the novel ultimately delivers an obvious conclusion, the heroine’s odyssey is unforgettable, enlivened by Fanta, Jet Star 88s, and a close look at a not so distant time.

While not always surprising, this ’60s family tale remains strikingly memorable.

SOMEONE ELSE
Hunter, Mary Paula
Unsolicited Press (292 pp.)
$17.00 paper | $4.99 e-book
Dec. 17, 2019
978-1-950730-30-8

A debut literary novel focuses on an American teenager’s journey of self-discovery.

It is 1968 in East Lansing, Michigan, and Sally Tallman is a high school student with an odd hobby. Sally likes to inhabit the lives of other people. She will mimic her chosen target to a refined point, even telling strangers that she has someone else’s name. Sally’s peculiar passion helps her distance herself from the realities of her own. Her father is a World War II veteran whose career as a journalist has been put on hold thanks to a vague illness. Her mother is deeply immersed in the creation of homemade clothing, paintings, and any other crafty pursuit that catches her fancy. Then there is Sally. She may be a steadfast babysitter and a whiz at Latin, but who is she really? Readers learn more about Sally as she copes with events like the suicide of a classmate and the emergence of family secrets. The Tallmans also allow a troubled girl named Beth to live with them. Beth brings her own difficulties to the table, not the least of which involve one of Sally’s neighbors, a religious man who runs a church out of his house. While it may take readers a few pages to adjust to Sally and her ambition to be other people, Hunter’s text paints an intricately detailed picture. With the Detroit Tigers in the World Series and intriguing characters, like a girl who is described as little more than “human wallpaper,” Sally’s world is an entertainingly distinct one. But some aspects can be drawn out. Sally’s long obsession with an accomplished twirler named Barbie Robert comes with the takeaway that perhaps this successful teen’s life isn’t as perfect as it seems. Although the novel ultimately delivers an obvious conclusion, the heroine’s odyssey is unforgettable, enlivened by Fanta, Jet Star 88s, and a close look at a not so distant time.

While not always surprising, this ’60s family tale remains strikingly memorable.

AETHYR
Kelly, Sean E.
Self (248 pp.)
$13.95 paper | $2.99 e-book
Jan. 30, 2020
978-1-73412-910-6

A nanotechnology engineer’s mind, uploaded online, reboots after spending three years in a netherworld and must try to remember what went wrong with the experiment.

Kelly’s debut SF novel offers a first-person narration from entirely within a software-based environment called the Aethyr. Pittsburgh nanotech engineer Patrick “Paddy” Riordan was part of a pioneering experiment in the late 2020s by a cutting-edge/punk rock–style team of young coders, neurologists, and biochemists. The group planned to digitize a human brain and put its consciousness online, theoretically resulting in immortality, godlike perceptions, empathy, and power. The subject was supposed to be the team’s financier, terminally ill venture capitalist Andrew Damon. But Paddy, suffering chronic gastric pain, volunteered to leave flesh behind and go first even if that meant being clinically euthanized and having his brain sectioned. After three years in a limbolike state, Paddy regains awareness and his mortal appearance (complete with Iron Maiden T-shirt)
in the Aethyr’s artificial program/simulation and its seedy, noirish city of New Eridu. (Here, as in the porn-dominated web, most places seem to be sex clubs and strip joints.) Surrounded by sinister phantoms and avatars that may either be people or AIs, Paddy finds that vital parts of his memory are missing. Moreover, a warrior type, calling itself the Varyag and declaring itself his defender, hints that the researcher who was the radiant love of Paddy’s life, MIT prodigy Zinaida, aka Zed, is in danger. Somehow in this incorporeal state, Paddy can help her. But is the Varyag lying? What happened to Andrew? What really happened to Paddy? For that matter, what’s happening right now? If this tale had been told in a more straightforward fashion, it might have had less impact. But in Kelly’s long-end-of-the-cyberscope gambit, starting with the outcome and leapfrogging back in time, the story is an intriguing puzzle of transhumanist tech, philosophy, metaphysics, and unreliable narrators. The narrative delivers a mounting sense of dread as describing the rubber reality of Aethyr is a tough proposition, digital entities broadly hint to Paddy that he will deeply regret learning the truth if he chooses to continue his quest. While describing the rubber reality of Aethyr is a tough proposition, SF readers raised on The Matrix and Black Mirror (the recipient of a shoutout) and Neal Stephenson’s Snow Crash should acclimate to the immaterial milieu.

Cyberpunk shock meets infinite romantic regret in this dark, engrossing, and ultimately doleful SF tale.

**PETER AND THE PARACHUTE**

*Manning, James & Ridgeway, Nicola*

*Illus. by Urosevic, Irena*

CBT Books (34 pp.)

$9.95 paper | $2.99 e-book

Apr. 11, 2020

978-1-80027-095-4

A young eagle gains the courage to face his fear of flying in this children's book.

