Her Secret Selves

By Megan O’Grady

“I KNOW EVERY PERSON has their own truth,” Tove Ditlevsen writes in “Childhood,” the first volume of her beautiful and fearless memoirs. “Fortunately, things are set up so that you can keep quiet about the truths in your heart; but the cruel, gray facts are written in the school records and in the history of the world.”

That the Danish author (1917-76) was famous in her own country by her 20s, writing a major body of work that includes 11 books of poetry, seven novels and four story collections, doesn’t mean that expressing those truths came easily. The facts of her early life in a rough corner of Copenhagen’s Vesterbro district were gray and often cruel enough: Hitler was rising to power; her father lost his job; Ditlevsen’s education ended with middle school. Her comedy, mercurial mother mocked her desire to be a poet, telling her that “everything written in books is a lie.” The best she could hope for was marriage to “a stable skilled worker who comes right home with his weekly paycheck and doesn’t drink.”
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New & Noteworthy

THE LOVE PROOF, by Madeleine Henry. (Atmi, $15.) Pieces and prose interlace in this novel about a brilliant young scientist who drops her studies for an all-consuming relationship, then returns to the lab to prove that love really can be forever.

APPROPRIATE: A PROVOCATION, by Paisley Rekdal. (Norton, paper, $18.) Questions of cultural appropriation often crystallize most acutely in works of literature, from William Styron's Jeannet Camm topping. Rekdal, a writing teacher, parses the issue to ask who is "allowed" to write what, and in what contexts.

WANT ME: A SEX WRITER'S JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF DESIRE, by Tracy Clark-Flory. (Penguin, paper, $16.) A journalist who covers sex and culture (currently as a senior staff writer at Jezebel) recounts her gradual understanding of the social forces and innate psychology that have shaped her own sexual identity.

UNSING: UNRELATABLE NARRATIVES OF AMERICAN SLAVERY & ABOLITION, edited by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. (Penguin Classics, paper, $12.) This anthology highlights the overlooked role that enslaved people played in emancipation.


WHAT WE'RE READING

I love spy novels and live in London, but somehow had never gotten around to reading anything by the British author John le Carré. His obituary in The Times, published in December, intrigued me. I started with his breakthrough novel, THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD, written more than 50 years ago but still relevant, with its tales of moral ambiguity, disinformation and betrayal. The protagonist, the lonely and exhausted British agent Alec Leamas, agrees to one last assignment before retiring. Le Carré, who penned the book while working for MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence service, peppers the novel with chock about the true nature of Leamas's mission, which takes him into Communist East Germany. But it is not until the very end that the threads come together — when Leamas makes the decision that defines him. I gasped out loud when I read the last two paragraphs.

—JENNY GROSS, GENERAL ASSIGNMENT REPORTER, EXPRESS HERALD
TO THE EDITOR:
In her review of Gabrielle Glaser’s “American Baby” (Jan. 24), Lisa Belkin asks what aspects of modern adoption will have profound and unexpected consequences. As an adoption counselor for the past 25 years, I believe some changes have been excellent, others detrimental.

Unfortunately, in many states it’s illegal for adoptive parents to help with housing and food, even though many birth mothers are homeless and hungry. Additionally, the harshness of babies bounced from one foster care family to another persists despite scientific research documenting the harm it causes. But adoptive parents go with their birth mother to the obstetrician, receive her medical records and are in the delivery room. And contact is one area contemporary adoption has gotten right. Knowing how important it is for their child, enlightened families exchange emails and social network information and often welcome visits from their birth mothers.

NANCY KREUZE
WALNUT CREEK, CALIF.

Close Reader

TO THE EDITOR:
In his essay centered on Harold Bloom’s “The Bright Book of Life” (Jan. 31), Robert Gottlieb suggests that Bloom included Ursula K. Le Guin’s books among his favorites because of “personal considerations,” specifically Bloom and Le Guin’s friendship near the end of her life. Gottlieb is of course entitled to his opinion of Bloom’s choice to include my mother’s works, but it wasn’t a matter of friendship or favoritism. Bloom wrote to Ursula for the first time in late 2017 to express his admiration going back decades for her work, and to let her know that he was planning to include her in a “kind of farewell book.” Their brief correspondence arose from this esteem for her prose and poetry.

The considerations behind Bloom’s decision to include her books may have been personal, but only in the sense that artistic and critical taste is always personal.

THEODORE DOPPAN-LE GUIN
PORTLAND, ORE.

TO THE EDITOR:
I cannot be the only reader who initially felt overwhelmed at the number of authors and books referenced in Gottlieb’s essay. I have read only a handful of the books Bloom included in his personal canon and could not begin to follow Gottlieb’s quibbles and aidses.

At first I felt ashamed at my lack of literary chops, but then I realized that the only excision of a nonwhite woman were two references to Toni Morrison: one about her birth year and another a joke diminishing her work in comparison with Shakespeare. Harold Bloom’s book contains many masterworks, but I prefer seeing the more robust and diverse set of authors in the pages of the Book Review each week.

MARK WEAVER
PITTSBURGH

CORRECTION

Because of an editing error, the Letter’s columns on Jan. 31 misidentified the address of a letter writer, Stephen Schleiningcr. He lives in New York, not Toledo, Ohio.

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

This issue marks the debut of our new crime columnist, Sarah Weinman. Marilyn Stasio, who wrote the column for 33 years, will continue to contribute crime and true-crime reviews to our pages.
Bill Gates

The Microsoft founder and philanthropist, whose new book is ‘How to Avoid a Climate Disaster,’ is surprised more writers don’t address ‘how the insights we’re gaining from big data could be used for good.’

What books are on your nightstand?

“ Infinite Jest.” I’m on a mission to read everything David Foster Wallace wrote, and I’m slowly working my way through everything else before I get to that one. I’ve also got a copy of “The Three-Body Problem,” by Liu Cixin, which I’ve been meaning to read for a while.

What’s the last great book you read?

I really liked President Obama’s new book. It was fascinating to read about times when he struggled with self-doubt and how he dealt with it. He’s honest about where he might have done things differently with the benefit of hindsight. It had a level of candor and self-reflection that isn’t all that common among leaders. I was surprised that he portrayed the job as less crazy than I’ve always imagined it to be.

What’s your favorite book no one else has heard of?

“Business Adventures,” by John Brooks, a collection of his New Yorker articles about business from the 1960s. Even though the world has changed a lot in the past 50 years, Brooks’s insights still hold up today. Warren Buffett loaned me his copy years ago and told me it was his favorite business book. Now it’s my favorite, too.

In “How to Avoid a Climate Disaster,” you unexpectedly cite “Weather for Dummies” as one of the best books you’ve found on weather. What science and nature books would you recommend for somebody who wants to understand climate change?

“Weather for Dummies” is probably the best book written for a general audience about the subject. If you want to understand more about how weather and climate are interconnected, John Houghton’s textbook “Global Warming: The Complete Briefing” is good. There is also a great Coursera lecture series called “Earth’s Changing Climate.” Give it six
“IN AMERICA, everything is about either race or money or some combination of the two.” So observes Easy Rawlins, the private detective of Walter Mosley’s key literary project over the past 30 years, making his 15th appearance in BLOOD GROVE (Houghton, 307 pp., $27). Mosley’s work has chronicled an America rendered invisible, but also overpowered, by whiteness. Easy may be “a Black man closer to Mississippi midnight than its yellow moon” but he’s also a “father, a reader, a private detective and a veteran” who has evolved, and aged, a great deal since readers first met the 1948 version of him in “Devil in a Blue Dress.”

It’s 1969 now, and Rawlins is nearly 50, still struggling with professional and romantic and familial conflicts in a Los Angeles about to be bent by the breakup. He catches a strange-to-parses case: a young white man who thinks he might have killed a man during a vicious attack.

“I had to help him because I could see his pain in my mirror,” Easy decides, seeing past race and money to the shared post-traumatic bond of war-time services.

There will be regrets, and deaths, and special appearances from other recurring Mosley protagonists as Easy continues his journey through the country as it was, and is, rather than the stuff of myths and dreams.

BELINDA BAVER’s thrillers are ingeniously plotted, propulsively paced and suffused with a keen intelligence and wit. So yes, I’m a fan, and EXTV (Atlantic Monthly Press, 235 pp., $26) is a welcome addition to this distinctive body of work.

Felix, at 75, has known loss, still mourning the deaths of his wife and child. He channels his grief through work as an “Itinerant” stinging with the critically ill during their last moments as they prepare to end their lives.

But the latest assignment goes horrifically wrong. — I gassed and

OUR MODERN, housebound, locked-down era has transformed an often vexing question — “Why doesn’t this person care about text me back?” — into the stuff of existential nightmares. Catri Dasibello clearly worked on and completed most of U UP! (Mellein House, 305 pp., paper, $17.99) before the pandemic, but the novel’s examination of loss, be it sudden death or friendship rupture, feels very much of this moment.

The main mystery can be boiled down to two interlinked questions: why Ezra has gone dark in Eve’s text streams after the final romantic fissure with his girlfriend (and Eve’s onetime close friend), Norton, and why Eve is able to communicate virtually — via text — with the ghost of their dead best friend Migg, who killed himself the year before.

Both strands will be resolved not in the besting, Before-Time Los Angeles where all four reside but in a hideaway nestled in the desert, where the living mingle with the afterlife, and where fractured threads will knits them-selves anew in unexpected ways.

Dasibello is after bigger thematic game than more paranoiac mystery-romantic comedy. The texts Eve sends and receives — and the ones she doesn’t — are the means for her to cope with and repurpose her grief at the compounding losses in her life, and the self-destructive behavior that ensues when medicating herself with alcohol and cocaine stops working. Rather than flatten emotion via text, Eve’s plaintive missives heighten her brokenness, injecting an ache that as she searches out her deepest self within the wreckage of the selves she has abandoned.

