Separated At Birth

By Lisa Belkin

Much has been written recently about what went wrong in the adoption world between 1950 and 1975, a period known as the “Baby Scoop Era” when the number of domestic adoptions exploded to, by some estimates, nearly four million. One agency receiving particular scrutiny in the post-mortem is Louise Wise Services, a now-defunct entity that promised to match “blue-ribbon” Jewish babies with “good” Jewish homes in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The 2018 documentary “Three Identical Strangers,” about triplets deliberately separated as part of that agency’s nature-versus-nurture “research,” is the most visible example of the growing realization that old-style adoption was not always what it seemed.

“American Baby: A Mother, a Child, and the Shadow History of Adoption,” by the veteran journalist Gabrielle Glaser, is the latest addition to this body of work, and the most comprehensive and damning one. Like “Three Identical Strangers,” Glaser tells a singular story to illuminate a universal truth. There are no one-in-a-million triplets here, just a teenage girl and a baby, who could be any young mother, any infant son. In fact, Glaser argues, Margaret Erle Katz and her son David Rosenberg are every sealed, secretive adop-
Make prep time the new playtime.
Explore curated collections like Recipes to Cook With Your Kids.
nytcooking.com
# Fiction

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Here are 175 true stories of love, each told in 100 words or less. Romantic and platonic, sibling and parental, requited and unrequited, lost and found: The stories are tiny, but the loves they contain are anything but. Honest, funny, tender, wise, and always surprising, these ordinary moments burn so bright that they reveal humanity, and our own selves, in their light.


—Neil Vigdor, Breaking News Reporter, Express Desk
When reality is surreal, only fiction can make sense of it.

29 new stories from Margaret Atwood, Colm Tóibín, Karen Russell, Tommy Orange, Leïla Slimani, David Mitchell, Rachel Kushner, Edwidge Danticat, Charles Yu, and many more

PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT: CHRISTOPHER MILLER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES’ MICHAEL BENANAV FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mount Chamberlin in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, left, and Trisul Peak in the Himalaya.

Letters

Seeing the Light

TO THE EDITOR:
In her review of Andrea Pitzer’s “Icebound: Shipwrecked at the Edge of the Word” (Jan. 10), Rachel Slade concludes by writing: “‘Icebound’ is a reminder that there was once a time when things were unknown. And when their ships bumped up against the edge of the Arctic, the Europeans gazed with horror and awe at the sparkling ice and wondered what Edens lay beyond, waiting to be discovered.”

Discovered? Is that what “Icebound” and the history of human conquest of nature reveal? Or is it rather plundered and annihilated? Before this interpretation, we read that “the 16th-century Dutchmen didn’t hesitate to shoot, maim, club and impale whatever they saw. ‘Slaughter emerged as the instinctive Dutch response to the Arctic landscape, a new theater that would see the same performance again and again with every European wave of arrivals,’ Pitzer notes.”

But that was then, some still say, now we know a great deal more. What shall we then make of The Times Magazine’s section in the same week, “Witness to an Extinction,” by Sam Anderson?

“Mass extinction is the ultimate crisis, doom of all dooms, the disaster toward which all other disasters flow,” Anderson writes. “What could humans do that would be worse than killing the life all around us, irreversibly, at scale?”

We do know more now, but obviously not enough to know that we are inextricably enmeshed in a great web of life; killing swathes of our biosphere will in time kill perhaps all of it, all of us.

PETER LONDON
DAVIS, CALIF.

TO THE EDITOR:
In his review of “Himalaya,” by Ed Douglas (Jan. 10), Jeffrey Gettleman approvingly quotes Douglas’s statement, “It’s easy to see why a philosophy stressing the illusionary nature of an individual consciousness, as Buddhism does, might prosper here.”

But it’s even easier to see that it takes an individual consciousness to believe that individual consciousness is illusory.

FELICIA NIMUE ACKERMAN
PROVIDENCE, R.I.

The Divine

TO THE EDITOR:
I am puzzled how anyone can review “The Orchard,” by David Hopen (Dec. 13), without mentioning the paradigm Orchard — or “Pardes” — story appearing in the Talmud. Clearly, Hopen had this reference in mind.

PHYLLIS SHAPIRO
ST. LOUIS

A Life in Letters

TO THE EDITOR:
The first thing I read in the Book Review each week is the Letters page. It is such a lively, interesting and literate discussion.

This week’s letters (Jan. 10) made me wish I had paid more attention to Daphne Merkin’s review of Heather Clark’s new look at Sylvia Plath’s troubled life.

I was also delighted by Barbara Matusow’s confession, reflecting the feelings of many readers (including myself), that long books — “doorstops,” she calls them — put off readers and discourage potential readers of biography.

And I was nodding my head as I read David Myers’s letter about the “poetry” in Michael Cunningham’s essay on Virginia Woolf. I then wanted to go back and reread that essay after reading Richard Gerber’s assessment of it.