It's time for Peter, a golden eagle who hatched three months ago, to leave the nest and fly. But he's scared—so much so that despite having wings, he's gotten himself a parachute. His mother urges him to have confidence, but Peter is full of what-ifs. Talking to several adult eagles, he discovers that they, too, were once wary of flying or lacked strength at first. But all of them tried their wings and discovered they could do it, got better with practice, and soon loved flying. Still, Peter is reluctant to get started. “What if he fell and snapped a wing?” When a gust of wind blows Peter from his nest, he can’t open his parachute. He panics but also remembers how other eagles were frightened to fly but “found a way to believe in themselves.” As he nears the ground, Peter flaps his wings—and flies. He learns that all he had to do to succeed was try his best, and the more he practices, the better he gets. By the end, Peter makes himself and his parents proud. Ridgeway and Manning, both consultant clinical psychologists, previously collaborated on Joe Goes To OCD School (2018).

Children who are scared to try new things can identify with Peter and appreciate that he’s never mocked for his fears but instead given solid encouragement. The book offers realistic acknowledgment that first attempts may be difficult, as when Peter soon needs to rest after his first flight, but encourages a resilient attitude. It’s also reassuring that his parents were watching all along. Urosevic, who illustrated similarly themed *Chasing Scaredy Away* (2020), offers varied and nicely composed pictures that combine realism with anthropomorphism. Approachable advice for kids who lack confidence.

**MY FIRST TIME IN CHARGE**

*Stop Worrying—Start Performing: Practical Guide for New Managers*

*Matteucci, Daniele*

AuthorHouseUK (190 pp.)

$17.23 paper | $4.99 e-book

Dec. 19, 2019

978-1-5462-9934-9

Neophyte bosses get deep lessons in both the mechanics and the interpersonal side of running a workplace in this management primer. Matteucci draws on his experiences overseeing the Thai wholesale subsidiary of an international eyewear company to advise readers on the practical and the emotional aspects of management. The former consist mainly of routines to conceptualize, organize, and oversee the activities of underlings. At the highest level are vision and mission statements. The author’s succinct statement for his enterprise was “eyewear modernization,” which translated in part into helping retail opticians sell his products with better displays, employee sales incentives, and the like. Matteucci further emphasizes the importance of setting concrete goals for a business and then translating them into “action plans” that specify what to do along with who should do it and by what deadline. Plans are then broken down into smaller steps, including a “Next Immediate Action” to get workers instantly in gear. The author offers no-nonsense tips on everything from how to conduct business negotiations to how to communicate with employees (“Do not abuse your authority by ordering useless reports”) and how to assess meeting attendance (“Do not be there if you are not interested”). He includes helpful charts, images from Getty, and paperwork templates that can be used to keep track of management initiatives. Matteucci addresses issues of workplace human relations in a similarly straightforward way. Arguing that bosses should adjust their management techniques to individual employees, he expounds on categories of worker characteristics and capabilities along with suggestions on how to manage staffs. These include various whimsically named but perceptive stereotypes, like the Devil Type (a selfish extrovert) and the Silent Villain (a selfish introvert), both of whom must be summarily fired. He suggests a number of “Pleasure Tools” and “Pain Tools” to positively or negatively motivate employees, but these are less lurid than they sound, ranging from raises and awards to stern talks. Written in lucid, straightforward prose, the author’s how-to is more hands-on than most business advice books, more attuned.
An entertaining story that captures not just scientific facts, but human drama as well.

EROSION

How Hugh Bennett Saved America’s Soil and Ended the Dust Bowl
Pattison, Darcy
Illus. by Willis, Peter
Mims House (34 pp.)
$23.99 | $11.99 paper | Jun. 9, 2020
978-1-62944-149-8
978-1-62944-150-4 paper

A soil conservation expert helps solve America’s Dust Bowl problem in this fifth Moments in Science picture book.

In the 1930s, eroding soil and the resulting gigantic dust storms, some reaching as high as 8,000 feet, destroyed millions of acres of farmland. When a congressional committee met in 1935 to discuss the problem, a soil scientist named Hugh Bennett (1881-1960) explained that farmers needed to change their methods, for example by rotating crops. But the committee was unconvinced it needed to take action—until a monster dust storm that “blotted out the sun” blew into Washington, D.C. Congress approved a soil conservation agency, the first of its kind, and Bennett became its director, reducing the areas affected by the Dust Bowl by half in two years. Pattison tells an entertaining story that captures not just scientific facts, but human drama as well. She makes erosion immediately understandable through simple but accurate language and attention-grabbing comparisons, such as a storm that “could have covered...Chicago in soil 12 inches (30.48 centimeters) deep.” But she doesn’t explain that plowing the deep-rooted native prairie contributed greatly to erosion. Willis’ illustrations are stylish, richly colored, and dynamic, with playful details, like the recurring image of a raccoon covering its eyes from the dust.