MY NO. 1 rule is that you should never hire a hit man, because it’s certain to result in catastrophe. IN FINLAY DONOVAN IS KILLING IT (Montana, 358 pp., $26.99), her first mystery for adults, Elise Cosimano takes this rule to heart. The plot is free-quently outlandish, but the main character is so endearing that it’s easy to surrender to the ridicu-

A freshly divorced, deeply indicted single mom, Finlay just wants to write romantic suspense novels and make a living at it, something that’s eluded her so far. A fraught conversation with her literary agent at a crowded suburban Panera is misunderstand-

This assignment — in cash — is to kill a stranger’s hus-

band. A payday that’s more than 10 times her average book ad-

vance.

Things turn screwball, natu-

urally, as if Craig Rice had writ-
ten “Home Sweet Homicide” with social media in mind. Finlay, poor decisions aside, has a promising future in killing for sort-of-fame. Her books might garner more commercial success, too. After all, as her baby sits in her stroller for reasons, if landing an agent had 10,000 to odds, and landing a book deal is tougher still. “Getting away with murder had to be easier than that, right?”

SARAH WEINMAN is the author of “The Good Liar” and The editor of “Un-
speakable Acts: True Tales of Crime, Murder, Deceit & Obsession.”

COOKING

Make prep time the new playtime.
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Recipes to Cook With Your Kids.
nytcooking.com
Old Sorrows

A novel examines the burden of inherited trauma over several generations.

By CLAIRE LOMBARDO

"CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS are anthropologists of our own families," Lauren Fox points in an address to readers at the end of her new novel, "Send Me." "We're participants—observers of cultures we live in, but that will never quite belong to us." In many ways, "Send for Me" is indeed an anthropological excavation; its preoccupations are many and sometimes diffuse but it is haunted throughout by the endlessly fascinating question of inheritance. How much of our stories—and which parts—truly belong to us?

"Send for Me" delves into the history of a single family, spanning four generations and two continents. It is Fox's fourth novel, written with what she acknowledges is a fair amount of autobiographical influence. (She notes that the earliest iteration of the story was a memoir she wrote for her master's thesis; the excerpts from letters scattered throughout the text were written by Fox's great-grandmother.) And overall, the book is a real achievement—beautifully written, deeply felt, tender and thoughtful.

The primary narrative belongs to Ameline, a young Jewish woman in 1920s Germany who is coming of age—and falling in love—just as her city is becoming uninhabitable owing to the rise of anti-Semitism. She eventually moves to the United States with her husband and young daughter, leaving her parents behind and creating a new life for her family in Milwaukee. Fox's prose is rhythmic and gorgeous, and the portrait she paints of Ameline's life—and all she comes to lose—is richly textured. Physical details animate Ameline's story—the sharp job of a mother's elbow, the disturbing squish of an uncle who welcomes mat, a part down a scalp dividing two pigtails—as well as lean and often painful emotional descriptions: "She can never admit it, having escaped with their lives, can never admit how much it hurts to lose so many nice things. . . . What kind of person mourns things when so many of her dear ones are ashes?"

The storytelling is patient, generous, at moments even languid. Fox takes her time staging the life that Ameline will ultimately leave behind, chronicling minor mother-daughter conflicts, tepid female friendships, young heartbreak, the progression of courtship and marriage and, finally, pregnancy. The point of view shifts among characters, allowing an glimpse into the minds of Ameline's mother, father, and husband as well. "Later he'll marvel at their small slice of good luck: that they fell in love before the four sank down into their bones. . . . It was a gift. Certain events diminish you, alter your elemental structure. Later, he will not trust police officers; she won't abide Fourth of July parades. . . . That's who they'll become. But when they fell in love, they were just who they were."

Half a century later, Ameline's granddaughter, Clare, forms a friendship with Lauren Fox, the granddaughter of the woman who once wrote to Ameline, offering her hope when she needed it most. Clare finds solace in the letters. "Send for Me" is an exploration of the power of connection and the strength of the human spirit.

CLAIRE LOMBARDO is the author of "The Most Fun We Ever Had."

From the family archive: letters from Lauren Fox’s great-grandmother to her grandmother.
Made in China
A Prisoner, an SOS Letter, and the Hidden Cost of America's Cheap Goods
By Amanda Pang
278 pp. Algonquin Books. $27.95.

Growing thin on a diet of poisonous-smelling vegetable soup, "Sun regularly slept just two to four hours," Pang writes. "Only to dream of the repetitive cutting motions of folding paper." In the aftermath of 2020 — a year that saw both the expansion of a vast detention and forced labor system in the western Chinese province of Xinjiang and a hometown global population increasingly reliant on goods delivered anonymously to their doorsteps — Pang's book feels timely and urgent. Her argument starts here, in the room with the mushroom, and goes like this: that the way we consume is unsustainable, that something as seemingly trivial as paper mushrooms and Halloween decorations are entangled in a system that hones atrocity by design and makes complicity — with authoritarian governments, with dangerous working conditions and even with religious persecution — part of modern life.

"Made in China" gets off to a rocky start; Pang does not hit her stride until a few chapters in. She opens the book with a mystery, involving the discovery, by a woman living in the suburbs of Portland, Ore., of a note that Sun Yi hid in a package of Pang's book race through Sun's childhood and, at the same time, survey decades of Chinese history in passages that are sometimes sweeping and reductionist. "The Cultural Revolution killed millions and mangled China's economy," she writes. "This is why modern mainland Chinese idealize to place higher value on social stability than human rights." Once she has dispensed with this preamble, and Sun Yi arrives in Masanjia, Pang's narrative grows stronger and her argument starts to take shape. She details the living conditions and social hierarchy within the prison, the greasing wheels and rumors about a shadowy "ghost" unit. And, outside the prison, Pang is a dogged investigator of the factory where Sun worked, interviewing workers and factory managers and sorting through reams of business records. She follows a former employee of the factory, a man named Xu, who had been forced to work without pay. "It is common for a major brand to have over 100,000 suppliers at the first level," he says. "But when 100,000 suppliers are subcontracting to factories that are subcontracting to other factories, even the cheapest audits can quickly become expensive.

"While Pang is explaining the tangled web of sourcing and consumption that ties U.S. consumers to places like Masanjia, Sun Yi's story continues to unfold. She starts contemplating writing an SOS letter to include in the package of some decorative Halloween gravenoses he is working on. He is having notes in the metal mold frame where he sleeps, courting disaster as his letter-writing campaign expands to include other inmates. Meanwhile, in the United States, Pang explains, consumers are being greedily forced to buy more products in our heads while making a purchase. "We feel pleasure if the price is too high. When we are standing in front of the gentle glow of a computer screen, we don't feel the agony of the workers who made our products as deeply as we feel our desires.

Pang leaves us with a question: "What kind of world do we want to see for China in the future?" The hope is that she is not alone in this struggle for a more just and equitable world.
Is Islam Misogynistic?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali argues that Western women are in danger of losing their hard-won rights.

By JILL FILIPPOVIC

THERE ARE FEW women in the world who generate as much animosity, and as much accusation of hypocrisy, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She denounces Islam for its absolutism and intolerance, and then villainizes the religion of more than one billion people as a “nihilistic cult of death.” Her own history perhaps makes her antagonism understandable — she was forced into genital mutilation as a child in Somalia, fled to the Netherlands to escape an arranged marriage, and, as an adult, has seen her life threatened by Muslim extremists so many times and with such credibility that she travels with security. But she herself rejects that framing as sexist and presumptuous.

She calls herself “an infidel,” while many Muslims say she’s just an Islamophobe. She was put on a Qaeda hit list and called an anti-Muslim “extremist” by the Southern Poverty Law Center. She praises Western liberalism at the same time as she suggests that Islam is so incompatible with it that it is not possible to consider suspending their core values in the service of self-preservation. She’s an aygloe who calls for an end to asaym as we know it.

Her latest project only amplifies these inconsistencies. “Prey: Immigration, Islam, and the Erosion of Women’s Rights” argues that immigration from majority-Muslim countries is imperiling the hard-won rights of European women. Muslim men, who are by Hirsi Ali’s telling accustomed to gender-segregated societies in which female modesty is mandated and women are harassed out of public life, arrived in Europe in droves over the previous decade’s migration crisis, bringing old orthodoxies — and violent enforcement of them — to their new Northern homes. As a result, she says, European women face endemic sexual harassment and violence. Even worse, in an effort not to be seen as xenophobic or feed into rising right-wing nationalism, liberal Europeans are complicit in their own moral indifference, failing to denounce, to denounce, misgynry as more multiculturality even as Western women are criminally assaulted, told to cover their bodies and driven from the streets of their own cities. Hirsi Ali calls for a new feminist movement, one in which Muslim men are rioters. But she is saying that young men from conservative Muslim societies arrive in Europe — and most of the new arrivals are young men — having been previously steeped in profoundly misogynistic cultures and subject to laws that offer women fewer rights than men. That impacts how they behave, she claims, something Western liberals, who worship at the altar of cultural relativism, don’t want to recognize. “When it comes to migrants and minorities,” she writes, “pointing to cultural explanations for their behavior toward women is taboo.”

But is it? In the same book, Hirsi Ali rightly excoriates a German judge for acquitting a credible accused rapist by making “allowances for migrant sex offenders’ lack of understanding of Western women’s sexual self-determination.” Is the problem that it’s taboo to point to cultural factors that drive sexual violence? Or is it that European authorities too often excuse sexual violence at the hands of Muslim immigrants by pointing to cultural factors? In Hirsi Ali’s narrative, it’s whichever is more convenient. And any attempt to truly expose the complex factors that drive entrenched poverty, housing and educational segregation, and higher rates of crime in immigrant communities — any attempt, that is, beyond blaming religion and culture alone — is relegated to what she calls “The Playbook of Denial.”

