FOR ME, FOR YOU, FOR US, Black historical fiction can salt real wounds both fresh and inherited. I’ll never forget my mother’s hour of tears after she saw the film adaptation of “The Hate U Give.” Or the row of us waiting stone still in the movie theater, trying to steady our weeping, like a pew at a well-cast funeral, after seeing “Fruitvale Station.” Or my stepfather’s stern shoulders broken down by “Selma”; or the real nightmares of water and scars after “Beloved”; or the movies, books, shows avoided because “I can’t really handle another slavery thing right now.”

Meeting yourself in media is no guarantee that the mirror will be kind or wanted. Instead, it’s often a jagged glass you catch yourself in before it catches you. And even when you know it’s coming, the blood’s still warm and sharp. What of me, of us, was I to witness in “The Prophets,” the debut novel of Robert Jones Jr., set on an antebellum plantation in Mississippi?

I double-checked my wounds before I entered Jones’s novel, wanting to be aware of where I was numb and where raw. I wanted to be good to myself and hopefully fair to a book I arrived at with baggage and implications.

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FROM THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Captain Calli Chase will follow the crime wherever it leads — including space.

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WHAT WE’RE READING

More than ever, I’ve been using music as a buffer, when needed, against the outside world. In that vein, I finally cracked open TESTIMONY, Robbie Robertson’s autobiography. A big fan of the Band, I was eager to learn more about the roots of the group’s singular sound. As history, the book delivers. Sure, there is plenty of Dylan — and the Big Pink section is especially strong — but there is also lots of great stuff about obscure early episodes and encounters, musical and not, that helps illuminate the origins of songs that made characters like Virgil Caine and Crazy Chester indelible — and illustrate how much hard work was involved. Still, I find Robertson less likable as the book proceeds (granted, likability is not a key rock ’n’ roll attribute) and sense a creeping defensiveness that is surely tied to his being just one side of the story. Levon Helm tells another in “This Wheel’s on Fire.” That’s next on my list.

— ED SHANAHAN, METRO REPORTER AND SENIOR STAFF EDITOR
**Letters**

**Exclamation Point**

TO THE EDITOR:  
Too bad W. S. Merwin isn’t around to take the other side regarding Elisa Gabbert’s effusive praise of “punctuation as a superpower and a secret weapon” in her Jan. 3 On Poetry column. Merwin stopped punctuating his poems in 1988. He said that he felt that punctuation “stapled” the language to the page. “I think punctuation is prose. We don’t punctuate our speech, and we don’t punctuate when we sing,” Merwin said. “Poetry always has to have one foot in song and in speech.”  

While I do not agree that all punctuation ought to be removed from poetry — periods, commas and a rare exclamation mark are really all poets need — I do think that poetry ought not be written with a staple gun.

J. R. SOLONCHE  
BLOOMING GROVE, N.Y.

**What Is Conservatism?**

TO THE EDITOR:  
Based on Andrew Sullivan’s fine review of “Conservatism,” by Edmund Fawcett (Jan. 3), I’m looking forward to reading it. However, he did slide in one sentence I can’t let pass without correction. In commenting on Burke’s work, Sullivan states, “But what liberal democracy eroded — the authority of religion, the coherence of a community, a sense of collective belonging, home, meaning and security — could prompt far more radical responses.” That would be an appalling indictment of liberal democracy, if it were true. What liberal democracy expends great energy attempting to erode is the claimed supremacy of religion, in particular Christianity; the insularity of a community; a sense of collective intolerance; exclusion; truncated meaning and false security. All of which stand at the door, rifle in hand, against a more perfect union.

SUSAN E. MULLENDORE  
TUCSON, ARIZ.

TO THE EDITOR:  
In the second paragraph of his review of “Conservatism,” Andrew Sullivan writes, “A defense of the status quo against disruption comes naturally to anyone truly comfortable in the world.” A dozen pages later, in the second paragraph of her review of Rachel Holmes’s new biography, “Sylvia Pankhurst,” Francesca Wade repeats the following quote from Pankhurst’s address to the court during her 1921 sedition trial: “It is wrong that people like you should be comfortable and well fed, while all around you people are starving.” (Italics in both quotes mine.)

I could hardly offer a more eloquent or compelling explanation of my quarrel with conservatism than that conveyed by the juxtaposition of these two sentences.

GAYLORD BRYNOLFSN  
Evanston, Ill.

TO THE EDITOR:  
Andrew Sullivan’s review of “Conservatism” serves as a reminder of the utter meaninglessness of that term in contemporary America. Sullivan alludes to this notion when he states that “conservatism is by its nature specific and local,” but stops there. It seems clear to me that Barack Obama, who, even as president, carefully tended to his relationships with his wife and children, attended church regularly and allowed his thoughtfully considered decisions and opinions to be influenced by the wisdom of others, is a far more conservative man than Donald Trump.

Perhaps the most ironic diminishment of the idea of conservatism is seen through the prism of environmentalism. What could be more conservative than the desire to preserve and protect nature? Even the very terms, conservatism and conservation, share etymological roots.

PETER BURWASSER  
PHILADELPHIA

**Lots to Celebrate**

TO THE EDITOR:  
In her Dec. 27 letter to the editor, Jessica Benjamin writes, “I implore you: Stop featuring celebrities in your By the Book column.” I implore you: Don’t stop. Although the word “celebrity” has over time become associated with glossy entertainment, it in fact refers to a person, in any field (including writing, by the way), who is celebrated. Kurt Vonnegut once argued that writers should emerge from everywhere, not just literature programs. Yo-Yo Ma was one recent “celebrity” whose By the Book entry I found captivating. Ma, a Harvard graduate, is as expansively bookish and as intellectually curious as any literary don.

Groucho Marx once said that he found television to be educational; whenever someone turned on the TV, he’d go in another room and open a book. He dropped out of school early on, but was a lifelong bookworm. If you read “The Groucho Letters,” you will encounter what an autodidact this nimble wordsmith was. What I wouldn’t give to hear his responses to By the Book questions.

DAVID ENGLISH  
ACTON, MASS.

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Susan Minot

The author, most recently, of the collection 'Why I Don't Write: And Other Stories' finds comfort in comic writers: 'Being funny is not only hard but perhaps the most powerful thing of all.'

What books are on your night stand?
That would be sprawled on the floor.

What's the last book to make you laugh?

"The African Svelte: Ingenious Mis-spellings That Make Surprising Sense," by Daniel Menaker. With drawings by the excellent and inspiring Roz Chast. Blunders in language are always delightful to me — unintentional poetry! I also weep as I laugh because this was written by my friend and editor who died this fall and one I hadn't read when he was alive and it is so hilarious that I wish I could tell him. And also weep as I laugh.

What's the last book to make you cry?

"Blackballed: The Black Vote and U.S. Democracy," by Darryl Pinckney. His is a brilliant mind which can make simple the complicated, then show how complex the simple.

What's the best book you've ever received as a gift?
So many! But the first that comes into my head: "Warriors: Life and Death Among the Somalis," by Gerald Hanley. A beautiful stark book. It helped that I loved the man who gave it to me.

What do you plan to read next?
"Blackballed: The Black Vote and U.S. Democracy," by Darryl Pinckney. His is a brilliant mind which can make simple the complicated, then show how complex the simple.

An expanded version of this interview is available at nytimes.com/books.
they reveal humanity, and our own selves, stories are tiny, but the loves they contain are anything but. Honest, funny, tender, of the Australian writer IT’S STILL DARK! But here are the town’s young people 12 years ago.

After a long exile, Kieran Elliott has returned to Evelyn Bay with his girlfriend and their baby to help his parents move out of the family house. But it is a complicated homecoming. Kieran was indirectly responsible for two of the storm deaths — one of the victims was his brother — and there are those who will never forgive him. Also, there’s a new body to contend with, that of a young waitress and art student whose drowned corpse is found, fully clothed, on the beach. In this tightknit place, everyone is a suspect, and everyone is grieving, in one way or another.

It’s hard to keep track of all the relationships — who loved or hung around with or betrayed or fought with whom, back when Kieran was a teenager and again now — but it’s worth making the effort. Evelyn Bay, utterly dependent on the sea, is a character of its own. As always, Harper skillfully evokes the landscape as she weaves a complicated, elegant web, full of long-buried secrets ready to come to light.

“There are so many ways to kill,” observes a character in RV Ramnath’s A WILL TO KILL (Polis, 282 pp., $26), a modern-day take on the classic locked-room murder mystery, transported to a remote mansion high in the hills of southern India. “People drown in rivers, fall down stairs, have heavy objects fall on them, die of suffocation in airless rooms or dungeons, and even get scared to death.”

Here at the possibly haunted Greybrooke Manor in Nilgiris, a dozen guests have gathered at the invitation of Bhaskar Fernandez, an eccentric patriarch whose squabbling extended family is tediously dependent on his largesse. Bhaskar is convinced that someone is trying to kill him and has included on his guest list Harith Athreya, a canny private detective charged with looking into a series of suspicious incidents. To disincentivize any would-be killer, Bhaskar has drawn up two wills allowing for two different possibilities: one if he dies of natural causes, the other in the case of his murder. (Bhaskar is a lover of mysteries and enjoys his little games.)

The roads are rendered impassable by a landslide. The lights go out. Greedy relatives and hang-on circle like so many piranhas. And before we know it, there is indeed a murder — but instead of Bhaskar, the victim is a guest, an artist with a murky past whose body is found, improbably, slumped in his host’s motorized wheelchair. Who did it? And who killed the second victim, not long after?

There seem to be several crimes going on at once, and a lot to pay attention to: an art scam, a drug ring, the falsification of identities, not to mention a spot of adultery. But Athreya is a fine detective with a curious mind, a cool eye for the chance detail, a skill in synthesizing disparate threads and a talent for resisting the insults of the requisite police officer assigned to the case.

The opening scene of Una Mannion’s A CROOKED TREE (HarperCollins, 320 pp., $27.99) will strike fear into the hearts of any former children hose had-it-up-to-here parents ever threatened to kick them and their squabbling siblings out of the car. Driving at twilight one day, Faye Gallagher, a widowed mother of five, actually does it: She stops the car five miles from home and leaves her 12-year-old daughter, Ellen, by the side of the road. Darkness sets in; the hours pass. Why hasn’t Ellen come home?