DAVID TILLYER
NEW YORK

TO THE EDITOR:
Au contraire to Barbara Matusow’s lament about lengthy biographies. Would she ignore Robert Caro’s majestic volumes on Lyndon Johnson? Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.’s 1,000-plus pages on the 1,000 days of J.F.K.? The 1,152 pages by Andrew Roberts that bring Churchill to life?

Rather than judgment based on a book’s heft, a read of the opening chapter provides a superior clue to the splendor that may lurk within.

DAVID SMOLLAR
SAN DIEGO

CORRECTIONS

A review on Jan. 10 about “Icebound,” by Andrea Pitzer, referred incorrectly to the Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton and the fate of the crew on his ship, the Endurance. In 1916, all of the crew members were rescued; it is not the case that “all but three” were rescued. (Three crew members from the Aurora, another ship that was part of Shackleton’s Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, did die.)

DAVID TILL YER
NEW YORK

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM
Brad Taylor

The novelist, whose new Pike Logan thriller is ‘American Traitor,’ avoids agenda-driven books: ‘I don’t care if it’s left or right, I read for escape, not the author’s political views.’

What books are on your night stand?
A stack that is much too large, and I keep saying I’m going to draw down, and is a bit eclectic: “Rise and Kill First,” by Ronen Bergman, on Israel’s targeted-killing program; “The Order,” by Daniel Silva; “AI Superpowers,” by Kai-Fu Lee, about the insidious gray war between China and the United States for domination of artificial intelligence; a book on long-range precision shooting: “The Shield and the Sword,” by Erne Bradford, about the Knights of Malta; and two advanced reader copies from other authors.

Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time?
I’m embarrassed to say the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey.” I read them because my daughter was assigned the tomes for school. Ironically, I’ve not let her read my own books until she is “old enough” because of the violence, but those two books are absolute blood baths. I was astounded at the sexual innuendo and the visceral killings.

Who’s your favorite fictional spy? And the best villain?
That’s easy: Alec Leamas from John le Carré’s “The Spy Who Came In From the Cold.” One of the best spies and spy novels — if not the best spy novel — ever written. Villain? This may sound strange, but it would honestly be General Woundwort from Richard Adams’s “Watership Down.” Yes, he’s a rabbit, but that is one of my favorite books and it had a huge impression on me as a child. I’m afraid to reread it as an adult because it might not hold up, so I just live with the memories it gave me in my youth.

What makes for a good thriller?
Without a doubt, characters. Characters, characters, characters. One could write a scene where a car bomb is placed in an empty parking lot, set to go off in two minutes. The buildup is intense, with a “Day of the Jackal” feel of finding components and creating the device, but at the end of the day, do readers care about the empty parking lot? No. They only care if that bomb is going to harm someone they’ve invested emotional energy in — and that is the character of the story. Setting, pace and trajectory are important, but they’re irrelevant without the reader’s emotional investment, and that is driven by characters.

What kinds of stories are you drawn to? And what do you steer clear of?
Right now, I read a lot of murder mysteries. Books by John Sandford, Robert Crais, Michael Connelly and others. Anything that has a bit of suspense and a twist — and, of course, characters I care about. What I steer clear of is any novel that has a political bent. I don’t care if it’s left or right, I read for escape, not the author’s political views. The minute someone begins preaching to me about some issue that’s not part of the plot, or characters appear who are obviously politically motivated and there to sell a political script, that book goes in the trash.

What book might we be surprised to find on your shelves?
Doc Savage, Conan the Barbarian, and Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators. None are literary masterpieces, but all are series I read in my youth, and they still hold a special place for me. Many times, during a military move to one duty post or another, I’ve been tempted to throw them out like an old baseball mitt, but I never have, and they still sit on my shelf.

What book would you recommend for the current political moment?
“The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy” or “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.” Anything that is hell and gone from today’s politics. Reading should be an escape. Why on earth would anyone want to read one more story about today’s political environment?

What book did you feel you were supposed to like, and didn’t? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?
“Where the Crawdads Sing,” by Delia Owens. It’s been on the best-seller list since forever, and everyone has raved about it, so I decided to give it a go. I couldn’t get through it. I know this has something to do with me and not the book, because my Lord it has been selling like toilet paper in a pandemic since 2018, but I just didn’t get into it.

Whom would you choose to write your life story?
Winston Churchill. Any man who says “History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it” is the man I want at the helm of my life story.

An expanded version of this interview is available at nytimes.com/books.
Bloody Murder

YOU’D THINK that three wives might have been enough for Blake Nelson, the head of a Mormon household in deepest Utah who makes a nice corpse in Cate Quinn’s debut mystery, BLACK WIDOWS (Sourcebooks Landmark, 418 pp., $26.99). Rachel, the No. 1 wife and one of the story’s three narrators, is the devoted, traditional one. Emily, the second wife, is a little more flighty. And Tina, Wife No. 3, is a former sex worker and addict. All the sister-wives were admittedly miffed when Blake started shopping around for Wife No. 4, but which one of them might have been mad enough to kill him? “Everybody loved Blake,” Rachel testifies. “Except his wives. Sometimes, we hated him.”