This knee-jerk oversimplification is particularly frustrating coming, as it does, from a womanly of great intelligence. Hirsi Ali is correct that Europeans and North Americans are grappling with the moral complexities of immigration law in a world where conflicts and crises have driven so many from their homes, that the stakes of harsh anti-immigration laws are high (just ask the families of the tens of thousands of souls who have drowned in the Mediterranean), that European welfare states are both generous and easily imperiled and that we are increasingly aware that our opportunities and our basic physical safety are often dependent on the random luck of where we were born or where we were born to. She is right that a well-meaning commitment to tolerance can be easily exploited, and that women’s rights are often the first to be sacrificed in the service of cultural relativism. But a reader interested in a thoughtful analysis of these questions won’t find it in this book. Even a reader like myself — a reader who delights in a little black humor, yearns for greater secularism and unapologetic atheism, and welcomes the skewering of misogynist fundamentalists of any religion (taboos and tolerance be damned) — couldn’t find much to cheer here. Like the fundamentalist religions view she and both detest, “Prey” is too absolutist to be credible.

It could also be said to be cut through with bigotry. Hirsi Ali seems to latch onto the trope of men of color threatening virtuous white women, a particular kind of fearmongering for a long and ugly history. European courts saw their enemies not simply as extraneous, but as civilizing; to make that work, they doubled down on the idea of African and Arab men as sexually aggressive and uncontrolled, and white women their desired victims. European settlers worried about “the Black peril” of African rapists, which was also used to justify colonialism and the pervasive racist violence that went with it. During the French occupation of Germany, French newspapers sounded the (false) alarm about a “Black plague” of mass rapes and murders by African men in the French Army. (Hitler, true to form, blamed the Jews for bringing in the Africans.) And Hirsi Ali, too, seemed to play up the specter of Black rape. Jamelieh Bouie wrote in 2015, after Dylan Roof murdered nine people in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and reportedly told the Black congregation, “Your raped women, and you’re taking over our country, and you have to go.” Donald Trump, the most xenophobic American president in living memory, often used the threat of white girls being raped by immigrant men to justify his draconian immigration policies.

Hirsi Ali does show this old narrative just a bit: Instead of being virgins for their submission, masculinity or innocence — the usual rendering of white women in need of protection — European women in “Prey” are virgins for their liberal feminist values, and also vulnerable because of them. This is where Hirsi Ali gives away the game. After spending much of this book portraying herself as a defender of these very values, by the end, she...
Territorial Conflicts
Land ownership and the deadly disputes it has spawned throughout history.

By AARON RETICA

WE DON'T TALK MUCH about land reform these days, but after reading Simon Winchester’s “Land: How the Hunger for Ownership Shaped the Modern World,” I am wondering what we should. In the United States, Winchester points out, “the top 100” landowners, taken together, own “as much land as the entire state of Florida.” Nor in this exclusively the result of the dead hand of the past. As Winchester ex-

Some of his previous books, most notably “The Professor and the Madman,” which tells the singular story of a murderer who was central to the development of the Oxford English Dictionary, Winchester opens his new book with his own purchase of 123 acres of forested land in Dutchess County, N.Y., but goes on to tell us about this Lawson’s controversial collection. In one of the depredations of the mid-century British colonialism, many women, children, and men were rounded up in the field and marched out to the huts to be moved to the land that had been taken from them by set-

Lands

How the Hunger for Ownership Shaped the Modern World
By Simon Winchester

plains, “Since 2007 the amount of Ameri-

can land owned by these wealthy 100 has increased by 50 percent, and is showing no signs of slowing down.”

Winchester clearly sees this as a prob-

lem, but his book is not a polemic, as much as one might sometimes wish it were. Like a lot of journalists-turned-historians, Win-

chester is a quick study, and there is an as-
tounding amount of information in "Land," much of it revealing, although it can also feel somewhat random. As he roams his seemingly boundless terrain, Winchester provides us with set piece after set piece. And yet, despite the epic centuries-and-

centuries scale the trips to take on, his ap-

proach at its best is often minimalist, as if he has been, with perhaps greater success in

AARON RETICA is an editor at large for the Op-Ed page of The Times.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HETI HADROVICZ/GETTY IMAGES

the material may be familiar from other ac-

counts. To give one example, Winchester’s description of Stalin’s slaughter in Ukraine can be affecting, but if you really want to know what happened there, you would be better off reading Anne Applebaum or Robert Conquest. And despite Winchester’s evident sym-

pathy toward dispossessed Native Ameri-

cans, which serves as a kind of leitmotif throughout “Land,” there are too many sentences that could have come out of a high school textbook, like this one: "They were, in short, a sophisticated and civilized people — and though many Americans to-day believe there to be precious few Na-

tives remaining in the country, there are in fact some 500 tribes remaining and offi-

cially recognized today.” Winchester can also, in his zeal for arguing that Native Americans have a noble conception of the land than the men who deprived them of it, sound inadvertently condescending: “In the United States too, representations of

in the first place, are enforced against Mus-

lim men: “Because the individual is inex-

tricably linked to the group, condemnation of the individual is considered verification of the group.” It’s Hirsi Ali, though, who does exactly this: She finds stories of individuals — Muslim immigrants who commit heinous crimes, and by suggesting those stories are broadly representative, uses them to jus-

tify curtailting the opportunities afforded to the whole group. This is not, as she sug-

gests, a feminism of standing up for the rights of women. It is a feminism of reac-

tion — and one that would undermine the very liberal values Hirsi Ali begs feminists to protect.

whether the immigrants have the skills to work for pay — a requirement that could curtail granting legal status to a great many female asylum-seekers and refu-

gees, who tend to be less educated than their male counterparts.

Whether Hirsi Ali herself, who wore the hijab as a teenager and supported the fascists against Salman Rushdie, would have qualified for asylum under her rules is an outstanding question. Yet this is where her

liberalism truly shines through. “All liber-

al institutions are predicated on this idea,” she writes approvingly, that “the individ-

ual, whether male or female, is recognized as a decision-maker responsible for his or her behavior.” Central to this concept of lib-

eral individualism is an antagonism to col-

lective punishment, and the idea that indi-

vidual responsibility means one person’s wrongdoing doesn’t implicate his family, his entire race or his religious group. No such concept of individual rights and re-

sponsibilities exists in the Muslim world, she says, where group identity takes precedence. It’s why, she writes, Muslims have a “victimhood complex” when sex crimes laws, which they believe are invalid
SYBILLE BEDFORD IS NOT a household name, but among her coterie of admirers in Europe and America she is held in high esteem. Her reputation rests upon a relatively slim literary output over the course of a long life (1913-2006); notably, four works of fiction (three earlier novels were deemed inferior and remain unpublished), a memoir, books about travel and international legal processes, a biography of her friend Aldous Huxley that is still the definitive one, and sundry journalism. Her first published novel, "A Legacy" (1956), rescued from possible oblivion by Evelyn Waugh's encouragement in The Spectator, has become something of a cult classic. She had limitations as a writer, the most significant being that she really had only one story to tell: that of her own life. But what a life it was! And now we have it, elegantly related by Selina Hastings, the author of finely wrought, literate biographies of Somerset Maugham, Nancy Mitford and Waugh himself.

Sybille Bedford's father, Maximilian von Schoenebeck, was a melancholy, idle German aristocrat and his mother, Lisa Bernhardt, a gifted but narcissistic daughter of a rich Hamburg businessman. Billi, as Sybille was nicknamed, passed her first few years in a schloss near the Black Forest. At World War I progressed and the middle-aged Maximilian left to join the army, she was sent to stay with the wealthy Jewish family of his first wife in Berlin, a milieu the nascent novelist portrayed unforgottably. The family members, "stunk of upholstery and their own corpulence... lived contentedly in a hansom coconuts, an existence that was wholly centered on their own domestic comfort. [...] They never went to the theater, looked at pictures or listened to music; they cared nothing for books... They took no exercise and practiced no sport... They did not go to shops, things were sent to them on approval, and people came to them for fittings."

Needless to say, this lifestyle did not survive the disastrous end of the war and the empire, and the whole extended family soon became what Bedford called "the new poor." Her parents, always uncomfortable together, split up and Lisa remarried a kind Italian man almost 15 years her junior, Nuri. With the rise of Fascism in Italy, Nuri, Lion Feuchtwanger, Ludwig Marcuse and Bertolt Brecht, among others. But throughout this period Lisa, always unstable, was descending into morphine addiction and alcoholism. It fell to Nuri and Sybille to manage and care for her, a team effort her daughter later compared to that of two brothers "serving — in different ranks — in the same regiment." It was to prove a fruitless task.

With the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 and a French parliamentary act restricting the movement of refugees, desperately to Anglicize myself entirely." Bedford spent much of World War II in the United States (re-encountering the Mann and Huxley circles in Los Angeles, where they had taken refuge) and spent eight months traveling through Mexico in 1945-47; for the rest of her life she moved between England, France and Italy with a motley series of women lovers. "I wish I'd written more books and spent less time being in love," she admitted late in her life, and her fans can only agree. Bedford wrote with great difficulty: "I sit before my typewriter and sicken before the abnormal effort. What is this blight I have suffered from all my life that makes trying to write...such tiring, crushing, defeating agony?" It was far preferable to go to parties and dinners, and to cook spectacular meals for her friends. "Remember; one friend prodded her when she had slurred work for too long, "you are a writer, not other people's cook."

But Bedford's busy social and romantic life nearly always took priority. Hastings calls her existence a "sexual carousel" and has clearly had quite a job keeping track of the constantly shifting partnerships. Here is a typical sentence: "Returning to Normandy, Sybille was prepared for the tensions surrounding Alland's affair with Elia; what she had not expected was Esther's sudden infatuation with Joan." Much of this material is not especially interesting. What is interesting is that Bedford so often had the upper hand in her own relationships. Her partners seemed to take it for granted that they should bear the brunt of the dirty work (housekeeping, gardening, bill paying, etc.), and they often supported her financially too. Lots of people supported her financially. Indeed, she stands revealed in this biography — as a world-class freeloader, with generous friends like Martha Gellhorn subsidizing her travels and writing periods and

"I wish I'd written more books and spent less time being in love." Her fans can only agree.
Puppet Master
Revisiting the tale of Pinocchio from Geppetto's perspective.