That single shocking moment reverberates through the book, bringing unexpected consequences for the family and their neighbors. The menace in this moody, meticulously plotted debut lies not in preposterous plot twists, but within the mysteries of dysfunctional families, close-knit neighborhoods harboring dark secrets and adolescents’ imperfect, and sometimes disastrous, understanding of the world of adults.

The book, set during the 1980s, is narrated by 15-year-old Libby, who desperately misses her father, a charming but feckless Irish immigrant who was separated from her mother and who has recently died, leaving Libby with a precious gift, “The Field Guide to the Trees of North America.” Living by Valley Forge Mountain in Pennsylvania, Libby takes refuge in the woods and in particular the crooked tree at the heart of a secluded spot she and her best friend, Sage, call the Kingdom. There she escapes her dysfunctional life with an overtaxed mother who offers little in the way of solace or supervision.

The plot unfurls slowly. A villain arrives in the form of a mysterious man with long blond hair driving a black Camaro. There’s also the unsettling presence of Wilson McVay, an older boy who listens to punk rock, takes drugs and has a reputation for violence and lawlessness. Before the story is over, everyone will have some growing up to do.

Sarah Lyall is a writer at large at The Times.
A scholar of addiction argues for a new understanding of drug use.

By CASEY SCHWARTZ

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG to get to what is perhaps the boldest and most controversial statement in Carl Hart's new book, "Drug Use for Grown-Ups: Chasing Liberty in the Land of Fear." In the prologue, he writes, "I am now entering my fifth year as a regular heroin user." In all honesty, I don't know how to feel about this admission. It's not easy to square all that I've learned about this drug with the image I also hold of Hart: a tenured professor of psychology at Columbia University, an experienced neuroscientist, a father. Hart knows this. He knows about the discomfort his readers might feel when they encounter his full-throated endorsement of opiates for recreational use. He offers the information in a spirit of radical transparency because he believes that "grown-ups" like him would talk freely about the role of drugs in their lives, we wouldn't be in the mess we are in, a mess brought about by our ruinous drug policies, which have had such profound — and profoundly unequal — consequences for those who fall afoul of them.

For Hart, it wasn't always so. Coming up in hard circumstances in Miami, Hart too bought into the widespread belief that "smoking crack is like putting a gun in your mouth and pulling the trigger," as one particularly memorable public service announcement put it. In 1986, he listened in "disbelief" as James Baldwin, his intellectual hero, argued for the legalization of drugs, believing that the recently passed Anti-Drug Abuse Act would be used disproportionately against poor and Black people.

Of course, we now know that Baldwin was right: Our drug policies have resulted in the wildly disproportionate imprisonment of Black Americans. As Hart argues, the drug war has in fact succeeded, not because it has reduced illegal drug use in the United States (it hasn't), but because it has boosted prison and policing budgets, its true, if unstated, purpose. In his last book, "High Price," Hart described his evolving views on drugs and those who use them, a gradual rejection of the overly simplistic idea that drugs are inherently evil, the destroyers of people and neighborhoods.

Here, Hart goes quite a bit farther. He has been studying the neurochemistry of different drugs for years, including crack cocaine and methamphetamine. He summarizes his research findings in this way: "I discovered that the predominant effects produced by the drugs discussed in this book are positive. It didn't matter whether the drug in question was cannabis, cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine or psilocybin." The positive effects Hart cites include greater empathy, altruism, gratitude and sense of purpose. For Hart personally, coming home and smoking heroin at the end of the day helps him to "suspend the perpetual preparation for battle that goes on in my head," he writes.

‘The predominant effects produced by the drugs discussed in this book are positive.’

I met Hart once, in 2016, when I interviewed him for an article I was writing about Adderall. He told me that for a responsible adult, it could make more sense to take a small dose of Adderall than to use caffeine — because Adderall has "less calories." At the time, I was struck by his candor. Now I understand that this is his driving purpose: to demystify drugs, to advocate for the right to "the pursuit of pleasure" enshrined in the Declaration of Independence itself.

Hart’s argument that we need to drastically revise our current view of illegal drugs is both powerful and timely, but the question of addiction lingers in the background. It is not one he attempts to resolve. In fact, he declares that his book is "unapologetically" not about addiction. Most users of any drug will not become addicted, he says, putting the figure at around 70 percent. He sees the "opioid crisis" as deserving of scare quotes, likening it to trumped-up drug scares of yore. "Much of the reporting on opioids is bull****" Hart writes, and doesn't account for the fact, for example, that many deaths declared opioid overdoses are actually the result of opioids mixed with alcohol or other sedatives.

Journalists writing about drugs are one of several groups of people that Hart expresses frustration with throughout his book. Others include members of the psychedelic community for insisting that their "plant medicines" are a "superior class of drug" and for not coming to the defense of drugs with more tainted reputations, like PCP. On the list is also his son's school, colleagues in the drug research world whom he calls out by name and people who didn't engage with his ideas, like Dr. Leana Wen, who, as the health commissioner of Baltimore, was apparently unwilling to introduce drug-safety testing to bring down the number of overdoses in the city, as Hart had suggested to her. "Thankfully for the people of Baltimore," he writes, Wen left to become president of Planned Parenthood. "Less than a year later, she was fired. I wish I could say I'm surprised." In these moments, Hart's writing can turn from passionate and moral to what feels like score-settling, undercuts the tenor of his narrative. But when it comes to the legacy of this country's war on drugs, we should all share his outrage.
James Comey mourns the decline of personal integrity in government.

By JOE KLEIN

IN HIS SECOND DEBATE against Joe Biden last October, Donald Trump inadvertently stated his philosophy of life. The issue was refugees. He said that “low I.Q.” immigrants were the only ones who abided by the law and showed up for their refugee status hearings. A week or so later, The Washington Post reported a similar statement Trump made when he admitted to stifling his creditors on a Chicago high-rise. He said the chicanery made him “a smart guy, rather than a bad guy.”

A smart guy, according to Trump, is someone who is wise enough to cheat. Stupid people abide by the law and attend their refugee status hearings; smart ones abscond. Stupid people pay their debts; smart ones stiff their lenders and dare them to sue. Stupid people believe their elected officials; smart people know the game is rigged. The most distressing aspect of Trump’s enduring appeal, even in defeat, is how many Americans seem to agree with him.

The former F.B.I. director James Comey is appalled. In his second attempt at a memoir, “Saving Justice,” there is a story about a small-time drug dealer named Vinnie who is placed in the federal witness protection program. Vinnie begins his new life, falls in love and gets married. The trouble is, Vinnie also was married in his old life. He now has two wives, which makes him a bigamist, which is a crime. “The Department of Justice has an obligation to tell the truth, and they do so with a certain style: ‘They were almost always younger than the other lawyers and stood straighter, buttoned their jackets more quickly, answered more directly, met deadlines and admitted what they didn’t know.’ In other words, they are the precise opposite of Donald Trump, who demanded ‘loyalty’ rather than ‘honesty’ from Comey, and fired him as director of the F.B.I. ‘Saving Justice’ is a slight and repetitive book, but not an insignificant one.

Comey revealed the crucial moments of his confrontation with the president in his 2018 memoir, “A Higher Loyalty.” Comey concludes. “But the truth was more important than his pain.” We never learn the fate of Vinnie’s marriages or the case in question — he is, after all, in the witness protection program — but Comey hammers the larger point: “The Department of Justice could not accept anything short of the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Comey’s view of justice — both the concept and the department — is ecclesiastical. U.S. attorneys are members of a sacred order. They make an unequivocal vow to tell the truth, and they do so with a certain style: They were almost always younger than the other lawyers and stood straighter, buttoned their jackets more quickly, answered more directly, met deadlines and admitted what they didn’t know.

In other words, they are the precise opposite of Donald Trump, who demanded “loyalty” rather than “honesty” from Comey, and fired him as director of the F.B.I. “Saving Justice” is a slight and repetitive book, but not an insignificant one. Comey revealed the crucial moments of his confrontation with the president in his 2018 memoir, “A Higher Loyalty.” They are rehashed here, but within the context of a larger theme: the national descent from strict, fact-based truth into a feckless mirage of “truthiness,” to use Stephen Colbert’s brilliant formulation. Can an institution religiously devoted to the truth, like the Justice Department, survive in a democracy where vast numbers of people believe that the 2020 election was a fraud?

Comey is a curious figure. He is smart, admirable, hard-working — and yet slightly smarmy in his rectitude. He begins each chapter with a quote from sources ranging from Virginia Woolf to Malcolm X to the inevitable Dalai Lama. He tries to leaven his supreme pontification with stories of his own flaws, mixed emotions and humility. His height — 6-foot-8 — makes him testy in cramped spaces. His government salary makes it hard for him and his wife to raise five children. Annoyed, he throws his daughter’s obnoxious talking doll out the window of his automobile (of course, he drives back to retrieve it). His pursuit of transparency is rigorous to the point of myopia.

But, of course, he is right: You can’t have a working democracy without an agreed-upon standard of truth. You need a “reservoir of trust” in our institutions if the government’s truth-work is to proceed. Conspiracies theories about the Deep State are debilitating. The Justice Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the intelligence community have to be perceived as honest to a fault — even about their own faults.

You can’t have a working democracy without an agreed-upon standard of truth.

Comey is surprisingly tough on Robert Mueller. He believes Mueller’s report on Russian interference in the 2016 election is devastating, but too complicated for mass consumption. Attorney General William P. Barr spins up a dust storm of inaccuracies while Mueller “chose to submit his unreadable — and unread — report and then go away without a sound,” Comey writes. “He could have found a way to speak to the American people in their language.” Department policy and tradition gave him plenty of flexibility to speak in the public interest. He chose not to. And, the only voices most Americans heard were lying to them. No truth, no transparency, and Justice paid the price in lost trust.