A compelling, kid-friendly, and visually appealing erosion story.

¡TODOS AL RODEO!
A Vaquero Alphabet Book
Pérez, María Alma González
Del Alma Publications (40 pp.)
$15.99 | Aug. 29, 2020
978-0-9822422-7-8

A bilingual children’s book that explores the alphabet through the Spanish-influenced traditions of the rodeo.

Pérez’s previous volume, ¡Todos a Celebrar! (2019), touched on various aspects of Hispanic culture in an alphabet book in the English and Spanish languages. In this latest addition to her series, she turns to the rodeo and its origins in the world of cowboys. Once again, the book aims to teach children new words while also emphasizing their connection to the Spanish-speaking cultures of the Americas. Each page presents a different rodeo-related concept, from “arena” to “the zillion cattle brands,” with a short description and a question designed to encourage a response, such as “Have you seen a horse with...”
horseshoes?" The full text appears in both English and Spanish, and it's clear and readable in both languages. Full-color photographs, including stock images, feature rodeo cowboys as well as children on horseback in traditional costume or working with animals. Although some words ("gallop," "bronco," "mustang") are drawn from the world of horses in general, others, such as "escaramuza" (a choreographed routine performed by women on horseback), are specific to Latino culture and Mexico's in particular. The book takes a few liberties in order to find a word for every letter (such as "Xx is for the shape of barbed wire"), but on the whole, it does a good job of matching the format to the theme. Pérez is also skilled at connecting well-known elements of cowboy culture to their Hispanic origins, making the book useful as more than just an alphabet primer. The images and text are engaging and dynamic throughout, and adults and children will find it enjoyable to read and discuss together.

An attractive alphabet book that effectively explores horses and cowboys in two languages.

**TOKYO TRAFFIC**
Prøkøn, Mìchæl
Raked Grawrl Prøss (294 pp.)
June 20, 2020
978-1-942410-19-5

Murders on a pornographic film set expose a bevy of criminal activities in this third installment of a Tokyo-based detective series.

Detective Hiroshi Shimizu’s forensic accounting skills and fluency in English make him an asset in the Tokyo police’s homicide department. The newest case consists of three dead bodies at Jack and Jill Studios, which specializes in porn. Who exactly was the target isn’t clear: the unidentified actor; the director, Ryota Noguchi; or Takeo Suzuki, a former Ministry of Finance official. But the business is definitely involved in illegalities, as the dead actor is not only underage, but likely one of many trafficked girls. Readers are aware that Sukanya, a Thai teenager who’s in Japan for a promised American passport, fled from the scene and may have witnessed the murders. She also stole a laptop and an iPad, believing they would help her get out of an unfamiliar Tokyo. Unfortunately, Kenta Nakamura from Jack and Jill is determined to retrieve those potentially incriminating devices by whatever means necessary. Hiroshi, meanwhile, uses his aptitude with numbers to link cryptocurrency to the porn industry and the decidedly more dangerous human trafficking ring—likely involving the same people responsible for the homicides. Series protagonist Hiroshi shares the spotlight with myriad characters, both recurring and new. The narrative perspective regularly shifts to Kenta, who’s working with someone even more menacing, and Sukanya, who thankfully finds a helpful soul in Chiho, a local woman. While Hiroshi and other detectives search for the killer, the story’s most shocking aspect is the sheer volume of crimes, including blackmail, kidnapping, and worse. But Pronko attributes this overwhelming seediness to individuals, not Tokyo itself. The Japanese city is instead rather lively and appealing, like a vivid character standing amid the grid of apartment blocks, gyudon shops, manga cafes, and family restaurants.

A dark and striking thriller with an indelible cast and setting.

**THE REVENGE OF OGSTONE**
Ralph, J.S.
Illus. by Macklin, Terence
AuthorHouse (170 pp.)
$28.82  |  $17.23 paper  |  $4.99 e-book
Nov. 28, 2019
978-1-72839-210-3 paper
978-1-72839-210-3 e-book

A young girl and her pixie-like friends find danger and idyll in this sequel.