By BRUCE HANDY

PINOCCHIO ENDURES: why, I'm not sure. Carlo Collodi's original 19th-century fairy tale is often funny, but with its rambling, wordy wooden hero who can't become "real" until he learns to behave, and who is further shamed by a phallic, lie-detecting nose, the story mixes morality and physiognomy in messy, silly ways. Somehow, though, this mash-up of Mary Shelley and Cotton Mather has resonated for generations:
Most everyone knows of Walt Dis-
ney's very freely adapted 1940 film, but there have also been movies, TV and stage Pinocchio from the Czech Republic, Rus-
sia, Canada, France and Japan — and so many Italian Pinocchios that Roberto Bo-
nagi has managed to star in two, Sequel on page and screen have taken the puppet to America, Africa, outer space and the year 3000, while yet more are reported in the works from Guillermo Del Toro and Robert Zemeckis. Francis Ford Coppola fought for years to make his own version. Mercifully, Jerry Lewis never got the bug.

Amid this glitz, the novelist and play-
wright Edward Carey has had the inspired idea to cut the marion-
nette loose and focus in-
stead on Geppetto, the lonely puppet maker who carves Pin-
occhio from an un-
chanted block of pine, giv-
ing his form and life — which is about as close as men get to im-
mandated concep-
tion, even if in fant-
asy. Carey's odd duck of a book is less a proper novel than a riff on the contrived themes of fatherhood and the creative space of a faithful Collodi in outline if not in spirit. "The Swallowed Man" takes place inside the garret of a whale, as in Dis-
ney) that swallows Geppetto after he sets off to sea in search of his runaway wooden offspring.

The test purports to be Geppetto's cap-
(December 14, 2020) and my first son (2006)."

Well, that gutted me. Should it matter to a reader why an author writes some-
ting, what he's try-
ing to work out on the page, or thinks he needs to say? Anachronists can worry that I was "The Swallowed Man," and en-
riched it. I've not suffered the kind of grief and mental strain that I understand a father's un-

Our main story, however, is about Geppetto's life. He is a loving father, a devoted husband, and an artist whose work is a reflection of his inner life. His struggles and triumphs reflect the universal human experience, and through his adventures, we gain insight into the complexities of parent-child relationships.

The main character, Geppetto, is a woodcarver who creates a wooden puppet named Pinocchio. Geppetto is a caring father who wants his son to be good and responsible. However, Pinocchio is a mischievous puppet who lies and breaks the rules.

One day, Pinocchio is stolen by a group of thieves, and Geppetto sets out on a journey to find him. Along the way, he meets a variety of characters, including a talking fish, a donkey, and a fox. These encounters help Geppetto learn important lessons about friendship, truth, and responsibility.

As Geppetto searches for Pinocchio, he discovers that the boy needs to learn to be honest and truthful. Geppetto teaches Pinocchio the importance of hard work and perseverance.

The novel ends with Geppetto and Pinocchio reconciling their differences and finding a way to live together happily ever after.

By AYELLET TSBARI

"IN CITY OF A THOUSAND GATEWAYS," Rebecca Sacks's ambitions first novel, the lives of a sprawling cast of characters intersect in the West Bank, where "ideology is unfolding in violent, consequential ways." There are Jewish settlers like Ori, a striking, blue-eyed sol-
dier stationed at a checkpoint, as well as Pal-
estinians: Mai, a student at Bethlehem University to whom Ori is a "beautiful mon-
ster," and the footballer Shahin has

family from a ghetto in East Jerusalem to the Jewish part of town, because "the Jews have better water pressure."

The book opens with a set of heart-stop-
ping scenes, Hawad, a clinic of Mal's, tattoos into Tel Aviv with an undated per-
mit. Outside the bus station he nearby bursts into Vera, a 20-something German reporter who is almost run over by a car belonging to Israel, an Israeli animate. Ori is stationed at a checkpoint where Haim's comparative literature professor, Samir, is waiting to cross into Jerusalem to get a travel visa to attend a conference in Chi-
cago. The multifunctioning body scanner that erroneously boops as she walks through is a point of illustration of the intens-
rating "senselessness" of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation. These various threads are all set against the recent mur-
der of a 14-year-old Jewish girl, by a terror-
ist who climbed into her bedroom window in an Israeli settlement, followed by the yenful beating of a 14-year-old Palestin-
ian boy at a Jerusalem mall. Sacks de-
scribes these acts of violence in graphic — perhaps too graphic — detail. The novel also explores the enduring wound of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and of the

fears an unflinching, unforgiving look into the harsh realities of the occupation and its impact on people's lives. Sacks works to dispel what Mal refers to as the "fantasy of a symmetrical conflict," but the author's description of the deep-seated hatred on both sides reads devastatingly true.

With her outsider's perspective and trou-
bling family past, Vera provides some of the more interesting observations on the con-
flict. For instance, noting that Israel's use of the term "Arab" instead of "Palestinian," she says: "Of all the wars waged here, the ones in language were the hardest to detect." But her motives are suspect. When she some-
how manages to be the only journalist to livestream a secret operation, "she needs ev-
everyone to know that she is here. That she is at the center. She needs them to know that this is her story." Vera wishes to narrate, "this place," believing her own voice is "a kind of soundtrack that brings poignancy, maybe even beauty, to the most divisive conflict in the whole world."

Sacks, an American who lived in Israel for a couple of years, demonstrates a knowledge of the region, but her characters' actions are-
't always persuasive, and her portrayal of Mitzi, an Arab consultant, is somewhat one-dimensional. Though Sacks' journalist presents herself "as a translator of these crises into language," and refuses to "peddle out her insights" lest she grant Va-
ria's word: "the meaning … that this white woman is so craved."

The tension of the opening scene falls to culminate in a satisfying climax, and the book is peppered with well-built cliffhangers that remain unresolved. We never find out what goes on in Samir's door at night, or what happens to a child who dis-
appears at a supermarket.

Though these narrative uncertainties evoke the unsettling pervasiveness of the "predictable" life in the region, the effect is often frustrating. But in a novel that resists offering a false sense of hope in the face of conflict, the open ends seem only fitting.
Let Me Tell You What I Mean
By Joan Didion
149 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $23.

first-person, observational style that is not saccharine but commonsensical. Seeing as a way of extrapolating hypocritically, disingenuously and doubt, she'll notice the hydrangeas are plastic and mention it once, in passing, sorting the scene. Her gaze, like a sentry on the page, permanently trained on what is being disguised.

The 12 previously published essays collected (mostly) for the first time in “Let Me Tell You What I Mean” were written between the late 1960s and the year 2000. They are gathered coldly, unevenly, with an exquisitely general, like a Didion di- gestion. Occasionally every page in the collection contains some mention of flowers, like a Didion bouquet. About all, she is her own kind of arranger — of words, of story — whose intuition for narrative arc is matched by her intuition for syntax.

Revisiting her work now provides a family photo, as well as a reminder of her prescience. Didion has a facility with bad omens, particularly when it comes to Ronald Reagan’s tenure as the governor of California. Telling Didion that “having a pretty place to work is important to a man,” Nancy Reagan fills an apothecary jar with hard candies for his desk, carpets the floors of the State Capitol in “a pleasing shade of green,” Didion writes. (What green carpet, Didion’s deadpan delivery invites us to ask, has ever been “pleas- ing”? ) Didion’s understated tone registers the nuances obscured by the quotidian: the still neutrality between mother and son (“The Skipper’s arrival is, I have been told, the pivotal point of Nancy Reagan’s day.”). Nancy’s preference for little choreographed.

The essays in “Let Me Tell You What I Mean” are at once funny and touching, evocative and non-nonsense. They are about humiliation and about notions of rightness. About mythmaking, fiction writing, her “failed” intellectualism and the syntactic.

DURGA CHEW-BOSS is the author of “You Much and Not in the Mood.”

As Hitler Als notes in his elegant and panoramic foreword, Didion is fifth-generation Californian: the language she speaks is, like every writer’s, regional. For her this means having a taste for the extreme and whatever strangeness erotics sunshine; the view from a highway and the perspec- tive gained from passing — not through, but alongside. In that same piece about San Simeon, Didion, whose writing is al- ways on some level a deliberation on what she herself endorses in theory that so many writers wrestle with: “Make a place available to the eyes, and in certain ways it is no longer available to the imagination.”

DIDION TURNED 86 in Decem- ber. Many of these dispatches, organized chronologically, were written when she was in her 30s and 40s. A half-cen- tury after her last “Points West” column, Didion’s ques- tions remain acute as ever. Reading newly arranged Did- ion, which is actually old Did- ion, feels like reaching that dip in a swimming pool where the shallow end suddenly be- comes the deep end. The bot- tom drops out, and you are forced to kick a little, to tread. This is why we return to her work again and again.

Didion cares for timelessness than for the evana- nce of language, mis- trusting pink icing or any- thing that might mislead the truth. Undergirding the entire collection is a regard for epistemology of glory, and of the era when fashion photog- raphers called their spaces “the studio.” Of fairy tales and failed attempts at quietude, of a child’s memory soup of imagination. Contrary to what this book’s title might suggest, Didion deals not in the definitive. Reading her letter from Stanford, Didion recalls “truly trying to interpret the words in some less final way.” Perhaps it’s the same impulse that’s behind the ellipse at the end of so many of her essays; her writing rarely winds up, but waives with unseeing pre- occupation. The Didion exit — on full dis- play in this collection — reveals the writ- er’s discreet contempt for those who chase on the encore. She rarely troubles herself with the loudest person in the room. Interess- ing rather for stories on a Greyhound bus or a flight to Honolulu, or in temporary set- ups with folding chairs and people climbing to their last hope. Didion’s pen is like a passage into the center of the universe. This collection demonstrates, it always has been. These essays offer a direct line to what’s in the offing. —

Why She Writes
Twelve newly collected essays are a reminder of Joan Didion’s prescience.

By DURGA CHEW-ROSE

THERE IS NO MISTAKING, at the mention of plastic hydrangeas, that one is reading Joan Didion. Much like the words “MIR- ACLES STILL HAPPEN” written in pink ink across a Gambler’s Anonymous ammuni- tion can, or the paper napkins at the Hearst Castle, fake flowers are one of many visual, allegorical asteroids that comprise the lush tool kit of this veteran writer’s American mise-en-scene.