He should talk. It was Comey’s epic mishandling of the Hillary Clinton email case in 2016 that, arguably, gave Donald Trump the presidency. Comey defends his Clinton actions in both memoirs. He admits only to sins of honesty. The public was clamoring for a judgment. And the F.B.I.’s conclusion, after overwhelming work on the case, was that Clinton had been sloppy but not venal. “If we couldn’t prove bad intent, there was no prosecutable case,” he writes. Comey chose to announce his dramatically, in public, but not without a bone to his fellow Republicans: Clinton had been “extremely careless,” Comey said. He stewed about the advert, which turned his report into an op-ed. And then, on the brink of the election, he reopened the case.

A computer containing more Clinton emails was found in the possession of former Congresswoman Anthony Weiner, whose wife, Huma Abedin, worked for Clinton. Now, if there ever was a time for transparency, this was it. Comey could have said: “Look, we found no evidence of criminality in the Clinton case, and I would be very surprised — given the nature of the thousands of emails we’ve read — if this new batch proves otherwise. But we’ve got to look at them, and so we will.” Instead, he sent a damning letter to Congress, announcing that the investigation had been reopened. As Comey might say: No context, no transparency.

In fairness, there was probably nothing that Comey could say about the Clinton case that would have stanching the “lock her up” conspiracy-mongering. His battle, and Mueller’s, is against a powerful sludge-tide of cynicism that has been flowing, especially in the media, for 50 years — and, for the past four years, from the White House itself. All politicians are crooked, aren’t they? All politicians lie.

If nothing else, Comey has laid out the challenge of the next four years. Joe Biden’s quiet humanity will confront a noisy nation where too many citizens have become so sour that they’ve found solace, and entertainment, in an alternative reality. It will not be easy to lure them away from their noxious fantasies, but fact-based truth is not negotiable.
Full-Court Pressure

John Thompson inspired a mixture of fear and respect in coaches, referees, journalists — even drug kingpins.

By JASON ZENGERLE

BY THE TIME he summoned Rayful Edmond to a meeting on an autumn afternoon in 1988, the Legend of John Thompson was already large. He was the Black coach of the Black college basketball team that was equal parts athletic and cultural force. On the court, Thompson taught his Georgetown Hoyas to play swarming, suffocating defense. Off the court, he hounded his players — who were among the few Black students at Georgetown — to go to class, keeping a deflated basketball in his office to remind them that “far more money is made sitting down than standing up.”

An Autobiography
I CAME AS A SHADOW
An Autobiography
By John Thompson with Jesse Washington

I came as a shadow, or at least tries to put a different spin on it. “A myth has grown about me threatening Rayful and ordering him to stay away from my players,” Thompson writes. “I’ve always been offended when some people assume our interaction had a physical component.” What actually happened, Thompson reports, is that he reassembled Edmond and appealed to the drug dealer’s better angels. “I thought of Rayful as my neighbor’s child, who was exposing my kids to some trouble. I wanted to protect my players, my university and myself. The conversation was between two Black men from Washington who both loved basketball, respected each other as human beings and had enough intelligence to work out a solution to our problem.”

In “I Came as a Shadow,” Thompson was a talented basketball player and received scholarships to attend a predominantly white Catholic high school in Washington and later Providence College. In the mid-60s he played two seasons in the N.B.A. for the Boston Celtics, backing up Bill Russell, Then Thompson retired from the N.B.A. “to begin the rest of my life.” He didn’t expect basketball to be a part of it. He returned to Washington and worked with troubled youths (one later became a hit man) while earning a master’s degree in education. A small Catholic high school, St. Anthony’s, hired Thompson to coach its pitiful boys’ basketball team — a side job that was akin to supervising “an after-school gym class.” But then Thompson’s competitive juices got flowing, he began combing the city’s playgrounds and Boys Clubs where he had once played for recruits, and before long St. Anthony’s became a powerhouse. In 1972, Georgetown hired him as its basketball coach.

Georgetown was, as Thompson and his fellow Black Washingtonians put it, “Across the Park” — referring to Rock Creek Park, which served as the informal dividing line between Black and white Washington. The university was notoriously inhospitable to Black people, but it hired Thompson because of his race — partly as a realization that it needed to make amends to Black Washingtonians, but also in an attempt to improve its basketball team, which in turn would raise Georgetown’s profile. “He knew any successful team needed Black players,” Thompson writes of Georgetown’s dean of admissions. “He knew I was a Black coach who had a lot of Washington’s best Black players on my teams. Are you starting to get the picture?”

The plan worked. Thompson turned Georgetown into one of college basketball’s dominant teams, and the university rose to prominence right along with it. Between 1983 and 1986, when Georgetown appeared in two Final Fours and won one national championship, applications to the school increased by 45 percent. Thompson boasts, not entirely unreasonably, “Basketball gave Georgetown a national reputation.” Meanwhile, the Hoyas, with their Black coach and their Black players, achieved a different sort of acclaim among African-Americans. Thompson recalls the many Black people who approached him in airports and elsewhere to thank him for what he was doing. “More than a few,” he writes, “thought Georgetown was a historically Black college, based on our team. That always gave me a good feeling.”

But there were a lot of hard feelings, too — typically having to do with race. Thompson was protective of his players, many of whom would not have been accepted to Georgetown but for basketball. He expected them to go to class and get good grades; if they didn’t, he held them out of practices or games. But Thompson was loath to let anyone outside his team know. “It would have been harmful to expose their weaknesses,” he argues. “You think we put a sign on the door saying my father
Ice, Ice Babies
Rich Cohen decodes the culture of youth hockey and considers its impact on parents.

By MARK ROTELLA

"IF THE COACH wants to win more than his
or her team does, that's a problem and the
team is doomed to fail," says the longtime
coach of my 15-year-old son's hockey team.
Rich Cohen might understand. In Cohen's
thoughtful, lively new memoir, "Pee Wees:
Confessions of a Hockey Parent," the
coach-player relationship is almost as im-
portant as the parent-child dynamic.

Welcome to the world of youth hockey in
Connecticut — and meet Cohen's 11-year-
old son, Micah. What's amazing is how uni-
time one's kid plays; and verbal tensions
between parents of opposing teams. "The
mildest New Jersey heckler outdoes Con-
necticut's most vociferous," Cohen reports.
"The nastiest are found on Long Island."

At the book's center is the development
of Micah as a hockey player, and Cohen's
identity as a type of parent he describes as
"the crazies, the control freaks, the hyper-
involved."

Tryouts for the Connecticut team
begin in April, with anxious parents
pressing their faces against the glass
or huddling like scouts in the stands.

At the end of each evening, the par-
ents gather in front of a list to see
whether their kid made a team on the
first round or will need to return the
following night. For the Bears, 200
kids try out, of whom only 70 will be
placed on teams, ranking from AA
down to B. Micah slips into the A team.

The hockey season ramps up in
September, and Cohen takes readers
deep into the lives of team families.

We meet a Deadhead parent, a dental
hygienist, a beer importer and a
French physicist. Most important, we
meet the coaches, who have the power to
shape or destroy a player's confidence.

There's a young, talented guy named Pete
and two assistant parent-coaches, Ralph
Rizzo and Alan Hendrix. (Cohen acknow-
ledges that names, teams and places have
been changed, "ditto dates and details.")

Initially struggling, the team tries to gel
under Coach Pete, who adjusts his lines to
create the best combinations. (There are
often three lines of forwards and two de-
defensive pairs in youth hockey; the first line
is usually the strongest.) Throughout, Co-
hen inserts himself into Micah's sport —
cornering coaches, and breaking the rule
prohibiting parents from talking with
coaches for 24 hours after a game.

After Coach Pete moves Micah down to
the third line — ostensibly to help weaker
players — Cohen approaches him, dis-
mayed that his son has been assigned a
"crap detail."

"Is Micah having fun?" Coach Pete asks,
and Cohen acknowledges he is. "So what
do you care? Try to remember what this is
about — them, not us."

On the car ride home, Cohen asks Mi-
cah: "Doesn't it bother you? Why aren't
you pissed off?"
The Struggle, Annotated
A novel of Philippine history takes a cue from ‘Pale Fire.’

By RANDY BOYAGODA

A novel of Philippine history takes a cue from ‘Pale Fire.’

THE REVOLUTION ACCORDING TO RAYMUNDO MATA
By Gina Apostol

350 pp. Soho Press. $27.

she now lives. She writes historical fiction like Hilary Mantel on acid. The result is demanding, confusing, exhausting and impressive, and justified, at base, by the origin story of her native archipelagic nation, as one of the several voices of this novel explains:

“The American Revolution had farmers and dentists. The French Revolution had a mob of lawyers.

“Our prime mover was a poet.

“The Philippines may be the only country whose war of independence began with a novel (and a first novel at that) — Rizal’s ‘Noli Me Tangere’ (‘Touch-Me-Not’).”

“Our notion of freedom began with fiction, which may explain why it remains an illusion.”

This account of Rizal’s literary-political significance comes from Estrella Espejo, an editor now living in a sanitarium because of a particularly trying project. The novel takes the form of a found memoir by Raymundo Mata, whose idiosyncratic entries, themselves arrive at the end feeling reconfigured. Real life is forever lurking around the corner, so it seems, lording its narrativizing ways over what might be glimpsed of the Beyond.

Enter Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), a British-born Mexican painter and author who fantastically surpasses her Freud-struck, phallocentric contemporaries. Her during meals. Her obsession with the painting leads to a 37-page digression that relates the life and times of Rosalinda Alvaraz della Cueva, abbess of the Convent of St. Barbara of Tartarus, to whom the Brotherhood is deeply tied. Carrington’s skillful rendition of this embedded story (which itself includes a bizarre retelling of the fate of Mary Magdalene and the Holy Grail) unlocks from the novel the many fractual worlds hidden within. Soon we’re in landscapes populated with orgies, riddles, doppelgängers and stairways to hell, with little time to trace who we were or where we’ve been.

Gina Apostol

Though fiercely attached to both men, Espejo isn’t particularly worried about clarifying details related to either Mata’s Bildungsroman-like life or Rizal’s passive involvement in revolutionary politics. She’s more interested in raging, via annotations, against the memoir’s English-language translator, a sanguine Cornell graduate student who goes by the pseudonym Mimi C. Magsalin and describes herself as “not yet a.b.d.” The editor also attacks D. Wata Drake, a Milwaukee-based psychoanalyst and scholar of Filipino experience who claims she was invited to edit the memoir in Espejo’s place after her breakdown.