That’s the challenge for Officers Brewer and Carlson, the Salt Lake City police detectives who trek out to the derelict farm in the middle of the desert that Blake and his industrious wives have turned into a survivalist camp. Quinn writes haunting scenes of the desert in its many moods (hot, dry, very hot, very dry) but she’s not much for cops, so Detectives Brewer and Carlson are as lacking in dimension as they are in forensic savvy. But oh, my, can this author draw women! Rachel, Emily and Tina, who have been in thrall for so long to their husband, discover they don’t know one another as well as they thought they did until after he is dead and buried. Without Blake to fixate on, they’re finally free to raise their eyes and discover who they are by studying — and at long last truly seeing — their sisters.

As readers, we come to know the wives gradually, not only through the dramatic revelations of their painful histories, but also through modest expressions of their dawning self-emanicipation. “I’d like to bake a real cake” is the bold wish of shy Emily. It’s the loveless wives, it seems, who could use the devotion and care of a wife of their own. And while Quinn writes with spirit on weighty subjects like kinky sex, domestic abuse, polygamy and religious cults, her primary and most poignant theme seems to be female friendship.

IF YOU THRILL to the chills of Scandinavian noir, chances are you’ve read something by Anders Roslund. (No? Do try “The Beast” to test your capacity for revulsion.) Roslund, a Swedish author who usually works with writing partners, has gone solo with a police procedural called KNOCK KNOCK (Putnam, 439 pp., $27). OK, I’ll bite: Who’s there? A killer who has returned to Stockholm to finish off the only witness to an atrocious multiple murder he committed 17 years ago, that’s who. Zana Lilaj was only 5 years old when this boogeyman broke into her home and wiped out the rest of her family. But trauma victims can have amazing recall, and some of them get itchy after years of boredom in a witness protection program.

Roslund has two strong prose styles — dark and darker — and both are on show in this no-frills translation by Elizabeth Clark Wessell. The author also likes to work with twin plots, which means that a conventional side-bar involving weapons smuggling keeps muscling in on the main action. But note that Detective Superintendent Ewert Grens, who starred in the books Roslund wrote with Borge Hellstrom, reappears here, as morose and socially alienated as ever, bless his miserable soul.

THE SNAPPY mother-daughter writing team known as P.J. Tracy created the lighthearted “Monkeywrench” cyber mysteries. But after the death of her mother, P.J. Lambrecht, Traci Lambrecht has struck out on her own, though she’s still using the P.J. Tracy name. In DEEP INTO THE DARK (Minotaur, 338 pp., $26.99), the first installment in a new Los Angeles series, she introduces Sam Easton, a wounded Army veteran who is neither too tough nor too cute, and Margaret Nolan, an equally sympathetic L.A.P.D. detective. Easton is suspected in the murder of a friend of a friend, which is as good an excuse as any for getting this new team on the road, and before long the two settle in to a relationship that’s not too jolly or too morose. Although Tracy seems to have found her literary sweet spot, she’ll have to keep an eye out for the wordy dialogue and clichés that litter the sidewalks of her brave new world.

FOR THOSE OF US who acquire our knowledge of science, art and history — if not life itself — from the pages of crime novels, Cecilia Ekback’s THE HISTORIANS (Harper Perennial, 464 pp., paper, $16.99) is the perfect read, an exciting and enjoyable way to sop up some history. It’s 1943 and the world is at war. Norway and Denmark are both occupied by the Germans, Finland swings this way and that, and Sweden, which is technically neutral, is known to be collaborating with the Nazis. Five friends who have gone their separate ways since college are feeling the stress, but it takes the torture and murder of one of their old gang to really bring the war into their lives. Laura Dahlgren hasn’t laid eyes on Britta Halberg since their school days, but when Britta is murdered, Laura decides to use her political connections to find out how her friend became involved in an ugly conspiracy, one that threatens the very future of Sweden.
Very Private Investigator
Justine Cowan dug into her mother’s hidden past. What she learned surprised her.

By ELLEN BARRY

JUSTINE COWAN HAD a problem with her mother — a smoothness problem, a constant criticism problem, an inability to offer warmth or comfort problem.

When Cowan was a child, her mother told her she was fat. She pushed her relentlessly, signing her up for 6 a.m. violin lessons with an extra-prestigious teacher. When Cowan grew up, and her mother came to visit, she went through her closet and affixed notes to her clothes with safety pins, explaining how they should be mended.

“I didn’t love my mother,” Cowan writes. So it came as a surprise when her mother died, and Cowan found that she was knocked sideways, in a state of deep, inarticulate mourning. Cowan’s memoir, “The Secret Life of Dorothy Soames,” recounts how she responded to this moment — not by grieving her mother, but by investigating her.