In five decades’ worth of essays, report- age and criticism, Didion has documented the charade implicit in how things are, in a

insisted, out of the one dark fear we all know about, that all the surfaces be gay and brilliant and playful. For Didion, reality arrives with its own controlled dis- enamorments: her method of sifting, in this case, the castle’s great pools and car- lion bells, the zebra and the boogien�nus, is a matter of lasting with the past.

Joan Didion in 2007.

Her gaze is like a sentry on the page, permanently trained on what is being disguised.

has shown no obligation to the whopping euphonic. Realizations occur, but she re- lines them without splash, as if she’s ex- tracting a tincture. Hearst’s mansion is “a sand castle, an implausibility,” she writes. “A pleasure dome decreed by a man who

...
Is it possible to portray the drama and heat of real-life activism in the panels of a comic book?

"WRITING THIS BOOK broke my heart," David F. Walker admits in the afterword to his ambitious and informative graphic history THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY (Ten Speed, $16.95), crispily illustrated by Marcus Kwame Anderson. Founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was the most famous exponent of the Black Power movement. Its Ten Point Program (reproduced in full in these pages) was a forceful manifesto demanding "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace" for the Black community. In the immediate wake of the horrific killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, Walker notes that "every single concern" the Panthers addressed — from police brutality to reparations — "is still relevant."

Newton and Seale were both born in the South, moving with their families to California as children in the mid-40s. They met in 1962 at Merritt College in Oakland, and began strategizing about revolutionary action to address racial injustice — reading Mao and Marx, refining the philosophies of previous civil rights activists. In Walker and Anderson's account, Newton and Seale are galvanized to start the Black Panther Party by a writer of events, including the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X and the police shooting of a Black teenager in San Francisco the following year. Newton insists on developing a unique structure for the organization, though they are its two sole members. In one of the book's few moments of levity, they arbitrarily decide that Seale will be the chairman and Newton will be minister of defense.

The Black Panthers disbanded in 1982. But they have lived on in the popular imagination because of their militant stance toward injustice — as in the iconic image of a seated Newton clenching a rifle and spear, which decorates the cover. Walker strives for a comprehensive view, dedicating his book to the party's "rank and file" involved in community work. The result is a sprawling overview of the group's rise and fall, punctuated by gripping confrontations with the powers that be.

Fifteen biographical sketches appear throughout, allowing Walker to memorably some less remembered personalities, such as Emory Douglas (whose artwork in the "Black Panther" newsletter helped define the party) and Lil' Bobby Hutton, who at 16 was the first to join Newton and Seale's group. (They had to ask their parents for permission; he was promptly named treasurer.) Walker dramatizes key scenes, such as an early dust-up between an Oakland police officer and a car packed with four gun-toting Panthers. When the officer asks for Newton's phone number, he tersely answers, "Five," referring to the Fifth Amendment. When firearms are discovered in the car, the tension ratchets up. A stickler for gun laws, Newton cites his constitutional right to bear arms, explaining that his piece is unloaded "because it is illegal to carry a loaded rifle in a car," stepping out of the vehicle, he loads it. "Not a single shot was fired, and no one was injured," Walker writes. "But war had been declared."

When the text boxes start piling up, though, the tone can dry out. "Having made a name for themselves in Oakland, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was asked by Eldridge Cleaver and the RAM-affiliated Black Panther Party of Northern California to help provide security for Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X," Fortunately, as an artist Anderson is just as good at rendering static shots as he is at depicting action, and his gift for warm, uncluttered portrayal lends familiar figures. In an early sequence, he depicts 31 slain civil rights activists, their names largely lost to us. Most of them are smiling, yet all are shaded, heartbreakingly, in a ghostly blue. Though each panel is just 1.5 inches by 2.25 inches, the depth of emotion could fill an entire page. A mixture of bravery and dread hangs over much of the book. For all the party's talk of guns, they are only shown being discharged toward the end. Fred Hampton, who had joined the Chicago branch of the Panthers at the end of 1969, found himself the national spokesman the following year, fixing him on the FBI's radar. Walker and Anderson depict his murder by plainclothes policemen without showing any gore. Their machine guns fire 31 times across 19 orderly, crimson-tipped panels, the sound of each shot ("BLAM") obscuring the terrified dialogue of the eight other Panthers in the house at the time. It's a turning point in the group's history, chillingly rendered.

THE ONLY SCENE of political resistance in Jan Terry's comic, COME HOME, INDI (Street Noise, 234 pp., $16.95), appears at the end, as the cartoonist travels with his sister and a friend to join the Standing Rock protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline. The son of a Native (Ho-Chunk) mother and an Irish-American jazz musician father, who divorced when he was young, Terry grew up in the Midwest, bouncing between two worlds. His devotion to Standing Rock is sincere, but he doesn't have the instant moment of connection that he was hoping for. He worries that it isn't his place — the tribal somehow seem as an impostor.

"Come Home, Indiana" is a dense, at times frenzied book, the panels teeming with text. The words themselves seem to vibrate with anguish, regularly fluctuating in size and boldness. An artist who normally works on more fantastical titles ("The Crow"), he plunges into his own life story with a gothic zeal and an arsenal of styles. Sometimes the panels fall away, and a single image, such as a silhouette of his musician father playing bass, will fill the page, evocative of Craig Thompson's loving-my-religion coming-of-age memoir, "Blankets."

As a boy, Terry vows to avoid the addiction to alcohol that has plagued the lives of both his parents. But one summer night at the Delt's, the Native community where his mother lives, he succumbs — partly because drinking would help him belong. His habit subsides, but returns in college and gets dangerous when he moves to Chicago; one page shows bottles rising from the bottom edge to the same height as the surrounding skyscrapers. Though describing alcoholism rings monotonous, Terry reveals how his problem is not just familial but cultural. In his early drinking days he feels shame seeing "haunted men...with warrior spirits gone twisted with impending rage and sour by boozes." Later, curled up in the throes of withdrawal, he hallucinates Sitting Bull scolding him: "I fought my ass off so you could be just one more drunk Indian? Come on."

His fractured identity resolves beautifully by the end. Over 20 odd pages, Terry recounts his spiritual journey at Standing Rock, rendered sometimes just as white sand over black space — a lose- de force of comics that burns off the remnants of his self-loathing to locate a core of strength.:

ED PARK is the author of "Personal Days" and a Graphic Content columnist.
Her Secret Selves

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

But as the author-to-be went about her homework, "song, mysterious words began to crawl across my soul like a protective membrane. . . . When these light waves of words streamed through me, I knew that my mother couldn't do anything else to me because she had stopped being important to me. My mother knew it, too, and her eyes would fill with cold hostility."

Díñeves's memoir, now published in a single volume titled "The Copenhagen Trilogy" originally appeared in Danish as separate books: "Childhood" and "Youth" in 1967; the astonishing third, "Dependency," in 1973. Read together, they form a particular kind of masterpiece, one that helps fill a particular kind of void. The trilogy arrives like something found deep in an ascetic's breast drawer, a secret stashed away amid the socks and sachets and photos of dead lovers. The surprise isn't just its inb-damp immediacy and vitality — the chapters have the quality of just-written diary entries, fluidly translated by Tina Nunnally and Michael Favala Goldman — but that it exists at all. It's a bit like discovering that Lilo and Loesi, the fictional heroines of Helena Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet, were real. Díñeves's Kristsdale Street is every bit as pungent (and perilous) as Ferrante's stradili.

Why: exactly; it has taken so long for Díñeves to come to the wider attention of Anglophone readers is a question that summons a certain déjà vu. We ask when whenever singular voices are "discovered," such as the Brazilian modernist Clara Lispector, or the brilliant Hungarian novelist Magda Szabó, or the prolific American short story author Lucia Berlin. The very truth of the question — "discovered" by whom? — points to the degree of whin and bias at play when the literary establishment considers which writers to translate, whom to grant cultural authority and a place in the collective consciousness.

One thinks also of Edna O'Brien, or Joan Rivers, who craved a different scale of existence than what the history of the world had ordained. more never mind the stakes for gifted, sensitive girls with no money. Like O'Brien and Rivers, Díñeves wanted love, children, art, a home — "to be the painting and the painter," as the portraitist Alice Neel put it — and paid a price in radical isolation, though she was rarely alone, her doomed vivacity a siren song for certain men. She died by her own hand at 58, and fell out of favor as a "popular" writer, that descriptor employed to dispatch successful women from critical history. But a younger generation of writers, including Dorothea Nors, who has described Díñeves's love, children, art, a home — "to be the painting and the painter," as the portraitist Alice Neel put it — and paid a price in radical isolation, though she was rarely alone, her doomed vivacity a siren song for certain men. She died by her own hand at 58, and fell out of favor as a "popular" writer, that descriptor employed to dispatch successful women from critical history. But a younger generation of writers, including Dorothea Nors, who has described Díñeves as the "Billie Holiday of poetry" for the accessibility of her complexity, has found in her the kind of literary foremother she might have longed for herself — a woman who traveled to the edges of all the rocky outcroppings and reported back with a raucous honesty and a bracing lack of vanity.

It seems right, then, that Díñeves's own mother figures so prominently early in these memoirs, her love for her daughter perceptible, if barely, through the twisted scrim of her own thwartedness. Young Tove can already read and write on her first day of school, and the principal rebukes her mother for teaching her too cruel, gray facts. At first, she plays this for brushing comedy, reciting a stilt as a nanny to a small boy who tells her, "You have to do everything I say or else I'll shoot you." When she finally earns enough money to rent that essential room of her own in which to write, it is in a flophouse run by a blown-up Nazi who blasts Hitler's speeches on the radio but complains about the clutter of Díñeves's typewriter.