The deranged scholarly contours of the novel manifest as a short passage per page from Mata — usually about his reading, his travels and his intrigues, political and romantic — that is otherwise dominated by multiple, rivaling footnotes. The results can be both confidently obscure and also very, very funny, as with Notes 466-469, in which Magsalin and Espejo trade viciously etymological claims about the gastro-gynopolitical implications of whether Rizal and Mata ate chicken Caesar salad when they first met in 1896. In other words, like “Infinite Jest” and “Pale Fire,” Apostol’s novel adopts absurd premises that are treated with graven seriousness by wordplay-obsessed narrators who are equal parts unreliable and cerebral.

Apostol also riffs on the Bible, Cervantes, Voltaire, Joyce and on the most prominent Filipino writer of the late 20th century, Nick Joaquin, among many others. Vertiginously preoccupied with its own textual genealogy and with the Borgesian speculations that come of its frenzied notations (is Mata’s memoir actually Rizal’s unacknowledged final novel?), the book occasionally seems as if it might have been more fun to write than to read. But that’s a minor footnote to this marvelous welter of Filipino storytelling.

randy boyagoda is a novelist and professor of English at the University of Toronto.

Reality Outdone
Leonora Carrington’s Surrealist novel upends all expectations.

By BLAKE BUTLER

I’VE NEVER HAD a go-to answer for when someone asks, “What’s a great Surrealist novel?” I’ve always found this nearly century-old subgenre of literature rather tame, less a transcendence of the known world than half-baked psychoanalytic play and veiled romance. Real life is forever lurking around the corner, so it seems, lording its narrativizing ways over what might be glimpsed of the Beyond.

1974 novel, “The Hearing Trumpet,” newly reissued, stands out as something at last truly radical, undoing not only our expectations of time and space, but of the psyche and its boundaries.

“For the last 45 years I have been trying to get away,” our 92-year-old narrator, Marian Leatherby, tells us early on. She knows she’s a liability to her son, Galahad, and his family, who live only for themselves. Nearly deaf, she is gifted a hearing trumpet by her friend Carmella — just in time to overhear her family discuss shipping her off to an elder-care institution “financed by a prominent American cereal company (Bouncing Breakfast Cereals Co.)” and portentously known as the Well of Light Brotherhood.

Even after the move, however, our kindly Marian remains buoyant, wide-eyed, ready for life. She continually adapts to her circumstances, as Carrington builds layers upon layers with an adeptly shifting point of view. Like captives in a body double that refuses to behave logically, we are allowed only to look over Marian’s shoulder as the world changes around her. At first, she finds herself swept up into the psychodrama of a confined tribe of similarly wild-minded female residents, who are overseen by the cultish and perverted Dr. Gambit. The doctor’s quasi-Christian rule of law belies a macabre conspiracy, involving mind control and poisoned fudge, that ends up dissolving pretty much every- thing we thought we knew about where the novel was going. It’s “The Crying of Lot 49” on Ambien, or perhaps “The Magic Mountain” whittled down to a viral nightmare, or a shiv.

The book’s pivot point is Marian’s discovery of an uncanny portrait of a “leering abbes” who appears to watch over her

Leonora Carrington

We are reminded of the power of fiction to create a gateway to a place that wasn’t visible.

Thereafter, nothing is the same. In following the mystery of the Brotherhood’s origin, Marian finds her mind and memory, and the entire history of the world, wholly transformed. The questions that plague our routine daily lives are broken at last, replaced with an occasion to see newly, and therefore, to rise to heights beyond the ceilings of domesticity.

The result is a mind-flaying masterpiece, held together by Carrington’s gifts of wit, imagination and suspense. We ourselves arrive at the end feeling reconfigured, as if the book — like “Mount Analogue,” by Carrington’s fellow Surrealist René Daumal — has only just begun where it cuts off. We are reminded, then, of the power of fiction not to reflect or to define, but to create a gateway to a place that wasn’t visible to us before the text, and yet has always existed just beyond our present reality’s dull edge.

blake butler is the author of seven works of fiction and nonfiction, most recently, “Alice Knott.”

Photograph, from left: Margarita Corporan; Emerico Weisz
How E.L. Doctorow taught an aspiring writer to hear the sounds of fiction.

I was born with “bad ears.” When I was a child, summertime swimming often turned into episodes of throbbing ear drums, and I would end up fetal-like on my bed, my hands cupped over my ears, rocking my body in hope that the movement would somehow diminish the insistent ache. My mom would heat up eardrops and slip the warm liquid down my inflamed ear chute with a dropper, creating temporary relief from the roar of pain. Tiny plastic cylinders were inserted into my ears on several occasions with the aim of draining the fluids that led to these bouts. Sometimes this worked. Other times it didn’t.

Growing up, I also struggled with learning disabilities: Reading did not come naturally to me. Instead, words splintered apart on the page, their pronunciation out of reach. When I read to myself, I couldn’t hear my own voice. For me, the act of reading was like sitting alone in a silent room: Static strands of words created meaning, character and story, but I couldn’t hear their cadences and rhythms.

This changed in the winter of 1995. I was a graduate student in the creative writing program at New York University, and you could say I had become a more active reader: I spent huge amounts of time in libraries and bookstores. I had even started writing a novel, which seemed like a miracle, given my earlier experiences with language. That semester, I enrolled in “The Craft of Fiction” taught by E.L. Doctorow.

The first class met at 5:30 on a Monday evening. It was late January, and darkness had already seeped into the sky beyond the windows of the arts and science building on Waverly Place. As Doctorow spoke to us, he leaned against the edge of a desk at the front of the classroom. Wisps of hair swept across the elegant dome of his balding head. He wore his circular glasses and a light blue button-down shirt, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Each week, he explained, we would read some of his favorite novels and short stories, following a sort of “kitchen sink” approach in which we would examine all aspects of the author’s craft so that we could become better writers ourselves. The reading list included “The Marquise of O” and “Michael Kohlhaas,” by Heinrich von Kleist, “The Waves,” by Virginia Woolf, and stories by Edgar Allan Poe (Doctorow was named after Poe).

“This isn’t about reading before you go to bed or reading on the subway,” he said with a soft smile. “This is about becoming professional readers. This is about craft and narrative. It’s about asking yourself: What can you steal from these writers?”

A month into the semester, I was rollerblading in Central Park with my then boyfriend (now husband), Michael. After completing a loop of the park, Michael and I slowly glided down an exit at East 96th Street. Near the bottom of the slight incline, my feet suddenly slipped out from underneath me, and I fell backward onto my shoulder. The pain was electric. Bright and blinding. An ambulance delivered me to the nearest emergency room, at Metropolitan Hospital. I was given an injection of Demerol and vomited instantly into a bedpan. Within an hour, an orderly arrived, asking me if I had health insurance (I did), and instructing me to go to another hospital the next day. (More police officers than doctors populated the hallways of the E.R. at Metropolitan.)

The following morning, at NYU Langone Medical Center, a doctor gently threaded my injured arm through a cloth sling and wrapped it tightly with a beige bandage against my abdomen. Except when showering and sleeping, the doctor said, I was to keep my arm like this for six weeks. If my shoulder healed well, I would move on to a program of physical therapy.

For the rest of the semester, I could no longer write or type. I told Doctorow about my accident, and he suggested I continue with the class and hand in the final paper over the summer. It had been a long time since I had merely sat in a classroom — and listened. Truly listened. No taking notes. Despite the turn of events, it felt like a luxury to sit back and take in the weekly discussions.

Along with two other students, I was assigned to give a presentation on “The Waves.” We decided to focus on character development, style and language, and structure. Considered one of Woolf’s most experimental novels, “The Waves” consists of interior soliloquies of six childhood friends as they move along the arcs of their lives; short descriptive interludes capturing the sun’s progression punctuate the sections, illuminating the passage of time.

This is when it happened: As I read “The Waves,” I started to “hear” language as if for the first time. It was as though a window flew open, and the sounds of the author’s words rushed in. I began to notice the sonic patterns of Woolf’s sentences, how she composed a music all her own with her rhythmic language and sentence structure. In the novel’s first section, Woolf writes from Bernard’s perspective: “We shall sink like swimmers just touching the ground with the tips of their toes. We shall sink through the green air of the leaves, Susan. We sink as we run. The waves close over us, the beech leaves meet above our heads.” I became attuned to the cumulative sounds of one sentence after another, and how the rhythms and repetitions produced a kind of symphony that I had never heard before.

Here is language, I thought as I read Woolf. Here is life. Perhaps it was synesthesia: I couldn’t write, and this limitation may have opened up another cognitive pathway in my brain. Or maybe it was the fact that Woolf’s novel is built with a kind of acoustic architecture; the sounds of her sentences carry the narrative along. Later, I read in Elica Clemente’s “Virginia Woolf: Music, Sound, Language” (2019) that Woolf wrote in a letter to Elizabeth Trevelyan, a Dutch musician: “I always think of my books as music before I write them.” (In the same book, Clements writes that Woolf was listening to Beethoven’s late String Quartet in B flat major, Op. 130, and that this chamber work inspired much of “The Waves.”) I imagine it was a combination of these circumstances: my broken shoulder and inability to write, Woolf’s distinctive soundscapes and the critical engagement that Doctorow was pressing on us.

During the class in which we presented “The Waves,” Doctorow spoke about how Woolf’s lyricism underscored the march of time in the novel. Like Kafka in “The Metamorphosis” and Dante in the “Inferno,” he observed, Woolf animated the inevitable movement toward death through her language, the rhythmic resonance of her sentences and her sophisticated narrative structure. The innovative interplay of these elements opened up this path of meaning for the reader.

The semester continued: We read Kerouac (and I had a similar aural experience with his stream-of-consciousness, syncopated prose), the stories of Jayne Anne Phillips and more. For the final writing assignment, Doctorow asked us to choose one of the works on the syllabus and borrow — or steal — from it in a fiction of our own. (For his best-selling novel “Ragtime,” Doctorow famously borrowed the tent poles for his plot from Kleist’s “Michael Kohlhaas” and reassembled them with his own version of the story in New York City at the turn of the 20th century.) Not surprisingly, I chose “The Waves”: I copied Woolf’s sentences word for word, then replaced her language with my own — and began to understand how I could create my own musical arrangements in my imagination and on the page.