In fact, her mother’s past provided a fat target. A Briton who had emigrated to America in her 20s and married a lawyer from Tennessee, she had always suggested she had grown up in wealthy, fox-hunting circles, and that this explained why she had grown up in wealthy, fox-hunting circles. But Cowan sometimes paints her as a villain — and the gaping absence that was passed including, eventually, to Justine Cowan. The baby monkeys a choice between a wire mesh holding a bottle of milk and a terry cloth doll that they believed to be their “mother.” The babies clung to the “mother;” even if the dolls pierced them with spikes or blasted them with cold water. Their need for food, even the need for safety. Cowan’s affecting memoir stands as a reminder of what was taken from the “foundlings” — they had mothers, for God’s sake! — and the gaping absence that was passed on, as a legacy, to their own children, including, eventually, to Justine Cowan.

But it is too late. Nothing can get her the mother she needed.

In 1935, foundlings — also known as children — posed outside their home.
Healthy Ambition
The sisters who became America’s first women doctors.

By JOANNA SCUTTS

IN 1849, when Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman doctor in America, the medical profession was neither well established nor well respected nor well paid. Germ theory was more than a decade away, and in hospitals for the poor, surgeons in blood-caked aprons went from handling corpses to delivering babies without washing their hands. In wealthy homes, physicians coasted on charisma and connections as much as skill. At all levels of society, doctors had little more to rely on than “purgatives, laudanum and lancets.” What kind of woman would fight to join their ranks? In her richly detailed and propulsive biography of Elizabeth and her sister Emily Blackwell, Janice P. Nimura considers and discards a couple of possible ori-

gin stories. The most narratively appealing is 17-year-old Elizabeth’s experience caring for her father on his deathbed, in which “it is tempting to discern . . . the germ of her medical future.” Tempting, but too easy. No single story convincingly explains why a young woman “enthralled by literature and philosophy” should plummet into the earthy business of bodies.

Nor is the answer easy to detect in her personality. It was not a caring instinct that drove her — “I have no turn for benevolences,” she wrote to her brother Henry in 1855 — or a curious one, to advance medical science beyond leeches, mercury and prayer. And while she was roused by the Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller’s exhortation to “let them be sea-captains, if you will,” she was no feminist foremother: “You cannot expect us to furnish the stalk of his business and beliefs by raising sugar beets, an alternative to cane much lauded by antislavery activists. They had barely finished unpacking when he died.

This loss and its dire financial consequences forged the Blackwell children, perennial outsiders, into an even more tightknit group, even as they had to scatter in pursuit of careers. One of the chief pleasures of this book is the liveliness of the siblings’ correspondence, revealed in judicious snippets expressing frustration, outlining plans, issuing orders and judgments, sharing joy and love. “Your letters always come to me like a puff of fresh North wind in a Summer’s day” Elizabeth wrote to Emily. When they were short of money for paper and postage, they turned the page a quarter-turn and wrote across the lines at an angle, yielding a dense cross-hatch: an apt metaphor for the way the siblings, who “loved and annoyed each other in equal measure,” would turn and turn about, only to emesh themselves deeper in one another’s lives.

For both Elizabeth and Emily, the path to qualification as doctors was circuitous and frustrating. The idea of a woman studying anatomy alongside men was shocking, but the truer fear lingering under the moral outrage was that female doctors would wrest power from men who were just beginning to enjoy it, as the profession rose slowly in status. Wouldn’t female patients naturally choose to be attended by a woman, if they could — especially in the lucrative business of childbirth? As the dean of one college wrote candidly to Elizabeth, “You cannot expect us to furnish you with a stick to break our heads with.”

Finally, in the fall of 1847, Elizabeth’s persistence was rewarded when Geneva Medical College, in upstate New York, punted the decision on her application to its students, who voted to admit her. It was only the first of many doors she had to beat down — to be allowed in the dissecting room, to observe hospital treatments, to gain hands-on experience. When Emily attempted to follow her sister’s blazed trail, it had been scuffed over: Geneva did not make the same mistake twice, and Emily finally graduated from Cleveland Medical College in 1854. While Emily was pursuing her diploma, Elizabeth was desperate to put hers to use. But returning to New York City to open her own practice, she found herself sitting and waiting for patients who did not appear. Dr. Blackwell was shadowed by the lurid specter of another female “physician,” known as Madame Restell, who peddled herbal remedies and surgical intervention for the oldest problem women faced. To escape the taint of association with the brazen abortionist, Elizabeth soon replaced her private practice with a clinic licensed by the state.

Power in medicine was shifting from individuals toward institutions, and there was only so much the Blackwell sisters could do alone. In 1857, they opened a larger infirmary, joining forces with a confident, highly qualified German midwife named Marie Zakrzewska, whom they called “Dr. Zak.” Over time, it evolved into a college for female doctors known for its rigorous standards — a symbol of progress, and an important legacy. When its doors closed at the end of the century, the advances of women in medicine were unstoppable.