Suzy, nearly 13 years old, lives with her Nan and Grandad in Capel-le Ferne, a village perched atop the White Cliffs of Dover. Suzy is friends with the Paxteys, winged fairylike beings who inhabit a nearby cliffside warren and take care of the natural world. Sometimes Paxteys and humans can form a special bond—a symbiosis of sorts—and can hear one another’s thoughts. This has happened with Suzy and the Paxtey Scratch, her special friend, who is still recovering from the tribulations of Ralph’s previous volume, *Voices in the Mist* (2012). In that story, the loathsome Ogstone captured lots of Paxteys and held them prisoner. Thanks to Suzy and Scratch, those Paxteys were rescued. Ogstone was thought to have “puffed out” (died), but he is back. He has taken over the body of an osprey, mutating it beyond recognition and corrupting several nests of young ospreys to act as his henchmen. Ogstone’s one driving thought is to take vengeance on the Paxteys. Can Suzy, Scratch, and the others defeat him again? This middle-grade book is very much a continuation, and though the author writes with new readers in mind, there are still some elements (Little House, for instance) that pass wholly without account, leading to a measure of disorientation. Suzy is a throwback character, evoking the bygone days of early- to mid-20th-century children’s fiction, including tales by E. Nesbit and Enid Blyton. Suzy is innocent and loving and rather saccharine in her interactions. She is often overcome with emotion. While her lack of foibles may not be to everyone’s taste, one consequence of her sweet disposition is that the story takes on even more of a wistful, halcyon feel. The Paxteys are delightful creatures. Ogstone is the very essence of a frightful villain. The dialogue is slightly stylized—again, evincing the formality of yester-year. The plot, though simple in both execution and resolution, moves along nicely and will keep young readers beguiled. The book contains a handful of black-and-white pencil drawings by Macklin that sufficiently depict the main Paxtey characters.

A dreamy, magical adventure harking back to the stories of an earlier era.
DUTCH THE CAST IRON OVEN
Riddle, Edward
Illus. by Guess, Vicki
Southeast Seven Publishing (40 pp.)
Nov 20, 2019
978-0-9988716-4-6

A cooking implement forms a lasting friendship with a boy in this picture book.

Dutch isn’t a pot: He’s a cast-iron oven. Following Dutch’s life from when he was first “born” in 1865 through his travels across the prairie in a covered wagon and his arrival in a log cabin home, the story explores generations of a family. The advent of the electric oven leaves Dutch relegated to a barn. After years of languishing without cooking, Dutch is purchased at an estate sale and his new family introduces him to camping. He develops a special relationship with Tyler, one of the children. When Tyler leaves for college, Dutch is worried he’ll be left in quiet of his faded celebrity—until an acquaintance from the past interrupts it: Stuart “Pinky” Goldstone, the father of one of Ray’s former grad students. Jeff, Pinky’s son, was a founder of the NoLab art collective, which devoutly followed Ray’s work and created their own impish art projects. Now Jeff and the other two members of NoLab are missing. Pinky pays Ray to look into it, and Ray enlists fellow artist Victor in the sleuthing. Their investigation leads them to the Institute, a cutting-edge arts organization outside of Columbus, Ohio. As Victor and Ray keep digging, NoLab’s latest project takes shape—a project bound to upset some very powerful people. Roth’s novel is at once a sendup and a loving portrait of the fine-art world, and it moves quickly. At the same time, however, it effectively gives Ray time to reflect, and these moments are the highlight of the book. As a narrator, Ray proves to be an eloquent guide: “I never tired of what I witnessed on those streets,” he says of New York City. “Lower Manhattan was my Yosemite, my Galapagos, my Sahara. My La Scala, my Prado, my Bodleian. Every day was a revelation.” Of painting, he observes: “It now seems absurd to me that the one culture I flatly rejected was my own, the one I labored in for so long and knew so much about.”

A lively satire, a loving homage, and a satisfying whodunit.

WHAT IS A GREEN ROOF?
Sando, Vicki
Illus. by Lehar, Zee
Nausicaa Valley Press (27 pp.)
$9.95 paper | $5.95 e-book
Feb. 19, 2020
978-1-73416-720-7

Urban environmentalist and educator Sando makes green architecture accessible to an elementary school audience in this picture-book debut.

The rooftops of New York City come in several colors: blue, black, silver, stone, and green. Sando briefly describes the reasons behind the other structures’ hues before delving into the subject of green roofs and how planting atop buildings can have a tremendous environmental and emotional impact. In well-labeled diagrams and instructional illustrations, the author, along with illustrator Lehar, reveals the layered structure that makes planting atop a roof naturally beneficial. Sando also makes sure to mention the positive impact it can have on people, who “work and feel better when they look at nature.” Sando seamlessly introduces scientific terms (such as “compression,” “tension,” “habitat”), providing definitions inline or in a callout where necessary as well as in a glossary. Lehar’s bright cartoon illustrations depict real New York landmarks with green roofs to show the variety of appearances they can have as well as a variety of New Yorkers. The text’s complexity is best suited for independent readers at the second- or third-grade level, but teachers will also find plenty of plain-language classroom material here.

An engagingly illustrated work that brings a compelling concept to life.
These mostly cheerful vignettes feel as comforting as old Reader’s Digest stories about glory days on the farm.

REALLY, GRANDDAD?