Over time, my hearing has worsened. A year after my graduation from N.Y.U., my left eardrum was perforated by another infection and required reconstructive surgery. For the past decade, I have experienced the continuous ring of tinnitus in that ear and now wear a hearing aid. Yet the sounds of reading are very much alive in my head. Occasionally, I’ll commit to memory a poem by one of my favorite poets — Marie Howe, say, or Jean Valentine — and for a spell I know the sound of her words intimately, almost like a heartbeat. All of this is thanks to Doctorow and what he taught me: Read deeply, steal what you can and always listen for the music.

S. Kirk Walsh’s first novel, “The Elephant of Belfast,” will be published in April.
The Wanderer
A memoirist contemplates what it means to find home.

WHERE ARE YOU FROM? If someone were to ask, you might cite your current ZIP code or share where you were raised. You might mention where your ancestors lived. You might explain whether you grew up rooted in one cul-de-sac, one city block, one country. But for Nadia Owusu, the question is not so simple. The daughter of a Ghanaian father who worked for a United Nations agency and an Armenian-American mother, she has lived a nomadic life — she was born in Tanzania, then, as a child, lived with her mother, she has lived a nomadic life — she

By F AHIMA H AQUE
FAHIMA HAQUE is the audiences editor for The Times’s National desk and works on the weekly Race/Related newsletter.

AFTERSHOCKS
By Nadia Owusu

Owusu opens the book with a chapter titled “First Earthquake” and chapters are grouped under sections with labels that include “Faults,” “Aftershocks” and more. Throughout the book, Owusu writes poignantly about belonging and assimilation. But the connective tissue of the book is the near-constant guilt she experiences as she grapples with identity and her willingness to erase the most vibrant parts of herself in an attempt to belong.

In one instance, Owusu details how she betrayed the only other Black girl at the Catholic boarding school she attended, making fun of the girl’s hair to the white students. “In reality, Agatha smelled like my family,” she confesses. In another, Owusu recalls feeling conflicted when her uncle, a cabdriver, drops her off at college. “I’m going to college too,” he said. “Next year. The cab is only temporary!” I was embarrassed that he felt the need to tell me that, that he needed me to know he was more than the immigrant man behind the wheel of a yellow cab.”

Owusu is unflinching in examining herself, which is commendable, but her self-reflection can veer toward the melodramatic and her repeated ruminations don’t add up to a narrative. “The boy’s bird body haunts me,” she says when she sees a child beggar collapse in Ethiopia. “He hovers over me in judgment when I feel sorry for myself, but he cannot stop me from feeling sorry for myself.”

Owusu also writes about the relationships in her life. She tells us about a man who she thought was her great love in her 20s, and of the foul men who assaulted her when she was a child, and of the many hapless men she has slept with. But Owusu’s book is most alive when she writes about her parents. It’s clear that Owusu believes most in her father, whom she so lovingly called “Baba-Mama.” Her father died when Owusu was a teenager, and his death remains a shadow over everything she does. She was initially told he died of cancer, but when Owusu was 28, her stepmother unexpectedly told her, without proof, that he had died of AIDS. It’s an assertion that makes her question everything she thought she knew.

In the end, Owusu ultimately answers what home is. Her definition is pure and restorative to read. “I am made of the earth, flesh, ocean, blood and bone of all the places I tried to belong to and all the people I long for. I am pieces. I am whole. I am home.”

Unseen Revolution
How one telephone call had a lasting impact on American politics.

By RAYMOND ARSENAULT
THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN STRUGGLE for freedom and civil rights is replete with dramatic and harrowing stories, many involving intimidation and threats of violence from white supremacist defenders of the status quo. One of the most consequential of these stories is the subject of “Nine Days,” a compelling narrative written by the father-and-son team of Stephen and Paul Kendrick, co-authors of two previous books on race, law and politics.

The story begins in mid-October 1960 with Martin Luther King Jr.’s incarceration (his first) in a Georgia jail cell and ends three weeks later with John F. Kennedy’s narrow victory over Richard M. Nixon in the most competitive presidential election of the 20th century. Kennedy’s razor-thin triumph depended on several factors ranging from his youthful charm to Mayor Richard J. Daley’s ability to pad the Democratic vote in Chicago. But, as the Kendricks ably demonstrate, one crucial factor in Kennedy’s electoral success was the late surge of Black voters into the Democratic column. In all likelihood, this surge represented the difference between victory and defeat in at least five swing states, including Illinois, Michigan and New Jersey, ensuring Kennedy’s comfortable margin (303 to 219) in the Electoral College.

This last-minute shift was precipitated by two impulsive phone calls: one from John Kennedy to Coretta Scott King, expressing his concern for her jailed husband’s safety; the second from the candidate’s younger brother Robert to Oscar Mitchell, the Georgia judge overseeing King’s incarceration. Arrested on two minor charges — participating in a student-led sit-in at Rich’s department store in Atlanta and driving with an Alabama license after changing his residency to Georgia — King was thought to be in grave danger after a manacled, late-night transfer from an Atlanta jail to a remote rural facility in Klan-infested DeKalb County, and soon thereafter to the state’s notorious maximum-security prison in Reidsville.

Coretta King, panic-stricken that her husband might be murdered or even lynched, contacted Harris Wofford, a friend and longtime civil rights advocate working on Kennedy’s campaign. Along with Kennedy’s brother-in-law Senator Shriver and the Black journalist Louis Martin, Wofford was part of a campaign initiative charged with expanding the Black vote for Kennedy by offsetting the senator’s mediocre record on civil rights — somehow without alienating the white South. On Oct. 26, after consulting with Wofford, Shriver persuaded Kennedy to call Mrs. King. The conversation was brief, but the message was powerful: “I know this must be very hard for you. I understand you are expecting a baby, and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King. If there is anything I can do to help, please feel free to call me.” When Bobby, Jack’s campaign manager, learned what had happened, he was furious, fearing this was a liberal stunt that would destroy his brother’s chance of winning the South. But after cooling down and realizing that the die was cast, he called Judge Mitchell to plead for King’s release on bail.

Mitchell agreed, King was soon released and on the last Sunday before the election, the Kennedy campaign blanketed the nation’s Black churches with a flier later known as the Blue Bomb. The choice was clear, the bright blue flier insisted: “No Comment! Nixon Versus a Candidate With a Heart, Senator Kennedy.” With Black ministers leading the way, Kennedy won an estimated 68 percent of the Black vote on Election Day, 7 percent higher than Adlai Stevenson’s showing in 1956.

No brief review can do full justice to the Kendricks’ masterly and often riveting account of King’s ordeal and the 1960 “October Surprise” that may have altered the course of modern American political history. Suffice it to say that any reader who navigates the many twists and turns and surprises in this complex tale will come away recognizing the power of historical contingency.
Mother Courage

One woman's journey to Syria to find her radicalized son.

By STEVEN LEE MYERS

THE TWO WARS that have taken place in the rebellious Russian province of Chechnya were in many ways the horrifying denouement of the Soviet Union's collapse. Though confined to "a small corner of hell," as Anna Politkovskaya, the late Russian journalist, called the place, the wars reverberate to this day.

Those reverberations — from Europe to Syria — are at the heart of a new book from Wojciech Jagielski, another journalist who, like Politkovskaya, has traversed the world's darkest corners.

"All Lara's Wars," translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, is Jagielski's journalistic account of one woman's journey from an improbably idyllic childhood in the mountains of Georgia — "there was no finer place on Earth" — through one conflict after another. "War was like a curse. Everyone ducked every step, constantly reminding her of its presence and steadily robbing her of everything she loved or valued," Jagielski writes.

The author of previous books on wars in Afghanistan and Uganda, Jagielski seems less interested in a historical inquiry of jihad than in an intimate account of the toll war exacts on one woman. At the same time, this is a book that in its ways seeks to explain what unfolds each time a terrorist attack is carried out by young Chechen immigrants, like the recent stabbing of a teacher in France.

"When I lost my husband, and then both my brothers were killed, I thought war was a man's business, and women had no part in it," Jagielski's subject tells him. "But I refused to give up my sons. I was their mother; my right to them was great-"

But I refused to give up my sons. I was their mother; my right to them was great-

"But I refused to give up my sons. I was their mother; my right to them was great-

two partisans from Chechnya declared independence, and Russia eventually sent troops to wrest it back. With war at her doorstep, Lara fled Georgia with her two sons. Her husband fled, too, finding asylum in an unnamed place in Europe that Jagielski simply refers to as the Alps. Lara thought she had found refuge.

"Here, out of the way, the war would never reach them," Jagielski writes. But it does.

The first Chechen war ended in stalemate in 1996, but when the region then descended into lawlessness, Russia's first democratically elected president, Boris Yeltsin, in 1999 entrusted a young new prime minister to launch another military campaign. That man, Vladimir Putin, would prove to be a ruthless commander in chief.

Lara's village became a staging ground for insurgent attacks across the border. Her sons, now teenagers, were beguiled by tales of the Chechen fighters and increasingly came under the sway of Islamic extremism. New mosques sprouted in the gorge, built with foreign money supporting holy war against the Russians. Lara's two brothers, acting as guides for a notorious Chechen commander, Ruslan Gelayev, died in a Russian ambush.

Once reconnected, her husband summoned the boys to Europe, which gave her hope that they could escape the violence. But after building new lives there, the boys became alienated and then radicalized. When the oldest, here called Shamil, joined the civil war in Syria, becoming a deputy to a Chechen commander of the Islamic State, Lara embarked on a remarkable journey to bring him home.

Jagielski, for better or worse, seems to have embraced the reporting model of Ryszard Kapuscinski, the famed Polish journalist. Kapuscinski crafted incredible tales but was dogged by accusations of confabulation. "All Lara's Wars" is billed as a true story, but parts of it, as with Kapuscinski's work, strain credi-

THE PUSH

By Ashley Audrain


One Bad Apple

A traumatized mother suspects her young daughter is evil.