None of the five Blackwell sisters married, pressing careers, one another and their independence too highly, yet their family circle nevertheless expanded. Henry Blackwell, most notably, married the prominent women’s rights activist Lucy Stone, fully supporting her decision to keep her own name, strike the word “obey” from her vows and use their wedding as a platform to denounce the institution of marriage. Elizabeth, under a cloud of depression in 1854, adopted an orphan named Kitty, who called her “Dr. Elizabeth” and grew up with an in-between status, “half ward, half servant.” Emily, too, adopted a baby and named her after Hannah, the beloved Blackwell matriarch. For the last 30 years of her life, she lived and worked with another Elizabeth, 10 years her junior, who arrived at the college in 1870 and never left.

Apart from a few early hints of romance, Elizabeth remained single, with Kitty as her constant companion. Always happier in England than America, she returned there for good after the infirmary opened, becoming more prominent as a writer and public figure than a practicing physician. In her extraordinary self-belief (“I know that I am one of the Elect”), her hardness and her idealism, Elizabeth is a striking figure, and Emily, self-doubting and hardworking, never quite gets clear of her shadow. To her credit, Nimura, who is also the author of “Daughters of the Samurai” (2015), about three Japanese girls who traveled to America to study in 1871, doesn’t strain to fit the sisters into the narrow shape allowed to feminist pioneers, as either virtuous role models or “badass” rebels against society. Instead, they emerge as spiky, complicated human beings, who strove and stumbled toward an extraordinary achievement, and then had to learn what to do with it. □

JOANNA SCUTTS is the author of “The Extra Woman: How Marjorie Hillis Led a Generation of Women to Live Alone and Like It.”
Constitutional Freedoms
Northerners used America’s founding document to battle slavery in the South.

By GORDON S. WOOD

IT WAS NOT LONG after the federal Constitution was created in 1787 that many anti-slavery Northerners began labeling it a pro-slavery document. Parts of it did support slavery — the clause that counted a slave as three-fifths of a person, which gave the slave states greater representation in Congress and the Electoral College than opponents of slavery believed they deserved; and the fugitive slave clause, which required persons held to service who had escaped to free states to be returned to their owners.

Because these poisonous clauses seemed to enable Southern slaveholders to dominate the national government in the early decades of the 19th century, the rabid abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison eventually concluded that the Constitution was a “covenant with death” and “an agreement with hell.” Oddly this view of the Constitution as a pro-slavery document was what the fervent hard-line apologists for slavery, like Senator John C. Calhoun and Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, believed as well.

We have long known of this pro-slavery view of the Constitution, one that has been much emphasized at the present time. Less well known is an anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution mounted by abolitionists and other opponents of slavery to counter the views of the Southern “slave power.” In “The Crooked Path to Abolition,” his very solid, carefully and rigorously argued book, James Oakes, a professor of history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, describes and analyzes the antislavery constitutionalism that emerged in a dialectical struggle with pro-slavery constitutionalism in antebellum America.

The Northern opponents of slavery began by emphasizing that the Constitution never mentioned “slaves” or “slavery”: that it never accepted the idea that there could be property in man and that with the ending of the international slave trade in 1808 it promised a future for the nation without the despicable institution. Although the antislavery advocates conceded that the Constitution gave no authority to Congress to interfere with slavery within the states, they stressed that it did grant power to Congress to curb and limit the institution in a variety of other ways.

In making their case that the Constitution favored freedom over slavery, the anti-slavery Northerners interpreted and parsed every part of it as imaginatively as possible, seeking to whittle away at the pro-slavery arguments while at the same time emphasizing every provision and every clause that could be used on behalf of freedom. Congress, they said, had the sole constitutional authority to prohibit slavery in the territories and, indeed, had an obligation to do so. It could also suppress the coastwise slave trade and abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. They claimed that many parts of the Constitution worked against slavery. The Fifth Amendment, for example, declared that no person could be deprived of liberty without due process of law, which the Northern opponents of slavery could use to stymie enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Acts. They stressed that the preamble of the Constitution granted the federal government the power to “secure the blessings of liberty” and that the Fourth Amendment guaranteed the right of people to be secure from unreasonable seizures. The antislavery Northerners argued that the privileges and immunities of citizens in Article IV, Section 2, were derived from the federal Constitution, not from the constitutions of the states, and thus Black citizens of the Northern states were entitled constitutionally to move freely from one state to another. They even invoked Congress’s war powers and the federal guarantee of a republican form of government to every state in Article IV, Section 4, to threaten slavery in the states. If the slave states ever seceded, the anti-slavery Northerners warned, they would forfeit their constitutional rights, and the free states would no longer be obliged to enforce the fugitive slave clause.

Gradually the antislavery advocates accumulated a variety of textual protections for freedom and limitations on slavery. Then they began moving beyond the text of the Constitution to invoke its spirit, which, they said, was mainly derived from the Declaration of Independence and its inspiring dedication to equality. By the 1850s the antislavery Northerners had built a powerful case for antislavery constitutionalism. They had created a “Constitution that made freedom the rule and slavery the exception.”