MAKESHIFT
Selbrede, C.M.
Lulu.com (62 pp.)
$5.99 paper | Sep. 12, 2018
978-0-399-00957-2

A researcher, haunted by personal tragedy, becomes emotionally involved while psychologically assessing an advanced robot who may be prone to dangerous behavior.

Selbrede takes on weighty issues of humanity and machine life in this SF novella. For five years, research scientist Ally Fallow has worked at an institution called NQQ (short for the Latin nequaquam, meaning “any means”). Suddenly, she is reassigned to a project in NQQ’s elite division. A series of advanced prototype robots has gone rogue. Their AI minds suffer through “a sort of artificial puberty, if you will,” and they tend to rebelliously conclude their human creators are unworthy and must be eliminated. Thus, robots have been summarily destroyed by NQQ to thwart any threat to people (Ally later learns to her horror that human life has been lost already). Because of her psychology background, Ally is supposed to assess Makeshift, a guinea-pig robot deliberately cobbled from components of the scrapped ones just to trace the malfunction’s nature. Ally is surprised that the roughly humanoid Makeshift seems gentle, creative, and whimsical but also maddeningly obtuse and resistant to letting Ally analyze his intellect using standard methods. Eventually, the time with Makeshift—who, like Melville’s Bartleby the scrivener, resists doing a task because of an existential crisis (except the robot does a better job of explaining himself)—triggers unhealed emotional wounds Ally carries about her dead brother. By adhering to a brief page count and a fairly unadorned narrative, Selbrede imparts a fablelike quality to material that might have been explored at greater breadth and depth in one of Isaac Asimov’s canonical robot tales, though Asimov (at least in shorter classics like “Liar!”) exhibits much less love for conflicted machines and uplifting moral. For example, during visits to his grandparents’ farm at haying time, the author learned the value of a work ethic. After disobeying a parent led to his sister’s getting injured, he realized that honesty was always the best policy. He also paints some touching portraits of colorful family members, like grandma Nanny, who doggedly taught him to read after a teacher had given up hope. Then there was his tough-as-nails father, who had a gentle side, too—he once bravely saved a skunk whose head was trapped in a glass jar. Even though this energetic compilation can be corny (there are plenty of winks and grins in Granddad and Claire’s conversations), many nostalgia lovers will enjoy Sherrard’s homespun humor and familiar situations. Who hasn’t heard a tale about a silly boy sticking his tongue on a freezing metal railing? And many people know how pesky—and ridiculously funny—those doggone gophers can be, especially when one chases the family dog. Complete with cute sketches by Dewitt and black-and-white family photographs, these mostly cheerful vignettes feel as comforting as old Reader’s Digest stories about glory days on the farm.

Sweet, sentimental slices of simpler times.

M I T T E S
Based on True Stories
Smith, Courtney Soling
Quarrier Press (265 pp.)
$15.99 paper | $3.99 e-book
Dec. 1, 2016
978-1-942294-09-2

Six witnesses relate their divergent interpretations of a violent incident that took place during the Civil War in this novel based on true stories.
Caroline Anderson lives in Greenbrier County, Virginia, at the Elmhurst house, a “magnificent place” before the Civil War erupted. President Martin Van Buren once picnicked there, but it has since decayed into ruins from neglect. Caroline’s husband, John, suddenly joins the Confederate Army, never to be seen or heard from again, leaving her to fend for herself and her two stepchildren, 8-year-old Sally and glum teenager Samuel. When bedraggled Union soldiers come marching through town, a group of them forcibly enters Caroline’s home, first looking for medical supplies and then for a reprieve from their nomadic discomfort.

On May 22, 1863, while Elmhurst is occupied by “horrid Yankees,” a “dreadful incident” occurs, one that leaves two men, one of them a Union soldier, dead. Years later, the incident is investigated by Gen. George L. Scarborough, under the authority of the Department of State. This ingeniously inventive novel by Smith is largely composed of the records of the testimony culled by Scarborough, collected from interviews with six witnesses, including Caroline and two of the soldiers who were in her home that day. The plot is bewildering—the author slowly, with aching suspense, inches toward the incident in question. Meanwhile, a romantic tension and rivalry brews between Caroline and Capt. James Tobin, a “sweet talking” and “handsome” soldier who will be among those who witness the event. Smith cleverly juxtaposes the different accounts, illuminating the paradoxical nature of storytelling, which reveals and conceals simultaneously. As Caroline explains, “What I mean to say is: the information you are after cannot be told in one simple story since it is actually many tales stitched up with each other.”

A tantalizingly kaleidoscopic look at an event that altered its witnesses’ lives forever.