By CLAIRE MARTIN

IS MY CHILD'S BEHAVIOR NORMAL? It's a parenting question for the ages, particularly at a time when a certain type of parent (present company included) frets over every childhood quirk, no matter how mundane. Does the preschooler with a predilection for hitting need a professional intervention, or maybe just a taekwondo class? Is the kid who drops naps but not tantrums a future rageaholic? This sort of hand-wringing, at its most extreme, is at the center of Ashley Audrain's taut, chilling debut novel, "The Push."

Blythe Connor is reluctant to become a parent — understandably so. Her own mother abandoned her when she was 11, after years of cruelty. Her grandmother, also abusive, departed in a more gruesome way: by hanging herself from a tree in the front yard. Blythe is primed, perhaps even genetically programmed, for maternal struggle. "I think the baby hates me," she says just days after giving birth to her first child, a daughter named Violet. Their relationship goes downhill from there.

Blythe's postpartum experience is familiar, and Audrain renders it flawlessly. Breastfeeding isn't a spontaneous success, for one thing; a nurse "stood over us and stared at Violet and my huge brown nipple as she tried to latch again." Blythe struggles to adapt to motherhood and she sees seismic shifts in her relationship to her husband, Fox. Noticeably absent is any sense of joy or wonder. "I was so disappointed she was mine," Blythe says of Violet. She admits to ignoring her baby's cries for hours on end.

It would be easy to chalk up these difficulties to postpartum depression if it weren't for the periodic reminders of Blythe's traumatic family history, woven through the book in stand-alone chapters. Blythe's mother hit her and often disappeared for a night or two at a time. Blythe's grandmother routinely locked Blythe's mother out of the house after school and once held her head underwater in the bathtub, nearly drowning her.

Audrain nimbly stokes the mystery as to whether nature or nurture is at play.

Lot since it involves diong a wig in order to befriend Fox's new partner, and then lying pathologically to her. Blythe's experiences are relatable on one level and full-stop alarming on another, a hallmark of the psychological thriller genre that's executed with gripping precision here.

Occasionally the second person gets repetitive, and I found myself longing to hear Fox's voice — or anyone else's, really. But the chapters examining Blythe's family's past provide texture, and the narrative feels more balanced once Fox's partner is tricked into dishing on their life, even asking Blythe for parenting advice. Finally, someone thinks she's a good mother.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

THE PUSH

By Ashley Audrain


One Bad Apple

A traumatized mother suspects her young daughter is evil.
Here Is the Fire Now

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

What I found was an often lyrical and rebellious love story embedded within a tender call-out to Black readers, reaching across time and form to shake something old, mighty in the blood.

“The Prophets” opens with a direct address, or maybe an address that speaks right past you depending on who you are: “You do not yet know us. You do not yet understand.” Speaking are seven voices who, in a prologue of sorts, usher readers into the world of “The Prophets.”

“A story is coming. Your story is coming.”

The central story that comes is anchored by Isaiah and Samuel, two enslaved boys on the Halifax plantation, also known as Empty. In each other, Isaiah and Samuel find a love that brings peace to the hearts of the many enslaved people on the plantation, until they are betrayed by a fellow enslaved man, Amos. Seeing the religious devotion of Paul, his often soiled, quick-to-cruelness master, and believing Christianity to be a pathway to better treatment for those enslaved, Amos approaches Paul, offering to bring the Word to those held captive on the plantation. Paul eventually sees the value in Amos’s proposition and allows him to begin preaching, a task that Amos excels in, mesmerizing his fellow captives with his sermons, delivered with a musicality Paul himself admits he wouldn’t have the rhythm to try.

The Word begins to spread across the plantation, and where folks once saw Isaiah and Samuel as beautiful — one “a deep cavern without lamplight to guide, the other a midnight sky, but without any stars” — this new, singular God and his ways, so unlike “the old ways” that guide and protect, rot their Black captives’ sight and turn them against the two young lovers.

To Amos, his betrayal of Isaiah and Samuel is a way to protect everybody held captive on the plantation — Isaiah and Samuel’s refusal of the forced mating that the enslavers demand as a way to breed more enslaved people puts everyone, including the lovers themselves, in danger. His love for the boys — and he does love them in his own way, having carried a young Isaiah in his arms to Empty when they were sold and brought to the plantation — is turned against them, a logic made by captivity.

Isaiah and Samuel’s relationship is the most tender and stunning achievement of “The Prophets.” Their beauty, the wonder of their spell, illuminates the darkness: “Willingness radiated off of them in all directions, to the other a midnight sky, but without any stars” — this new, singular God and his excels in, mesmerizing his fellow captives with his sermons, delivered with a musicality Paul himself admits he wouldn’t have the rhythm to try.

Isaiah and Samuel’s relationship is the most tender and stunning achievement of “The Prophets.” Their beauty, the wonder of their spell, illuminates the darkness: “Willingness radiated off of them in all directions, to the other a midnight sky, but without any stars” — this new, singular God and his excels in, mesmerizing his fellow captives with his sermons, delivered with a musicality Paul himself admits he wouldn’t have the rhythm to try.

Jones seems to be reaching across centuries of blood and memory in an attempt to shake awake a warrior armed with weapon and wit that lies sleeping in his imagined, beloved, Black reader.

All of it — the seven voices, the midnight blue lovers, the warrior women, the shadows fat with ancestors — pressed upon my Black heart asking me to remember before the boats, to not turn from the horror of the fields and see what has always been most beautiful and unkillable in us — our ways, our fight, our magic, our love. “The Prophets” attempts to give its Black characters and Black audience the same gifts — our right names, our Black knowing, a freedom outside of time and circumstance.

Jones’s adoration for Toni Morrison shimmers through the novel, which is both a blessing and a hindrance. Haints and blue eyes in the book seem to wink at Morrison’s catalog, and like Morrison, Jones proves himself an amazing lyricist, pulling poetry out of every image and shift of light. Nothing here is flat, everything has shape and depth, we see deep into shadows and silences, transgress rich landscapes rivered and internal.

In another Morrisonian move, the story of “The Prophets” is narrated by not one central character but by a tapestry of folks, the vantage point of each chapter shifting to another person on the plantation, from the many enslaved who are watching for knowing shadows and chances to strike, to white enslavers who see empathy and even kindness in their assaults and crimes. This form is one place “The Prophets” falters. If a character is named, you can be sure there will be a chapter dedicated to him or her, and while that offers perspective, it also sacrifices some of the urgency.

At times, I wanted less from the minor characters and more time with the lovers and the villains of the book, more space to dramatize both the peace and the tension in the story.

The last chapters of “The Prophets,” however, dispelled some of my frustration with the form of the narrative. The book closes with a brilliantly rendered suite of rebellion and choice that left me in tears. What earthly, writerly beefs I had with the book evaporated, forgiven. What Black, queer wounds I held close to the chest, I surrendered, I let breathe.

What a fiery kindred that ending, this book. A book I entered hesitantly, cautiously, I exited anew — something in me unloosed, running. May this book cast its spell on all of us, restore to us some memory of our most warrior and softest selves.

“Here is the fire now: dancing, destroying.”

And may we spin and ignite in turn.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NAIMA GREEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

SUNDAY, JANUARY 17, 2021

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DAINEZ SMITH is the author of three poetry collections, most recently “Homie,” and is a co-host of the “VS” podcast.

Robert Jones Jr. near his home in Bedford-Stuyvesant.
Death Do Us Part?
A debut novel paying tribute to the author’s lost family.

By BENJAMIN NUGENT

ONE OF THE signal achievements of contemporary Argentine fiction has been to take the country’s dark recent history—the state terrorism of the ’70s and ’80s, the subsequent economic crises that brutalized the poor—and channel it into ghost stories. In Mariana Enriquez’s short story “The Inn,” for instance, a tourist-town hotel that served as an official restoration of democracy, Tomás is emotionally dead, a ghost of a man; and Isabel is physically dead, an actual ghost. Loedel has inherited a particular brand of mordant humor from his literary forebears in the Southern Cone: When Tomás references Ronald Reagan (“U.S. president? Actor from California?”), Isabel shows “no sign of recognition.” Then they fall into bed, he says, “I imagine sex is . . . complicated for you now.”

The character of Isabel Aroztegui is very much based on a real woman. Loedel dedicates the book to his half sister, Isabel Maiztegui, a Montonera who was murdered by the dictatorship in 1978, at the age of 22. In the acknowledgments, the author writes that this novel “could not have been written without her sacrifice.”

Loedel’s sense of obligation to the real Isabel might explain why “Hades, Argentina” can feel dutiful, even workmanlike in places as it catalogs the depravities of the regime she fought. There are detailed descriptions of various torture methods, down to the number of volts used to deliver shocks—14,000 in one instance—but scant insight into the mentality of the torturers. A set piece about the dictator’s practice of dropping its victims from planes “into the depths of the Río de la Plata” is wedged into the middle of the book, and written in stilted prose: “One at a time they fell.” Loedel’s exhaustive account of the junta’s crimes might be a homage to the long chronicle of violence against women in Roberto Bolaño’s novel “2666”—an oft-repeated street address in Loedel’s novel is “Río Negro 2166”—as well as to the memory of his half sister and her cause. Alas, it doesn’t always serve the story.

Still, it’s fun and sad to follow Tomás and Isabel past the forgotten equestrian statues and dingy cafes of Buenos Aires, beneath skies with “the slippery iridescence of fish scales,” both lovers stunted, one technically alive, the other joking about her otherworldly condition. When Tomás asks Isabel if she’s lonely, she says, “Like Dracula.” Any debut author who can come up with that exchange deserves some attention. Loedel will learn from this novel, and I suspect that he will approach his next book with a greater sense of freedom. Perhaps he will show us more of that bleak, serious comedy he writes so well.

Word Play
A raucous homage to the power of language, both real and imagined.

By PATRICIA T. O’CONNER

YOU WOULDN’T EXPECT a comic novel about a dictionary to be a thriller too, but this one is. In fact, Eley Williams’s hilariously new book, “The Liar’s Dictionary,” is also a mystery, love story (two of them) and cliffhanging melodrama.