The Republican Party became the political embodiment of this antislavery constitutionalism, with Abraham Lincoln its most eloquent spokesman. So fearful were the Southern slaveholders of Lincoln and his Republicans that simply his election as president in November 1860 precipitated the immediate secession of many slave states. By Feb. 1, 1861, even before Lincoln took office in March, seven states had formed the Confederacy. Four more joined between April and June 1861. Lincoln hated slavery as much as any abolitionist, but as an ambitious and sensitive politician in a radically democratic society he couldn’t ignore the feelings of the diverse constituents of Northern society. He believed in law and order and in the Constitution; and thus because of the Constitution’s ambiguity he had to make his way along a very “crooked path” to achieve the ultimate extinction of slavery that he wanted. Despite all the backtracking and roundabout routes that Lincoln and his party followed, however, they never abandoned the central tenets of the antislavery constitutionalism that had developed over the previous half-century.

Through all his twists and turns Lincoln held firm to his belief that the guiding spirit of the Constitution was the principle of fundamental human equality proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. Consequently, Oakes writes, “It became harder for Lincoln to distinguish his opposition to slavery from his baseline commitment to fundamental equality for whites and Blacks.” Because he came to realize that racial discrimination was really a means of supporting slavery, he moved toward a position of true racial equality. In the end, Oakes observes, “Lincoln became the first president to publicly endorse voting rights for Black men.”

In his final and perhaps most original chapter Oakes traces the winding route Lincoln followed in order to get to the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery in the United States once and for all. A Republican-dominated Congress might muster the two-thirds vote to pass such an amendment, but ratification by three-quarters of the states would be more difficult. During the war, Lincoln’s position became more and more radical, but, Oakes says, Lincoln was skeptical all along that emancipating slaves, even in large numbers, would ever be enough; and he always remained committed to the belief that the slave states should abolish slavery on their own.

The Emancipation Proclamation and the treating of slaves as military contraband were never ends for Lincoln, but simply means to be used to pressure the states to free their enslaved populations on their own. Two of the border slave states that had not seceded — Maryland and Missouri — and then several of the seceding states that had been conquered and made loyal members of the Union — Louisiana, Arkansas and Tennessee — were nudged, urged and hassled into abolition. By the end of January 1865 there were 27 free states and nine slave states in the Union, exactly the proportions needed to ratify the amendment. Enough states had abolished slavery on their own to make acceptance of a nationwide abolition amendment by three-quarters of the states possible. “This amendment,” Lincoln said, “is a king’s cure for all the evils. It winds the whole thing up.”
Scared Straight

An exposé of the expensive and unregulated tough-love industry by a writer who felt damaged by his own experience.

By ROBERT KOLKER

FROM THE VERY START of the prologue of “Troubled” — Kenneth R. Rosen’s examination of the so-called “tough-love industry” of wilderness camps and residential therapeutic programs for young people — there is no mystery about how the author feels about such places. Rosen writes that the parents who choose to send their offspring away “have their children vanished”; that sometimes they do so “through trickery or bribes”; and that these programs, in his view, are “a short-term solution with lasting (mostly negative) effects.”

Rosen does not come to this issue primarily as a journalist. He’s a former client, roused from sleep as a teenager in the middle of the night in 2007 and forced away in what he now calls “a kidnapping.” It would not be his last: Rosen spent time in a secure residential treatment center in Utah, a therapeutic boarding school in Massachusetts and an outdoor therapy program in New York.

Nothing seemed to take. Juvenile detention followed, and then jail sentences, before he found even footing, starting a family and building a career as a reporter and author. In “Troubled,” Rosen argues that many of his difficulties spring back to that first moment when, as a teenager, his relatively quotidian substance abuse issues might have been addressed by less radical means. “As I was dragged away from my bed and shoved into a van, I felt my future vanish,” he writes. “It took me more than a decade to learn that my initial feelings about these programs were incorrect, that they did lasting damage to me and others like me.

We are warned, then, that “Troubled” will be less a traditional work of investigative journalism and more a cri de coeur. As far as exposés go, the standard of proof is higher. The question going in isn’t going to just be, what did you find out? Instead, it will be, will you be fair?

Rosen, a former New York Times staffer, takes imperative steps to mitigate his admitted biases. Rather than turn “Troubled” into a “Boy, Interrupted”-style memoir, he focuses on four other graduates of tough-love programs, the story of his own is subsumed in the manual.

When none of Rosen’s subjects adore these programs, they are all strikingly even-handed about their experiences. Quite unlike the author, they don’t see these programs as signaling a definitive break with their lives. They merely see them as one more moment when things got worse. Each of his subjects has an emotionally poignant story to tell, starting with Hazel, whose grandparents pull her out of a clearly dangerous life (her father, mother and older brother all regularly took drugs with her), only to send her away to Adirondack Leadership Expeditions, a wilderness program in upstate New York. The nicest thing Rosen can say about her grandparents is that they were “desperate for someone to make a decision where they could not.”