THE MAGPIE’S RETURN
Smith, Curtis
Running Wild Press (380 pp.)
Aug. 1, 2020 978-1-947041-61-5

A gifted girl finds her life thrown into chaos during a period of societal upheaval in this dystopian literary novel. Math prodigy Kayla sticks out from the herd. The middle schooler takes high school calculus classes while generally trying to avoid being victimized by her peers. The rest of the country is not much friendlier than her middle school, particularly since the rise of Arthur McNally and his populist, anti-intellectual movement based on exclusionary Christian nationalism. After McNally wins the presidency and Russia and the nations of Asia destroy themselves in a nuclear war, America is forced to undergo “The Great Shut-In” until radiation levels return to normal. During the resulting social unrest, Kayla’s professor father becomes involved in the Movement, a nonviolent protest organization at odds with McNally’s government. Things come to a head when her father is pulled from their house by their neighbors and lynched in the street. Kayla’s mother and uncles are arrested, forcing the teen to go into hiding. After she is betrayed by a friend’s family, Kayla ends up in a school for girls who have lost their families during the government’s purges. Here, Kayla must learn how to keep herself from becoming a victim—and to plan her revenge on those who destroyed her family. Smith’s prose is lyrical and controlled, creating a dystopia that is realistic in its mundane brutality. Here, Kayla witnesses her father’s hanging: “Slater lifts his arm, and the shirtless man yanks the rope. Another man rushes forward and grips the rope, then another. My father rises, an imitation of fight. His hands claw the noose, the spastic kick of his feet, the rope’s wild sway.” The author masterfully depicts America’s crisis through the perspective of one girl even as he shifts the point of view through the novel—one person, second person, third—to highlight major reorientations in Kayla’s life. While there is no shortage of novels offering nightmarish visions of the near American future, this one manages to stand out both in its realism and its resistance to simple moralizations. It’s all the more frightening for it.

An affecting futuristic tale that manages to feel both urgent and timeless.
A girl with an unpronounceable name discovers that she can use wordplay to change other people’s destinies in Somreth’s middle-grade novel.

Jane Doe Smith has been raised on word games by Mommy Dee and Daddy Joe in a double-decker bus among the swamps of Okefenokee, Georgia. When she starts attending the labyrinthine Lewis Middle School, she hopes only to avoid her bully, Ezequio. However, after Jane discovers on the first day of school that her legal name is actually Ouishiouishiwacomolocoeau (pronounced as in the book’s title), Ezequio smears mud on her face. Jane—now known as “Wishy-Wishy”—then finds that invoking her true name allows her to transform people into mythical creatures. As a result, Ezequio becomes a “squonk,” a pitiable beast who can’t stop weeping, hates the sun, and, oddly enough, reads Walt Whitman. Remorseful but unable to reverse the curse, Wishy-Wishy tries to adjust to middle school life by studying grammar with her only friend, the brilliant Indian foreign exchange student Adhyaksa, in a remedial English class taught by Principal Mathis. Mathis encourages students to get Cs, forces them to write shorthand in crayon, and tells bad jokes that strangely seem to make him shrink when he tells them. The fearsome Jabberwock, who’s long stalked children from Lewis Middle School’s Gifted and Talented Education program, perceives Adhyaksa’s intelligence and imagination and abducts her in order to steal her dreams. Newly friendless Wishy-Wishy tries to remember Adhyaksa when nobody else is.

Ezequio mourns his dead mother’s lettuce preference or the English class taught by Principal Mathis. Mathis encourages students from Lewis Middle School’s Gifted and Talented Education program, perceives Adhyaksa’s intelligence and imagination and abducts her in order to steal her dreams. Newly friendless Wishy-Wishy tries to remember Adhyaksa when nobody else.

Telling bad jokes that strangely seem to make him shrink when he tells them. The fearsome Jabberwock, who’s long stalked children from Lewis Middle School’s Gifted and Talented Education program, perceives Adhyaksa’s intelligence and imagination and abducts her in order to steal her dreams. Newly friendless Wishy-Wishy tries to remember Adhyaksa when nobody else.

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With the settings ranging from Washington state and Canada to London, Belgium, Paris, and, eventually, Italy, the novel captures the intense details of the trip, including the couple’s chafing thighs and exhaustion on their bikes; their emotionally heightened fights and sniping; and their moments of romantic rejuvenation in new, exotic surroundings. Despite his unwillingness to acquiesce like his fellow reincarnated brethren, Alessio is a sympathetic villain, driven by the same unremitting pride and fear as Edward, a fitting physical obstacle for the couple to overcome if they wish to break the pattern of heartbreak. The book boasts an impressive knowledge of cycling as well as the history it draws from, be it Renaissance Italy or the time of the French Canadianvoyageurs, a pleasant balance to its more outlandish conflicts.

Travel, both conventional and through time, brings rousing action, romance, and unorthodox marriage counseling.
An intoxicating, acutely observant collection.

The natural world melds with the spiritual unknown in this collection of poetry.