THE LIAR’S DICTIONARY
By Eley Williams

The twin protagonists are separated by more than a century. Mallory and Peter work at Swansby House in London, home of Swansby’s New Encyclopaedic Dictionary, she in the present and he in 1899. What gradually weaves their alternating stories together is the curious power of words, both real and imagined.

THE LIAR’S DICTIONARY

As the novel opens, Mallory is the company’s only remaining employee, a bored intern whose sole task is to answer the phone. It’s not much of a job, since the phone rings just once a day (with a cryptic bomb threat). She passes her time reading the dictionary, a dusty behemoth that for all practical purposes is dead. Work on it was abandoned around World War I, far short of the letter Z, and it exists only in an incomplete nine-volume edition published in the 1930s. The company is kept alive by the persistence of its owner and editor in chief, David Swansby, who rents out most of the elegant Queen Anne building for events.

Meanwhile, back in the 19th century, Peter is also numbingly bored at Swansby’s, where he’s one of more than 100 lexicographers toiling at what he considers “a pointless census of language.” But he has a couple of secret amusements. One is a fake lisp, which he cultivates for sympathy (it got him his job). The other is a furtive talent for making up words, like “abantina (n.),” defined as “fickleness,” and “agrupt (adj.),” about the “irritation caused by having a denouement ruined.” They’re his “secret, silly words,” his “cuckoos-in-the-nest.”

The cuckoos have now come home to roost. David Swansby, who wants to update and digitize the dictionary, discovers two fake entries and asks Mallory to root them out. Before long, she’s amassed piles of suspicious-looking blue index cards from the company’s archives, written in a similar hand. Fascinated, she tries to imagine the author of these “small sweet observations, inconsequentialisms.” Should she expose them, or let sleeping dogs lie? (Interpret “lie” however you wish.)

Williams, a British writer who is also the author of the story collection “Attrib.,” ingeniously links these parallel narratives. Peter wakes one morning with a pounding head after a night of drinking and wonders why there’s no word for his condition. Later, Mallory reflects on the many modern words that never made it into Swansby’s, like the bibulous sense of “hangover.”

Their love lives are ambivalent, each in its own way. Peter, who’s excruciatingly shy, is smitten by a colleague’s fiancée. Mallory is gay though not quite out, while her lover, Pip, is “out-and-out out.” When Mallory ruminates on all the words we don’t have—one for the kindness of people who try to free trapped insects—Pip asks, “What about a word for not being out?” (Peter, in the meantime, struggles to release a moth from his railway carriage.)

“The Liar’s Dictionary” is a raucous orgy of words. Williams juggles them, plays tunes with them, tries them on and takes them off, tastes them and spits them out. All the while, she’s using them to frame a thoughtful inquiry into truth and meaning. And her denouements are so satisfying that it would be abrupt to spoil them.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAYPOOT SINGH HANS

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 17
About the Boy
A memoir so rife with trauma it’s written in the third person.

By JARRETT J. KROSOCZKA

AUTHORS’ CHILDHOOD experiences — no matter how joyous or upsetting — often lay the groundwork for their fiction. Gary Paulsen’s name is synonymous with gritty survivalist stories, so it should come as no surprise that his memoir, “Gone to the Woods,” leaves you gritting your teeth and clenching the pages. Paulsen, a recipient of the Newbury Honor-winning “Hatchet.”

Paulsen refers to himself throughout as “the boy.” There is just one moment, early on, when a character calls him “Gary.” While the boy spends most of the book escaping unfathomable traumas, “mind pictures” remain seared in his psyche. Writing a memoir is a fraught endeavor, and I can only presume that Paulsen chose this third-person device — which sometimes kept me at bay — as a form of self-care.

This isn’t to say the book is void of beautiful language or stunning detail. I was still lost in the story, rooting for the 5-year-old boy who boards a train alone in Chicago and rides 400 miles to Minneapolis surrounded by wounded soldiers returning from World War II, where his absent father (whom he won’t meet until he’s 7) has been serving as a low-level officer under General Patton. In Minneapolis he transfers to another train to travel hundreds of miles more — all to escape an alcoholic, irresponsible mother. (She would dress him in a uniform and drag him with her to bars, where she set him on tabletops to draw men to her by singing songs.) The boy’s scandalized maternal grandmother is the one who insists he go live with Aunt Edy, his mother’s younger sister, and her husband, Sig, in Minnesota’s North Woods.

Paulsen describes their homestead as “a fairy tale kind of farm.” It is here that the boy learns to work and survive off the land, and immerses himself in the wonders of childhood. Even in these sublime moments, I found my heart racing, knowing that while authors may craft fairy tales, they don’t always live them, because life doesn’t play out that way.

My heart broke as does Sig’s when the boy’s mother turns up unannounced, with a man she calls “Uncle Casey,” to take him away, first by train to California and then “across the ocean to be with your father in a place called the Philippine Islands.” (“The man named Casey . . . was not the boy’s uncle and would never be his uncle.”)

So many horrors befall this boy as he moves through his childhood and teenage years. While traveling by boat to the Philippines, he witnesses a plane crash, followed by a shark attack on the passengers. Thrust into the water. While in Manila, he hears heavy artillery being fired nightly and witnesses brutal killings. In North Dakota, where his usually drunken, fighting parents land next, he repeatedly runs away, before enlisting in the Army. These events haunted me as a reader, so I can’t begin to imagine how witnessing them with his own eyes has haunted the author.

Lessons from Aunt Edy and Sig help him survive, or at least buoy him until 13 he first steps into the safe physical space of a public library, where a librarian puts a notebook and a sharpened pencil in his hands and encourages him to write down his “mind pictures.” This small act has echoed throughout his life, and enriched the lives of readers across generations.

The Hide-and-Seek of Grief
Two picture books separate the person from the emotions, and model empathy.

By SYDNEY SMITH

“WE ONLY HAVE 42 more Christmases until we are dead.”

This is what my 4-year-old told me in mid-December before bedtime. He has been testing out these kinds of musings on mortality a lot lately. I quickly changed the subject, asking which he would prefer, “PJ Masks” or dinosaur pajamas. The truth is, I am terrified of engaging him in these conversations.

WHAT’S THE MATTER, MARLO?
By Andrew Arnold
32 pp. Roaring Brook. $18.99. (Ages 3 to 6)

BEAR ISLAND
By Matthew Cordell
48 pp. Feiwel & Friends. $18.99. (Ages 2 to 5)

Many in your own lifetime and the more familiar anger and sadness. Over time they become companions in their respective wanderings through grief.

“Some days, only Louise was better. Some days, only Bear was better.” Colors are introduced to the palette as grief fades and happiness returns.

Unlike “What’s the Matter, Marlo?,” “Bear Island” depicts a layered and complex journey. We are shown the true tragic nature of grief as it happens to all of us. It’s a slow process with ups and downs and no quick fixes. Cordell speaks eloquently and respectfully to the universal experience of loss and recovery.

Authors such as Andrew Arnold and Matthew Cordell appreciate the unique privilege of creating safe spaces for our children to explore these multifaceted emotions. Their books promote self-awareness and understanding. After they are closed, there may be hard conversations, and questions that have no answers, but we’re left with a comforting message: it will be OK if we are here for one another.
### COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

**SALES PERIOD OF DECEMBER 27-JANUARY 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
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<td><strong>2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>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 fates intertwine.</td>
<td>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>ANXIOUS PEOPLE, by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.</td>
<td>WORLD OF WONDERS, by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. (Milkweed) In a collection of essays, the poet celebrates various aspects of the natural world and its inhabitants.</td>
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<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
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<td><strong>9</strong></td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>IS THIS ANYTHING?, by Jerry Seinfeld. (Simon &amp; Schuster) The comedian shares material he collected in an accordion folder over the last 45 years.</td>
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<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>BAG MAN: The White Crimes, Audacious Cover-Up, and Spectacular Downfall of a Brazen Crew in the White House, by Rachel Maddow and Michael Yarvitz. (Crown, $28.) This detailed and breezy account of Vice President Spiro Agnew’s downfall, adapted from the authors’ popular podcast, reminds us of how lucky the nation was to be rid of him.</td>
<td>THE ANSWER IS ..., by Alex Trebek. (Simon &amp; Schuster) A memoir by the host of the TV game show “Jeopardy!” from 1984 to 2020.</td>
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Editors’ Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review

**HIMALAYA: A Human History,** by Ed Douglas. (Norton, $40.) This authoritative account of the world’s most storied mountains is rich with personalities, politics and lore, to which Douglas, a veteran mountain climber and expert on the region, brings an infectious love and fascination.

**A GOOD TIME TO BE BORN: How Science and Public Health Save Children a Future,** by Perri Klass. (Norton, $28.95.) In this ambitious, elegant meditation on medicine, culture and parenting, Klass explores one of our greatest human achievements: the reduction in child mortality. With a powerful rage, she underscores the racism and shameful political truths that have complicated our contemporary plague.

**BAG MAN: The White Crimes, Audacious Cover-Up, and Spectacular Downfall of a Brazen Crew in the White House,** by Rachel Maddow and Michael Yarvitz. (Crown, $28.) This detailed and breezy account of Vice President Spiro Agnew’s downfall, adapted from the authors’ popular podcast, reminds us of how lucky the nation was to be rid of him.

**SAVING FREEDOM: Truman, the Cold War, and the Fight for Western Civilization,** by Joe Scarborough. (Harper/HarperCollins, $29.99.) The popular cable news host examines President Harry Truman’s legacy, showing how shrewd White House politics overcame America’s divisions and its isolationist tradition.

**A LIE SOMEONE TOLD YOU ABOUT YOURSELF,** by Hilaria Momm. (Simon & Schuster, $16.) A journalist and public speaker shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.

**WILD MINDS: The Artists and Rivalries That Inspired the Golden Age of Animation,** by Reid Mitenbuler. (Atlantic Monthly Press, $28.) Mitenbuler’s fast-moving account of the cartoonists, writers, hucksters and moguls who constructed the firmament of American animation is also filled with juicy business dealings and fierce rivalries.