By her early 20s, Díñeves has married her first editor, a stout, impotent man three decades her senior who prints her work in his small literary journal, a spin on the "stable skilled worker" her mother imagines as her destiny. Díñeves publishes her first book of poetry, "Girl Soil," in 1938, her truth-telling landing her a devoted readership. But nothing in her memmies's first two volumes quite prepares you for what's to come. Her third marriage, to a sociopathic doctor who injects her regularly with Demerol — "the same name loud hilarious" — nearly kills her. It does kill, for years, her urge to write, the protective membrane of words that has accompanied her since childhood dissolving into chemi- cal oblivion. So uncomically obvious is her rendering of addiction — I frequently found myself having to pause, finger in book, and take a breath — that an episode involving Evelyn Waugh, whom she admires at a literary party before being dragged off humiliatingly by her intrusive husband, has an almost learning effect.

In the annals of adulthood of her third divorce, the voices return, and Díñeves publishes, in 1966, her great novel, "The Faces." Republished in Britain this year, it captures the dissociated mental state of a children's author, Liz, who hallucinates voices and faces, the latter — disembodied, floating, often those of children — inspiring the book's singular prose. "Some of them, especially girls, had had to live out their mother's childhood while their own lay hidden in a secret drawer," Liz explains. "Their voices would break out of them like pus from a sore, and the sound would frighten them, just like when they discovered that someone had been reading their diary, even though it was locked among the junk and old toys from the time they had worn the discarded face of a 4-year-old. That face would stare up at them from among the tops and ripped dolls with innocent, astonished glass eyes.

As the paranoid Liz grows convinced that her husband is plotting to induce her to commit suicide, the voices ratcheted up, accusing her of various offenses: of being an insatiable wife, an incontinent mother, a solipsistic writer. "You've never seen anything but yourself in the whole world," she envisions her beloved daughter saying. Liz's sensuous, impassioned, telepathic literary subject, capacious enough to contain multiple halves-century later, all of it — her extraordinary clarity and imperfect femininity, her unstartling account of the struggle to reconcile art and life — still stands. The construct of memory (and its stylistic cousin, autofiction) involves the organ- izing filter of retrospection, lending the impres- sion that life is a continuous narrative reel of action and consequence, of meanings to be universalized. Díñeves repro- duces her father's witting, perceptive self-awareness."

The New York Times Style Magazine and an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

MEGAN O'FARRELL is a writer at large at T: The New York Times Style Magazine and an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Photograph: STAN JENNINGS deMILLE DIRECTORS
Crude Awakening
This memoir follows a worker in the last days of the North Dakota oil boom.

By GARY SERNOVITZ

WHO IS “THE GOOD HAND”? Michael Patrick F. Smith’s memoir about working in the North Dakota oil fields, for? Those seeking points to make across our political divides will not find a condemnation of the oil business as a “swamp,” insisting in the rigging up and down of drilling and auxiliary equipment at a well site, Smith was an actor, musician and playwright, with Brooklyn liberal politics to match.

Readers who come to “The Good Hand” previously uninterested in moving equipment — which is, well, everyone — will also find a memoir penned in front, bumpy in Smith’s self-portrayal as both a quiet watcher and an “adventurous freak” and short of the reductive transformation sold by the book’s subtitle. Smith’s life was more off the rails after he returned from North Dakota.

In this, other words, might be a book that pleases no one.

And yet, after Smith finally starts working in the oil field, in June 2013, the memoir tightens its grip with its depictions of action and men. Smith brings an alcoholic mindset to describing physical labor, which comes with numb fingers, swinging cranes, precarious footing, damp boots, holes, chains and extreme cold. He not only writes work scenes with precision but also treats precision itself with reverence: Understanding and doing the job precisely allowed him to triumph over his own self-consciousness, ignorance and fear. A nega- tive-38-degree day was “one of the best days of my life,” he writes, and it also provides the best chapter in the book.

With a playwriting’s talent for dialogue, storytelling in miniature and staying out of the way, Smith writes dozens of scenes of men moving, joking and endlessly talking — there are few stoics here, or women — in pick-ups, sublets, job sites and bars. “I’m a good listener, and I’m not quick to judge,” he writes of spending time with the veteran professionals, local residents and drifters in the last days of the Bakken oil boom. Smith never SARASOTA, 1967.

Michael Patrick F. Smith

JAMEL STOKES

— the emotional plunge — of kink; Taylor wittily moves through its complications. Garth Greenwell wrote the only story for all my sexual aptitude, that made me squawk out loud. His story, a sprawling, moving, upsetting, confusing, exciting tale of submission, domination and resolution, portrays the hunger that we all must feed — through kink, through sex, through whatever intimacy works for us. “Who knows why we take pleasure in such things,” Greenwell writes, about a certain sex act, but also about sex — kink — intimacy itself. “It’s best to look into it too closely.”

Safe Words
A new fiction anthology explores what kink, as a practice, can unlease.

By JAZMINE HUGHES

A TWEET THAT’S haunted me (and there are many) is one that reads: “Most of sex is committing to the bit.” Good sex, yes, is full of tact and explicit agreements, the central one being sex itself — the veil that can be drawn over partners, the temporary worlds built together, the setting of the stage. I thought of that tweet often while reading “Kink,” a new anthology of short, sexual fiction compiled by R. O. Kwon, the author of “The Incendiaries,” and Garth Greenwell, the author of “Cleaner.”

“Kink” is not quite erotica. Ostensibly, it’s more about the transformative nature of kink as a practice, and the different modalities — kink as anticipation, as commu

JAZMINE HUGHES is a Metro reporter for The Times and a staff writer for The Times Magazine.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL J. HURLEY
Show and Tell

Overcoming shyness and isolation via notes, pictures and a pine cone.

By SARAH HARRISON SMITH

WHO IS THE “Best Friend in the Whole World”? Could it be a pine cone? Seen in Sandra Saehiry’s velvet-hued watercolours, these seed pods have character. Some are spiky. Some look as if they’re doing the twist, or wearing tall, flattened hats. But friendship with a pine cone seems like… is one-way kind of thing.

Roland doesn’t notice. “A quiet life of drawing, and music, and drinking tea” has left this well-dressed young rabbit desperate for company. Sometimes he walks in the woods “hoping, just maybe,” to find a friend. Compared with the sequoia-like trees that tower over him, Roland is very small.

BEST FRIEND IN THE WHOLE WORLD
By Sandra Saehiry
(Ages 4 to 8)

SHY WILLOW
By Cat Min
40 pp. Larkins/Queido. $15.99.
(Ages 4 to 7)

THE BOY WHO LOVED EVERYONE
By Jane Porter
Illustrated by Maisie Paradise Shaeving
(Ages 3 to 7)

FROM ARCHIE TO ZACK
By Vincent X. Kirsch
(Ages 4 to 8)

small, and utterly alone. Hence the pine cone. Roland gives it a name and keeps it with him while he draws more drawings, makes more music and drinks more tea.

One day, Roland finds handwritten notes stuck to the trees near his home. Someone has left a beloved pine cone—a pine cone that looks suspiciously like Roland’s. What to do? If Roland returns the missing pine cone, he’ll lose his only friend.

Once Roland imagines how lonely the author of the notes must feel, he acts with compassion — and in doing so, makes a new friend. Who is the “Best Friend in the Whole World”? After reading this sweet, sensitive tale, children can decide for themselves.

When we first see “Shy Willow,” the title character of Cat Min’s lovely illustrated picture book, her rabbit ears are sticking straight up through the letter slot of an abandoned mailbox. She’s clearly on the alert.

Glimpses of the sketches she’s taped up inside her mailbox hint at her state of mind. Rather than face the perils of the outdoors (snakes, cars, soccer balls and children among them), Willow would prefer to stay in and draw.

Min illustrates this portrait of the artist as a young rabbit with layered mixed-media paintings that incorporate colored pencil and watercolor. Her palette, ranging from the deepest sea-blue to bright oranges, pinks and violets, evokes a richly mysterious night, a night in which dreams could come true.

But it’s the written word that gets the action going. Although Willow’s mailbox is out of service, a letter slips through the slot. In it, a little boy named Theo begins the moon to shine into his mother’s window on her birthday.

Willow imagines how disappointed Theo and his mother will be — “waiting and staring at a dark, empty sky” — if the moon doesn’t appear. Can that compassion galvanize Willow to deliver Theo’s letter to the moon? As with Roland, Shy Willow’s brave, generous actions help her find the community she needs.

When it comes to making friends, words are powerful. Can they ever get in the way? In “The Boy Who Loved Everyone,” Dimitri spends his first morning at preschool telling every living creature he meets — right down to the classroom guinea pig — that he loves them.

Jane Porter (“This Rabbit, That Rabbit, “King Otter”) writes most of this story in dialogue, letting readers hear the poignant disconnection between Dimitri’s kind words and the awkward silences he receives in return.

It’s no wonder Dimitri is reluctant to return to school the next day. On the walk there, his mother reassures him: When you say you love someone, they feel it, “even if they don’t say it back or show it.” She points out other ways people show their love.

When Dimitri arrives, something is different. Now the other children invite him to play, and he gets “a warm feeling.” Did his love for them spark the change, or was it the other kids’ sympathy that made them welcome him? Either way, or both, it’s a happy ending. Dimitri can enjoy school for all it offers.

I love you.

In Maisie Paradise Shaeving’s illustrations, the school is a bright, cheerful place, with students and staff of all skin tones, wearing a wild array of patterns and costumes. Lap readers will enjoy the busy background scenes, showing children tagging on rain boots, playing dress up and, yes, washing their hands.

The two friends in Vincent X. Kirsch’s “From Archie to Zack” do everything together, from riding bikes to flying rainbow kites. Though all the kids at their elementary school know this pair love each other, “Archie couldn’t say it. Zack couldn’t say it. But they wanted to.”

Archie expresses his love in letters, but squirrels them away on the school grounds instead of sending them. When his classmates find the notes, they make sure they get to Zack.

Zack, in the meantime, has been working on his own note to Archie. Kirsch’s long list of accomplishments includes another fabulous book about friendship, “Freddie and Gingerpants,” and illustrations for The New York Times. Though his pen line is reminiscent of Ronald Searle’s satirical drawing for the midcentury Makepeace series, Kirsch’s candy-brigt colors and generous sensibilities are far from old school.