The epigraph to this new offering by Watson asserts: “Finding meaning / in the subtle underpinnings / of this soft earth.” This reads as the poet’s mission statement for the forthcoming pages, where he delights in illuminating the disregarded minutiae of human life. The fluid collection is divided into 10 books, each no more than 50 pages long, and complemented by paintings from a broad range of artists, from Nicholas Roerich to Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In the opening poem, “origins,” the author’s camera eye zooms outward from microcosm to macrocosm, capturing “distant sands / turned white as flecks / on wild black hair” to the infinite expanse of “where the world begins / before Creation.” This strikingly visual collection then seeks to understand humankind’s place in the universe by taking readers on a poetic journey through time and space. Watson’s writing is sparse yet deeply thought-provoking, as in the poem “fossils,” which celebrates an indelible declaration of love across the ages: “In two thousand years / they will find an oak fossil / with meaning / in the subtle underpinnings / of this soft earth.”

Fans of Watson’s work will find this his most penetrating, cohesive volume to date. The result is an intoxicating, acutely observant collection where landscapes shift continuously and meaning is in a constant state of flux. Fans of Watson’s work will find this his most penetrating, cohesive volume to date.

A dazzling and intriguing poetic examination of the wonders of the universe.

Wolfram, a technologist whose family members run several businesses that incorporate advanced math and computation, presents an authoritative call to completely revamp the structure of math education (or “maths,” in his British dialect). The book makes a case for improving students’ mastery and action-calculation gives students room to focus on broader questions. Wolfram does an effective job of analyzing the problems with contemporary math education, and he makes a strong case for change. His writing is strong and often clever (“Sometimes the maths educators can look like elders, policymakers like disciples, and the population like the maths tribe”), and it makes for enjoyable reading on what might ordinarily be a dry subject. Wolfram will likely persuade many readers that, in 2020, using computers for calculation gives students room to focus on broader questions. Teachers and students are sure to find this book useful, as will those who make education policy.

A solid and thoughtful educational analysis.
INDIE
Books of the Month

THE REVOLVING HEART
Chuck Augello
A superb, captivating work from a promising new literary voice.

STAY, DAUGHTER
Yasmin Azad
A loving and approachable coming-of-age story about generational change.

MURDER, INC.
Gerald M. Goldhaber
A safety expert’s engaging and well-written guide to hazards at home, at work, and elsewhere.

BURNING JUSTICE
Marti Green
A captivating and intimate look at injustices in the judicial system.

SORCEROUS RIVALRY
Kayleigh Nicol
A free-wheeling, clever, and joyful debut that should be on every fantasy reader’s shelf.

ENTREPRENUDDING NUMBERS
Spencer Sheinin
A highly readable, mystery-dispelling introduction for entrepreneurs to the world of accounting.
DID AGATHA CHRISTIE ‘BORROW’ FAMOUS PLOT TWIST?

A British translator has suggested that Agatha Christie borrowed the famous plot twist in her novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* from a short story by a Norwegian author, the Guardian reports.

Lucy Moffatt thinks the legendary British novelist might have been influenced after reading a story by Sven Elvestad (who wrote under the pen name Stein Riverton) that appeared in an English magazine two years before *Roger Ackroyd* was published.

Spoiler alert—if you haven’t read the novel, stop reading now.

In both Elvestad’s story and Christie’s novel, the murderer turns out to be the narrator.

Christie’s great-grandson, James Prichard, said it was possible that the author was influenced by the story. Moffatt’s publisher made clear that they’re not accusing Christie of plot theft. “We do not claim this is conclusive proof that Christie ‘borrowed’ the idea for *Roger Ackroyd*,” a spokesperson for Lightning Books said.

STORMY DANIELS IS A SUPERHERO IN NEW COMIC SERIES

Stormy Daniels, the adult film star who claims she had sex with Donald Trump in 2006 while he was married, is casting herself as a superhero in a forthcoming series of comic books, Reuters reports.

TidalWave Productions will publish *Stormy Daniels: Space Force* this fall. “It is *Barbarella*–meets–*Star Trek*–meets–*Stripperella* in a racy comedy, action, and adventure series starring Daniels.”

“It’s all satirical, of course,” Daniels told Reuters.

Daniels gained national fame in 2018 after it was reported that Michael Cohen, Trump’s lawyer, had paid the porn star $130,000 in hush money to stay quiet about the alleged affair. Cohen was later convicted of a campaign finance violation because of the payment and sentenced to serve three years in federal prison.

In late May he was released to home confinement as part of a Justice Department push to stop the spread of coronavirus in prisons.

Co-author Andrew Shayde said that he had fun writing the book. “Because *Space Force* stars Stormy Daniels, I feel it appropriate to drink a glass or bourbon or two while I write,” Shayde said.

ALASKA SCHOOL BOARD REVERSES BOOK BAN, FOR NOW

An Alaska school board reversed its earlier decision to remove five classic novels from a high school curriculum, the Anchorage Daily News reports.