**AN INVENTORY OF LOSSES,** by Reid Mitenbuler. (Atlantic Monthly Press, $28.) Mitenbuler’s fast-moving account of the cartoonists, writers, hucksters and moguls who constructed the firmament of American animation is also filled with juicy business dealings and fierce rivalries.

**HOW TO SLOWLY KILL YOURSELF AND OTHERS IN AMERICA,** by Kiese Laymon. (Scribner, paper, $16.) A contentious publishing experience left Laymon unsatisfied with his 2013 essay collection. Now, seven years later, after buying the book back from his initial publisher and revising the collection, he returns with Take 2.
Game On

When “Ready Player One” came out in 2011, Ernest Cline bought his dream car — a “Back to the Future”-inspired DeLorean — and logged 4,000 miles driving to bookstores to talk about his debut novel, which was made into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg. He’d park out front so fans could snap pictures of themselves alongside the iconic vehicle. “It was like a traveling ’80s museum,” Cline said in a phone interview. “It made for kind of a festive event.”

In November, his sequel, “Ready Player Two,” landed in a very different world — one where the futuristic technology Cline envisioned in “Ready Player One” has not only come to fruition but become indispensable. This time, instead of traversing the country, the former spoken word poet, lifelong gaming enthusiast and self-described “full-time geek” conducted a virtual author tour from his home in Austin, Texas. Sales of this novel do not seem to have suffered: “Ready Player Two” debuted at No. 1 on the hardcover fiction list, spent three weeks in that spot and is now at No. 4 in its sixth week as a best seller. It’s No. 1 on the audio fiction list, and “Ready Player One” is No. 15. (The actor Wil Wheaton narrates both books, as well as Cline’s alien invasion thriller, “Armada.”)

Cline has embraced virtual reality as a result of his work on the “Ready Player” books — in fact, when he realized in-person visits would be curtailed, he supplied friends and family with Oculus Quest headsets so they could hang out in 3-D. Clearly surmising that he was in conversation with a late adopter of everything, Cline explained, “My wife and I had our anniversary in a VR room.”

My wife and I had our anniversary in a VR room.”

An asterisk (*) indicates that a book’s sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders.
### AUDIO MONTHLY BEST SELLERS

**SALES PERIOD OF NOVEMBER 29-JANUARY 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audio Fiction</th>
<th>Audio Nonfiction</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>A PROMISED LAND</strong>, by Barack Obama. (Random House Audio) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term. Read by the author. 29 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>READY PLAYER TWO</strong>, by Ernest Cline. (Random House Audio) In a sequel to &quot;Ready Player One&quot;, Wade Watts discovers a technological advancement and goes on a new quest. Read by Wil Wheaton. 13 hours, 46 minutes unabridged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>GREENLIGHTS</strong>, by Matthew McConaughey. (Random House Audio) 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.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>THE VANISHING HALF</strong>, by Brit Bennett. (Penguin Audio) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 divide but their fates intertwine. Read by Shayna Small. 11 hours, 34 minutes unabridged.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>CASTE</strong>, by Isabel Wilkerson. (Penguin Audio) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today. Read by Robin Miles. 14 hours, 26 minutes unabridged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>THE RHYTHM OF WAR</strong>, by Brandon Sanderson. (Macmillan Audio) The fourth book in the Stormlight Archive series. Read by Kate Reading and Michael Kramer. 57 hours and 26 minutes unabridged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY</strong>, 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 one could have lived. Read by Carey Mulligan. 8 hours, 50 minutes unabridged.</td>
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<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>ANXIOUS PEOPLE</strong>, by Fredrik Backman. (Simon &amp; Schuster Audio) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house. Read by Marin Ireland. 9 hours, 53 minutes unabridged.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td><strong>DAYLIGHT</strong>, by David Baldacci. (Hachette Audio) The F.B.I. agent Atlee Pine’s search for her twin sister overlaps with a military investigator’s hunt for someone involved in a global conspiracy. Read by Britanny Pressley and Kyf Brewer. 11 hours, 37 minutes unabridged.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>THE AWAKENING</strong>, by Nora Roberts. (Macmillan Audio) The first book in the Dragon Heart Legacy series. Brenn Kelly travels through a portal from Ireland to a land of fairies and mermaids. Read by Barrie Kreinik. 15 hours and 27 minutes unabridged.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>THE DUKE AND I</strong>, by Julia Quinn. (Recorded Books) Daphne Bridgerton’s reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series “Bridgerton.” Read by Rosalyn Landor. 12 hours, 9 minutes unabridged.</td>
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<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING</strong>, by Delia Owens. (Penguin Audio) A young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect. Read by Cassandra Campbell. 12 hours, 12 minutes unabridged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE</strong>, by V.E. Schwab. (Macmillan Audio) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue has across centuries. Read by Julia Whelan. 17 hours, 10 minutes unabridged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>READY PLAYER ONE</strong>, by Ernest Cline. (Random House Audio) In 2044, the key to a vast fortune is hidden in a virtual-reality world. Read by Wil Wheaton. 15 hours, 46 minutes unabridged.</td>
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Audio ranks 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 accurately all outlets proportionally nationwide. Free-trial or low-cost trial audiobook sales are not eligible for inclusion. Publisher credits for audiobooks are listed under the audiobook publisher name. **ONLINE:** For more lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.
The chasm between just how well some have thrived economically during the pandemic and just how badly others have fared is among the more startling results of this annus horribilis. But where some see the disease as upending some industries (travel and restaurants) and boosting others (home entertainment and technology), Blakeley, an English writer, Labour Party activist and leftist theorist, sees the have and have-not divide as the latest and perhaps most egregious chapter of the sad story of capitalism.

For Blakeley, the response to Covid is twined with the great financial crisis of 2008-9: Then, states bailed out the financial industry; now, the state is bailing out all industry to maintain the system of “monopoly capitalism.” While she acknowledges that no government could just let the system collapse, she excoriates the way that officials have become handmaidens to corporations, which have pocketed the free money of central banks while millions of individuals go further into debt. That, in turn, has led not to a desirable reversal of globalization, but to even more advantages for the “Global North” and even less latitude for the “Global South.”

The only solution, she believes, is an enormous global Green New Deal. It would be hard to find a purer iteration of the socialist critique of modern capitalism in a pandemic age. Blakeley’s passion as a polemict notwithstanding, if you don’t share her sensibility, it’s unlikely that this book will change your mind.

In our world of constant immediacy, it’s easy to forget that all is not new under the sun. This is the first pandemic of our lifetimes, but it is neither unique nor especially deadly compared with pandemics past.

Gordon, a Canadian author, takes us on a world tour of previous pandemics, starting with the 14th-century bubonic plague. His danse macabre continues with the 17th-century Great Plague of London and then through various typhus and cholera outbreaks in the 19th century through the Great Influenza of 1918-19.

At each point, the science and medicine of the day proved woefully inadequate. Doctors and those who passed for learned persistently misidentified the way the various diseases were transmitted. Another constant during pandemics was and is the predilection of the wealthy to flee urban areas, leaving the poor and vulnerable to cluster together and suffer the worst ravages.

Gordon is at his best in these thumbnail sketches. When he turns to the lessons of the present, he is on thinner ground and his observations about the digital transformation of industry and the work-from-home revolution become more familiar. Given the current pace of change, even an insta-book can feel dated: Gordon wrote over the summer, when vaccines seemed years rather than months away and when it appeared that Covid might be the defining feature of all societies for years to come.

By now, it has become increasingly evident that the pandemic has accelerated multiple trends that were currents before Covid and have become tidal waves because of it. The shift to the digital world, already in play over the past decade, has become tectonic.

Few are better positioned to illuminate the vagaries of this transformation than Galloway, a tech entrepreneur, author and professor at New York University’s Stern School. In brisk prose and catchy illustrations, he vividly demonstrates how the largest technology companies turned the crisis of the pandemic into the market-share-grabbing opportunity of a lifetime.

Galloway neither celebrates nor decries this, though he has little patience for the homilies of Silicon Valley that all disruption is for the best; he recognizes that the pandemic makes it even harder to police the “bad behavior” of Big Tech. He also notes that one industry ripe for disruption that has resisted it until now — higher education — may finally have its day of economic reckoning. That may imperil some institutions but could well unleash a new era of education.

Galloway fears, rightly, that all of the spending and government intervention may serve only to embed dominant companies. His call for more competition in the age of tech consolidation is laudable, but even with antitrust measures now being taken, how that is to be achieved remains elusive.

By Rickards, a longtime financial author and stock market skeptic, the assorted policy responses to the pandemic in the United States and elsewhere have produced a new Great Depression, one that has hurt the working class disproportionately. That means the starry-eyed hope for a 2021 return to normal isn’t going to happen: “In depressions, things don’t get back to normal because there is no normal anymore.” The destruction of service industries caused by the lockdown and the rise of technologies like telemedicine and tele-conferencing mean the damage to the old economy is likely to be permanent.

This is not a book to read if you want reassurance: Rickards forecasts a 30-year period of lower growth. The predilection of governments to take on huge debt and to spend, he says, will only make the recovery more sluggish. While civilizational collapse is not likely, it should not be ruled out as a possibility.

Given his longtime bearishness about financial markets, it’s not surprising that Rickards ends with an investment menu heavy on cash, commodities and gold and light on paper assets like stocks and bonds. We all tend to read crises through the lens of our prior beliefs; for Rickards, an economic system built on central banks and fiat money had been itching for a reckoning long before 2020. Gold was his answer before the crisis, and gold is the answer now. It would be comforting to think that the solutions were so elegant and simple.
We’ve come a long, exhausted way from trying to make the best of it.

GONE ARE THE early, heady days, when sheltering in place afforded the time to make sourdough loaves, start craft projects and consult books on new homesteading skills. With nothing to look forward to but lockdown fatigue, lukewarm take-out and more isolation, the spirit of making things has soured. Fuses are short, patience is tested and “Do It Yourself” has taken on a new tone entirely.

LEANNE SHAPTON is the author, most recently, of “Guestbook.” TEDDY BLANKS is a co-founder of the Brooklyn-based graphic design studio CHIPS.
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