Other picture books depict the deep love of one child for another, but things can get complicated. In Thomas Scotto and Uliver Talle’s poetic 2018 “Jerome by Heart,” Raphael’s parents scowl at his feelings for Jerome. Kirsch’s Archie and Zack back in the smiles of everyone they encounter. What an enlightened, encouraging view of friendship.

You’d want that, wouldn’t you, even if you had to start with a pine cone?
### Best Sellers

**The New York Times**

**Combined Print and E-Book Best Sellers**

**Sales Period:** January 24-30

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
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<td>1. THE RUSSIAN, by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Dutton) The 30th book in the Michael Bennett series. An assassin killing a number of women might disrupt the detective's wedding plans.</td>
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<td>4. THE VANISHING HALF, by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their twin sisters.</td>
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<td>5. THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARIAN, by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.</td>
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<td>6. THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE, by V.E. Schwab. (Tor Forge) A 258-year-old woman also known as the secret of the court that offers the adventure of Addie LaRue has been centuries.</td>
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<td>8. THE PULL, by Anthony Doerr. (Penguin) A heartwarming story about a mother who questions her child’s behavior and her own sanity to confront the truth.</td>
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<td>10. FIERY LANE, by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin’s Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.</td>
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<td>2. A PROMISED LAND, by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Obama offers personal reflections on his transformative and pivotal moments through his first term.</td>
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<td>3. CASTE, by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reveals a right hierarchy in America today.</td>
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<td>4. GREENLIGHTS, by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.</td>
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<td>5. UNNAMED, by Glennon Doyle. (Dalm) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.</td>
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<td>6. EXTRATERRESTRIAL, by Avi Loeb. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) The Harvard science professor shares his theory that a space of advanced technology created by an alien civilization recently visited our solar system.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. BECOMING, by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes how she balanced work, family and her husband’s political ascendance.</td>
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**Editors’ Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review**

- **MY YEAR ABROAD**, by Chang-rae Lee. (Riverhead, $28.95) A part story of early 1960s, part globe-trotting adventure, Lee’s latest novel follows a young man on a transformative trip to Asia in search of a low-key life in a New York town. Reflective, precise writing and a steady churn of pleasures and perils make for a winning combination.

- **EXTRATERRESTRIAL, The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth**, by Avi Loeb. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, $27.97) You may not buy Loeb’s argument that the cigar-shaped object that streaked through our solar system in 2017 was alien technology. But his search for intelligent life, couched in a moving account of his path to the top of Harvard’s astronomy department, is fascinating and persuasive.

- **THE RATLINE** by Philippe Sands. (Knopf, $30.00) Using a trove of archival and personal documents, Sands tells the gripping story of a Nazi war criminal responsible for the deaths of thousands who managed to elude his pursuers until his death in Rome in 1960.

- **LET THE LORD SOW THEM: The Rise and Fall of the Death Penalty**, by Mauricio Charnahum. (Crown, $28.00) The number of inmates on death row has been declining for years, and Charnahum thoroughly reported, essential history, which includes interviews with inmates, wardens, activists, prosecutors and politicians, delivers a surprising account of how and why the death penalty is dying.

- **SANCTUARY A Memoir** by Emily Rapp Black. (Random House, $27.75) In her second memoir, Emily Rapp’s Black (set of tentatively published) regimen and his family’s struggle to make sense of her mother’s disappearance. With brutal honesty, she severs readers into the mother’s uncertain status, where life and death, love and love, rage and happiness, pleasure and pain are tangled autonomies.

- **WE CAME, WE SAW, WE LEFT: A Family Gap Year**, by Charles Wheeler. (Penguin, $27.95) Two parents and three teenagers set out on a nine-month trip around the world. This travel memoir is the father’s story of how it went — including buses, airplanes, skin rashes, misunderstandings and domestic sniping.

- **SAUL: City, Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia** by Thomas H. Hirschhorn. (Metropolitan, $29.95) In the 1970s, Floyd McKissack, a civil rights activist, set out to create a Black-run city in rural North Carolina. Hirschhorn’s account is a parable of America’s tragic racial past and its insidious legacy.

- **MISTRESS: Why Losing Faith in Institutions Provides the Tools to Transform Them**, by Ethan Zuckerman. (Harper, $26.95) Zuckerman, the former director of the MIT Center for Civic Media, sees the dark side of a society that is built on trust, but he leads activists who work around institutions and those trying to fit them or create new ones.


The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: nytimes.com/books
Inside the List

ELIZABETH EGAN

Byte Club Before Hudibash Fazial became a best-selling author — her second novel, “We Free the Stars,” was #6 on last week’s young adult hardcover list — she designed websites for other writers.

In a phone interview, she estimated that she had created sites for hundreds of clients, including Angie Thomas, V.E. Schwitz, Elizabeth Acevedo and Becky Albertalli.

“I started coding when I was 13,” Fazial said. “My dad taught me a new laptop, a very expensive one, it was pink and had my name on it, and he was like, ‘if you want to keep it, I want you to learn this book.’ He handed her a manual for Microsoft’s now-discontinued software, FrontPage.

The Florida native, whose parents are from Sri Lanka, quickly started experimenting with a blogging platform. “I posted a questionnaire, trivia and recipes every week, she said. ‘I don’t even remember what it was called, but my parents and my dad’s friends and my mom’s sister used to visit.’

When she was 17, Fazial started Icy-Books, where she blogged about young adult titles. “A few years later, an author came to me and asked me to design her site. She was on WordPress.org, so I stayed up a few nights trying to work through the code,” Fazial recalled. “I basically just running all the code until I figured out what was wrong.”

In 2019, after struggling with rejection, Fazial published “We Hunt the Flame,” the first installment of her Sands of Arawiya duology. Like “We Free the Stars,” it was inspired by back-to-back viewings of “The Lord of the Rings” and “The Hunger Games.” Both books are set in a world inspired by ancient Arabia and influenced by Fazial’s designer’s eye: “I’m always describing clothing, food, language, everything as something that’s what I love. That’s how I think.”

Many authors feel they’ve arrived in the literary community when they open a book containing their first book. For Fazial, that experience came when she started building her own website to promote “We Hunt the Flame,” which was also a best seller. She adds, “Another unforgettable, mind-blowing moment is when you’re sitting in front of a signing table and there’s a line of people who have read your book, who have swag they’ve designed that they want to give you, or they want you to write a quote in your own handwriting so they can make a tattoo out of it. I still can’t believe there’s a world I’ve created where people cared about themselves.”

Paperback Row

BY LAUREN CHRISTENSEN

1. Fiction

THE RUSSIAN, by James Patterson and James O. Born (Little, Brown). The 13th book in the Michael Bennett series. An assassin killing a number of women might disrupt the detective’s wedding plans.

2. Fiction

THE VANISHING HALF, by Brit Bennett (Riverhead). The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their family interferes.

3. Fiction

THE MORNIG LIBRARY, by Matt Haig (Viking). Nora Swet finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.

4. Fiction

THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE, by V.E. Schwitz (Ten/Forge). A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie Laurar has across centuries.

5. Fiction


6. Fiction

THE PUS, by Ashley Aukheah (Harper). A devastating event forces a mother who questions her child’s behavior and her own sanity to confront the truth.

7. Fiction

THE RETURN, by Nicholas Sparks (Grand Central). A doctor serving in the Navy in Afghanistan goes back to North Carolina where two women change his life.

8. Fiction

NEIGHBORS, by Danielle Steel (Delacorte). A Hollywood movie’s perspective changes when she invites her neighbors into her mansion after an earthquake.

9. Fiction

READY PLAYER TWO, by Ernest Cline (Ballantine). In a sequel to “Ready Player One,” Wade Watts discovers a technological advancement and goes on a new quest.

10. Fiction

ANNOUS PEOPLE, by Fredrik Backman (Minna). A failed bank employee rather holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.

An asterisk (*) indicates that a book’s sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger ($) indicates that some booksellers report reaching bulk orders.

AMERICAN PRISON: How Racial Hostility Destroyed Our Prisons, by Eduardo Prates (Vintage, 272 pp., $16.50). “A tough read,” our reviewer, Michael Ignatieff, said, because of its implications for American liberalism, its indictment of “our faith in our own empathy.”


THE SHIP IN THE POND IN THE RAIN, by George Saunders (Random House). A collection of essays examining the functions and importance of works of fiction.


WINTER AND LOVERS, by Ulf King (Bloomsbury, 352 pp., $17.37). It’s 1987 and a 50-year-old Washington novelist is waiting tables in Harvard Square and nursing the recent death of her mother. In this review, Alan Williams points out the loneliness of this plot in King’s own autobiography — his mother died soon after the publication of her previous novel, “Euphoria.”

“The emotional force,” Williams wrote, “is considerable.”
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**AUDIO MONTHLY BEST SELLERS**

**SALES PERIOD FOR JANUARY 3-30**

**Audio Fiction**


2. **STAR WARS: LIGHT OF THE JEDI** by Charles Soule. (Random HouseAudio) In the installment of the High Republic series, a theater in hyperspace races to save the galaxy. Read by Marc Thompson. 13 hours, 30 minutes unabridged.


5. **THE GUEST LIST** by Lucy Fickle. (HarperAudio) A wedding between a TV star and a magazine publisher on an island off the coast of Ireland turns deadly. Read by Joe Dassin,.otlier Masey, Olivia Dowd, at al. 9 hours, 54 minutes unabridged.

6. **THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY** by Matt Haig. (Penguin Audio) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives she could have lived. Read by Nancy Mulligan. 10 hours, 50 minutes unabridged.

7. **THE VANISHING HALE** by Blythe Bennett. (Penguin Audio) The fate of two women who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge but their fates intersect. Read by Stephia Smalls. 11 hours, 34 minutes unabridged.


9. **THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE** by V.E. Schwab. (MacmillanAudio) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventures of Addie Lareau for centuries. Read by Julia Whelan. 17 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.

10. **ANGELS PEOPLE** by Kristin Bachman. (Simon & SchusterAudio) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage in an expensive town house. Read by Marin Ireland. 9 hours, 53 minutes unabridged.