In the Adirondacks, Hazel is stripped of all possessions and forced to march and do senseless chores in all weather with no real equipment. In theory, the rigors of outdoor therapy are meant to be a stand-in for the suffering you have caused yourself and others. The problem is that there’s very little science to back this up, and what research does exist is often conducted in-house. “The instructors were not properly trained nor equipped in childcare, let alone empathized or understood child psychology,” Rosen writes. What they had was a manual called a “Growth Book” with a therapeutic script to follow. “To get out, Hazel learned “she would need to play the game” — that is, speak the language of the manual.

As soon as she comes home, Hazel reverts to her former self, and her problems continue for years. This is also true of Rosen’s next subject, Avera, a child-abuse victim whose godmother promised her a shopping spree to get her in the car before dropping her at a wilderness program that preceded her time at Academy at Swift River, a residential therapeutic boarding school that is styled like a little prep school, but that Rosen characterizes as a brainwashing mill, where participants “are taught to give up their control over their lives — their appearance, their physical possessions — in order to be made whole.” Avery witnesses a suicide attempt (the girl is whisked away, her fate never revealed to the others), and a boy then accuses her of rule-breaking, before she finally learns to play the game — to snitch on other participants to prove her own progress. Avery leaves Swift River feeling optimistic, but that feeling doesn’t last. “If you’re sent away to a program,” another former participant tells Rosen, “then you label yourself in your head that, OK, I’m a troubled teen, and it’s kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Rosen’s final two subjects are brothers, Mike and Mark, whose drug- and violence-fueled teenage years bring them both to the Academy at Ivy Ridge, which closed in 2009 after allegations of false imprisonment, child abuse and gross negligence. Here, too, both brothers are supposed to be scared straight, though Rosen shows how Ivy Ridge “focused more heavily on instilling the idea that the clients themselves were the problem.” By now, we know what will happen. The brothers will muddle through, only to link back up with their old lives further scarred, “in a state of constant flux, like they cannot escape their adolescence.”

Reporting on these places is difficult. Most parents are not interested in talking with a reporter about sending off their kids to such programs — and the programs aren’t either. Springing up without any connection to established hospitals or institutions, the tough-love industry, we also learn, is phenomenally lucrative. (Rosen cites one company, Universal Health Services Inc., with a behavioral health division with revenues of $3.4 billion.) Some places are well intentioned but slapdash, while the worst have been driven out of business by prosecutors. (Swift River and Adirondack Leadership Expeditions were part of an entity controlled by Bain Capital, which shut them both down in 2013.) But Rosen reports that some 5,000 kids are still admitted into wilderness programs each year. According to him, even the industry’s recognized trade group, National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs, doesn’t articulate or enforce standards of care — it just offers what Rosen argues is a self-reinforcing “ineffective accreditation network.”

While he doesn’t make the comparison himself, it sometimes seems Rosen is arguing that these programs are almost like gay conversion therapy: a ludicrous, damaging response to something that might never have been a problem to begin with. This raises a question — what viable alternatives did their families have? Rosen isn’t entirely unsympathetic to them. When, more recently, he witnesses Mark in a fresh crisis, he writes: “I felt the anguish of my parents. I did not know what to do. I wanted to help, and that desire counted for nothing.”

Another question hovers over much of “Troubled”: Did the programs cause these kids’ problems or simply fail to address problems that existed already? Rosen argues that the trauma of scarifying a kid straight ends up scarring them for life, making them feel like outsiders, like they’re broken. “It distances them more from the world they’re meant to join,” he writes.

You could say that the author himself is living proof that these programs sometimes do work. He would not agree. After all this time, he continues to live his life on the edge.

“For as I can tell,” he writes, “I never really shed that troubled past. I disrespect authority figures. I make risky financial decisions. I test the limits of my family’s patience. My love of risk still sends me places others would prefer not to go. And I still smile when others ask about it all.”
Strained Relations
The troubled history of America and Iran across 300 years.

By ABBAS MILANI

FACTS OF HISTORY are stubborn. Shibboleths of ideology are almost as stubborn. Untangling facts from fictions, platitudes of ideology from the realities of politics (or policies), in the 300-year history of United States-Iran relations is an enormous task. For parts of this history Iran was a coveted prize in the 19th-century Big Game between Russia and England, a pivotal point in the 20th-century Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and for the last 40 years, a stalwart bastion of Shia anti-Americanism and its particular brand of anti-Israeli rhetoric and policy. “America and Iran: A History, 1720 to the Present” attempts to untangle it all — in less than 600 pages of text.

The book is divided in four sections, or seasons — beginning with spring and a chapter called “East of Eden,” about the first 150 years of American-Iranian relations. The summer section covers relations from the end of World War I to the fall of Mohammad Mossadegh, Iran’s popular prime minister, in 1953. The third section, autumn, takes the story to the shah and the end of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979. Winter covers the last 40 years, and includes a chapter on Iran’s long war with Iraq (1980-88).

John Ghazvinian, a historian and former journalist, claims, loftily but not altogether without merit, that his book is the “most extensive and wide-ranging study ever undertaken on the history of U.S.-Iranian relations.” Ghazvinian has at times taught creative writing, which is evident in the richness and supple prose of the book’s narrative.