The board meeting was contentious, KTVA 11 News reports, with the board’s vice president, Jim Hart, reading aloud an excerpt from Angelou’s book describing the sexual assault of a child. He described the passage as featuring “sexual content.”

The school board’s original decision to pull the books drew national headlines. The rock band Portugal. The Man, whose members come from Wasilla, offered to send copies of the books to Alaska students who wanted to read them. The school board is scheduled to revisit the issue next May.

Michael Schaub is an Austin, Texas–based journalist and regular contributor to NPR.
It was 1960, a time that didn’t belong to the era we call “the ’60s” but instead was an extension of the uptight, gray 1950s. Samuel R. Delany, known since childhood by the self-bestowed nickname Chip, was a teenager who was just coming out as gay. His father, an African American from the South who had come to New York to find a better life, had just died, and Delany was bereft. “I’d been trying to write an elegy. It began, ‘They told me you were not in any pain,’ ” he writes in his 1988 memoir of that time, The Motion of Light in Water, even though he knew that his father was suffering terribly.

The following year, Delany married the budding poet Marilyn Hacker, traveling to Michigan to do so because of laws still in place in New York that forbade interracial unions. They had found a battered apartment in the East Village—although, he notes, it wasn’t called that in those days but instead “was still the Lower East Side.” It was fantastically inexpensive, but meeting the rent was still challenging in a time when $50 seemed a fortune.

Yet they made do, living in a splendor of secondhand chairs and brick-and-board bookcases. Delany began to craft stories and novels such as The Jewels of Aptor and Babel-17 that would shake up the robots-and–ray guns world of 1950s science fiction, novels with characters of nonbinary gender, robust and fluid sexualities, and multiple ethnicities who inhabited planets where such distinctions weren’t important and where anyone could be anything at any given time: gay or straight, male or female, neither or both, whatever your mood and desire.

It was much like the East Village, where bohemian experimentation was the order of the day. “I was a young black man,” Delany writes, “light-skinned enough so that four out of five people who met me, of whatever race, assumed I was white. (Some figured I was Italian or possibly Spanish.) I was a homosexual who now knew he could function heterosexually.”

Elsewhere in the city, binary categories were still much in force, however. As Delany recounts, his mother-in-law called him a “homosexualist,” a term that amused more than bothered him. Still, he allows, she was onto something. “I’ve often asked myself why Marilyn and I married,” he writes. “Through my adolescence, as I’d explored this personally difficult (as all sex is) and socially confused (as most sex is) situation—at least as it awaited young people in the fifties, who then had little chance of any parental support—Marilyn had been among my few confidantes, as I’d soon become one of hers for her own heterosexual explorations.”

In the rare milieu of lower Manhattan if almost nowhere else, though, he could be anyone and anything he wanted, to the benefit of readers everywhere. He and Hacker would have a child, part, come together again, and finally separate as the ’60s began to change the rest of the country. Delany’s fiction both reflected and anticipated the transformation, with explorations of sexuality that are still startling—and liberating—today.

Gregory McNamee is a contributing editor.
LOOK OUT FOR NEW RELEASES!

“A COMING-OF-AGE MASTERPIECE.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

In this companion to the award-winning Darius the Great Is Not Okay, Darius suddenly has it all: a boyfriend, an internship, a spot on the soccer team. It’s everything he’s ever wanted—but what if he deserves better?
ON SHELVES 8/25/20

“MYSTERY AFICIONADOS OF ANY SEXUAL ORIENTATION WILL THINK IT’S THE BEE’S KNEES”
—Kirkus Reviews

A Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue meets Miss Fisher’s Murder Mystery in this rollicking romp of truth, lies, and troubled pasts.

“A FIERCE, PENETRATING, AND EMPOWERING CALL FOR CHANGE.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

“A (This Book) Will Make A Better World.”
—Booklist, starred review

POCKET CHANGE COLLECTIVE was born out of a need for space. Space to think. Space to connect. Space to be yourself.

“EVERYONE SHOULD READ THIS REMARKABLE, AFFECTING NOVEL.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

This debut novel is a deep look at the bravery it takes to stand up for yourself, and the power of finding someone who treasures you for who you are.

How It All Blew Up is Arvin Ahmadi’s most powerful novel yet with an incisive look at navigating multiple identities as a gay Muslim teen, who runs away to find himself.
ON SHELVES 9/22/20

A CSK HONOR, BFY A TOP TEN, AND A RAINBOW LIST TITLE NOW IN PAPERBACK!

A bold and lyrical debut about two black girls from very different backgrounds finding love and happiness in a world that seems determined to deny them both.
ON SHELVES 6/23/20

Enter to Win Copies of All 7 Reads at https://bit.ly/ReadProudGiveaway!