13. **WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING** by Delia Owens. (PenguinAudio) A young woman who survived abuse in the month becomes a murder suspect. Read by Madeleine Maby. 12 hours, 12 minutes unabridged.


15. **THE PUSH** by Ashley Audrain. (PenguinAudio) A devastating event forces a mother who questions her own motherhood and her own sanity to confront the truth. Read by Marin Ireland. 8 hours, 38 minutes unabridged.

16. **A PROMISED LAND** by Barak Obama. (Random HouseAudio) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barak Obama reflects on his transformative years and pivotal moments through his first term. Read by the author. 29 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.

17. **GREENLIT** by Matthew McConaughey. (Random HouseAudio) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years. Read by the author. 6 hours, 42 minutes unabridged.

18. **CASTLE** by Isabel Wilkerson. (PenguinAudio) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and industries. A rigid hierarchy in America today. Read by Robin Miles. 14 hours, 26 minutes unabridged.

19. **UNTAMED** by Glennon Doyle. (Random House Audio) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice. Read by the author. 8 hours, 22 minutes unabridged.

20. **JUST AS I AM** by Cindy Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperAudio) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices. Read by Cindy Tyson, Viva Davis and Robin Miles. 16 hours, 9 minutes unabridged.

21. **BECOMING** by Michelle Obama. (Random House Audio) The former first lady describes how she balanced work, family and her husband’s political career. Read by the author. 10 hours, 3 minutes unabridged.

22. **EXTREME UNIVERSE** by Judie Winick and Liz Bahin. (MacmillanAudio) Applying the principles of New York Univ’s leadership training to any organization. Read by the authors. 8 hours, 15 minutes unabridged.

23. **TALKING TO STRANGERS** by Malcolm Gladwell. (HarperAudio) Famous examples of communication serve as the backdrop to explain potential conflicts. Read by the author. 8 hours, 42 minutes unabridged.

24. **THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE** by Bessel van der Kolk. (Simon & SchusterAudio) How trauma affects the body and mind and innovative treatments for recovery. Read by Sean Pratt. 16 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.

25. **BORN A CRIME** by Trevor Noah. (AudioStudio) A memoir about growing up in South Africa by the host of “The Daily Show.” Read by the author. 8 hours, 50 minutes unabridged.

26. **BREATHE** by James Nestor. (PenguinAudio) A re-examination of a basic biological function. Read by the author. 7 hours, 19 minutes unabridged.

27. **MYTHOS** by Stephen Fry. (Chercheval) Whimsical retelling of Greek myths. Read by the author. 15 hours, 27 minutes unabridged.

28. **SAPENIS** by Yoael Noah Harari. (HarperAudio) How Homo sapiens became Earth’s dominant species. Read by Derek Perkins. 15 hours, 17 minutes unabridged.

29. **EDUCATED** by Tara Westover. (Random House Audio) The daughter of survivors, who kept out of school, educated herself enough to leave Kentucky for university. Read by Julia Whelan. 12 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.

30. **YOU’LL NEVER BELIEVE WHAT HAPPENED TO LACEY** by Amber Ruffin and Lucy Lamar. (HarperAudio) A pair of sisters who live in different parts of the country share their perspectives on the absurdities and everyday experiences of racism. Read by the authors. 5 hours, 25 minutes unabridged.

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*Note: Book selections are composed of sales in the United States of digital and physical audio products from the previous month. Sales of titles are statistically weighted to represent actual book and audiobook sales respectively. From the total, six are for audiobooks, one or more are for print editions. Published results for audiobooks are listed under the additional publisher name. ONLINE: For more information and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nybooks.com/hardcover-best-sellers*
LAST ORGY OF THE DIVINE HERMIT
By Mark Leyner
277 pp. Little, Brown. $27.

The best way to start a review of a Leyner book is to list a few of its high-concept con- cepts. In “Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit,” these include:

• a spoken-word karaoke bar
• warring criminal gangs that distinguish themselves by their cologne
• “If Joan Rivers had gone to the electric chair instead of Ethel Rosenberg, this is the book she would have written.”

As in most of Leyner’s novels, like “Et Tu, Babe” and “Gone With the Mind,” these little joke-bombs go off on nearly every page. The reader has to stop to figure out what they mean and why (and whether they’re funny). This can be a slog. It’s also a weirdly exciting reading experience.

“Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit” poses as an ethnographic study of the fictional Eastern European nation of Chalazia. Actually, the novel explores the study, consisting only of an introduction and an epilogue. The intro- duction is being recited by a patient in a New Jersey opthalmologist’s office. She’s reading it off a eye chart through a phonograph (the device used to determine lens prescriptions). “Is it better like this… or like this? One… or two?” the opthalmologist asks, switching lenses. The epilogue dramatizes a tender scene between the author of the study, Mark Leyner, and his loving guitar, Gaby. They visit a Chalazian karaoke bar on a Thursday “Fa- ther/Daughter Night,” where they read endearments off a screen, just as the other fathers and daughters in attendance do. Perhaps none are the real Mark and Gaby.

The serious work of this comedy is to depict a father’s love for his daughter and their shared recognition that they won’t always be together. It’s played out across a half of mirrors, an “ironic eulogy of fathers and daugh- ters.” The situation parallels paths, which Leyner ac- knowledges below relentlessly hyperbolizing, satirizing and denoting the pathos. The novel’s underlying pathos, however, remains intact.

MASHLANDS
By Andre Gide
Translated by Damion Searls

The narrator of “Mashlands,” a writer, is being driven mad by ennui. He’s miserably aware that human beings can’t be anything but themselves, defined by their personal characteristics and imprisoned by routine. He rails against the sameness of the daily tasks they’re forced to perform: “We do it again precisely because we have done it; every one of our acts from yesterday seems to want us again today, like a child to whom we have given life and who de- mands from then on that we keep it alive.”

Maybe he’s been in lockdown too long with his kids. In fact, “Mashlands” was written by the French nov- elist and journalist Gide, whose career extended from the late 19th century to his death in 1951. This was an early work, first published in 1895. Searls, a prolific translator, has annotated the revised 1932 edition and rendered it in vivid American English. His admirable efforts, however, are not quite enough to lift the novel beyond the status of a minor work.

The narrator is writing a novel about his trip through “Mash- lands,” about a man named Tityrus, from Virgil’s “Ec- logues,” who lives in an empty, grassy region. The writer wants the novel to express his own “boredom, vanity, monotony” — not usually a promising idea for a book. Yet there’s something compelling in Gide’s perception that all of us are trapped, regardless of the pandemic, in some kind of lifelong lockdown, the days essentially featureless, relieved only by trivialities like our mean- ingless work, our predictable cultural products and our irrelevant public affairs.

The critic Dubravka Ugresic’s exuberant praise claims for “Mashlands” a charm on the order of “Win- nie-the-Pooh.” She more persuasively compares it to Ivan Goncharov’s “Oblomov.” “In the 1859 Russian novel about another afflante 19th-century man, he too is bur- dened with the mysterious privilege of human existence.

SATURATION PROJECT
By Christine Home
179 pp. Solid Objects. $20.

In her richly meditative lyric memoir, Home poetically describes the life of a woman whose child- hood was marked by sexual violence. What the reader may initially find challenging in her convergence of intimate personal his- tory and classical mythology soon turns deeply absorbing.

Home invokes the Greek heroine Atalanta, the fer- cious hunter raised by bears and the slayer of centaurs who try to rape her. Even offstage, Atalanta remains the embodiment of animal courage. Her cunning and resil- ience, especially against male predation, must be sum- moned by a girl trying to survive her western Pennsyl- vania childhood. Home repeatedly suggests incestuous brutality: “the memory of his huge hands down your pants.” She explains, ominously, “If there’s one thing the woods do not need to tell her, it is what a body standing over her at night means.”

In her damaged adolescence, “the dark, limy teenage girl” hunt herself as she walks wildly through the threatening woods, hums everywhere, contemplating what the act of humming represents. It’s “the sound of my captivity,” she says. “The only intimacy I had available.” She continues to hum even while performing felis- tin. For the young woman, “my sonic ornament was a customized flush of puberty, a condemned libidinal vehe- nence.” She eventually passes into adulthood and be- comes mother to a 3-year-old girl who develops her own personal relationship with the unseen world, specifically the wind. Her daughter is terrorized by it, suffering raw pain in the open air. The wind’s mythologically sexual aspect can be aggressive, relentless and even, in some legends, germitative.

“Saturation Project” is sometimes elusive, but there’s no meaning in it that gets lost for long. When Home’s thematic connections and redemptive insights arrive, it’s with the force of a hurricane.
Sketchbook / The Sexiest Book / By Julia Rothman and Shaina Feinberg
For Valentine's Day, we visit books that first inspired a certain passion in their readers, beyond the literary.

"Until seeing his work, I didn't think I knew an image of a flower could turn me on. He knows how to juxtapose floral displays next to bondage and make it look sexy and the same."
—Shyanique Jarvis, artist

"At 9 years old, I learned everything I ever wanted to know about life but was afraid to ask, (including sex) from Judy Blume. So I trusted Judy, yes, forever."
—Alpina B الحرير، عارض ومنتج

"The Captain's Vowes" by Neruda is the only answer for me, the language is just as sensual and stupidity poetic, it's in living far his wife while she葬者 and wants. I mean: 'From your hips to your feet I want to make a long journey.' Come on.
—Anis Muyiwa, Oyster Bay Lafehede

"The unabridged dictionary we always had up in the living room. Certain words were very interesting."
—Reza Chest, cartoonist

Julia Rothman and Shaina Feinberg are the authors of "Every Body: An Honest and Open Look at Sex From Every Angle."
A Historic Election at a Historic Time

The United States’ 46th President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris are groundbreaking figures at an unprecedented time. This special edition chronicles their extraordinary lives, including their memorable election and inauguration. Full of inside reporting and stunning photos, this keepsake looks at how they got here as well as the challenges they face in leading America forward.

The New York Times Joe Biden and Kamala Harris special edition is now available from your favorite retailer, magazine.store, or Amazon.com

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