In a breezy history, brimming with new details, Ghazvinian combines pithy descriptions and poignant anecdotes. He writes of how in the early days of the American colonies there was a “budding ‘Persophilia’ — a romantic idealization of Persian culture and Persian themes.” In fact, the first newspapers of North America were absolutely enchanted by Iran, writing with a “breathless” energy about Iran and its battle with the Ottoman Turks, deemed to be “a danger to Christendom.”

The same concern for Christianity led to the arrival of American Presbyterian missionaries in Iran at the end of the 19th century. They went there not to convert Muslims, but to provide “spiritual enlighten-

ment” to the Armenian, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians who lived in Iran but whose Christianity was deemed to be “twisted and degenerate.” Zealous Christians, however, were not the only Americans on the scene. It is almost certain that “the first Americans and Persians to interact in person” were not missionaries but “rum traders.” Even then, in spite of public pretenses of piety, Iranians were and still are great consumers of what was called “Boston Particular (rum laced with whiskey).”

It was not all Bible and booze. From the mid-19th century, Persian reformists and领导班子 were keen on establishing diplomatic ties with the United States as a countervailing force against Britain and Russia. But none of these efforts and inducements, including invitations for America to invest in Iranian oil, were enough to entice a United States preoccupied with domestic challenges. No less serious an obstacle was Britain, which, after the discovery of oil in 1908, did all it could to prevent American involvement in a country the United Kingdom saw as the empire’s cash cow. Ghazvinian offers a fascinating look into what he calls “one of the great unspoken rivalries of the 20th century: the competition between the United States and Great Britain for Iran’s vast petroleum bounty.” Oil is a subject the author knows much about. A previous book was “Unspilled: The Scramble for African Oil” (2007).

But if the first section of the book, spring, has fascinating nuggets of insights and facts, the narrative of the last three seasons becomes choppier, falling prey to what Ghazvinian rightly describes as the problem with so many recent studies of United States-Iran relations — the tendency to look for “someone to blame, or something to defend.” The root of the problem might well be the noble instincts of what can be called “progressive” historiography. These well-intentioned accounts — attempting to correct what they often rightly dismiss as one-sided narratives by offering the perspectives of the historically oppressed — sometimes teeter dangerously close to legitimizing the Islamic Republic of Iran with its claims to represent the marginalized, anticolonial forces, although it is itself the embodiment of harsh forms of authoritarianism.

“Ameria and Iran” rightly posits that if, as Ghazvinian writes, his archival search lasted from 2007 to 2017, the history in the second half of his book is already dated. Evidence declassified in the last few years has shown that in 1979 the United States played a crucial role in facilitating the clergy’s rise to power and, before the hostage crisis of that year, went out of its way to befriend the new regime. It is surely important to expose the errors of American policy and of self-serving American narratives, as well as Benjamin Netanyahu’s crying wolf about Iran’s imminent ability to make a nuclear bomb — as the book does in granular detail. But it is no less important to expose the bombast of the Iranian regime, its evasions on the nuclear issue and Khamenei’s unwillingness to reach any kind of rapprochement with what he has called “the greatest Satan.” Khamenei has a long history of anti-American sentiment, dating back to his days as an unknown seminarian translating the works of the obsessively anti-American Sayyid Qutb, and clerics close to Khamenei have even created a theological basis for this antagonism. Ghazvinian’s bias is evident even in his use of language. The most egregious example is his objection to the English translation of the concept “the guardianship of the jurist” — the defining idea at the heart of clerical rule in Iran for the past four decades. He finds the translation “awkward,” suggesting instead a “more appropriate” translation might be “oversight by the most learned religious scholars.” But guardianship of the jurist is not merely a matter of “oversight.” The published text of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s lectures elucidating this concept makes it clear that he was committed to the absolute rule of a “learned jurist” over the people, who are seen as incapable of managing their own affairs. The text of the Islamic Republic’s constitution, particularly the one revised in 1988, also makes clear how incorrect the author’s proposed new translation is. This constitution was tailor-made to allow a junior cleric like Khamenei to ascend to the role of the Supreme Leader in what was now literally called the absolute guardianship of the jurist. And Khamenei, with the power granted him by virtue of his absolute guardianship, has by fiat declared a ban on normalized relations with the United States.

To be sure, even when we disagree with Ghazvinian, the story he offers is delightfully readable, genuinely informative and impressively literate. He begins “America and Iran” by asking whether Shakespeare’s “star-crossed lovers” or Omar Khayyam’s “leaf of bread and jug of wine” will capture the spirit of American-Iranian history. Maybe a apt more quotation for this troubled history would be Horatio’s words at the end of “Hamlet,” where he talks of “carnal, bloody and unnatural acts / of accidental judgments, casual slaughters” and in the upshot “purposes mistook / Fallen on th’innovators’ heads.”
A new history gives this country’s overlooked artisans their due.

By DEBORAH NEEDLEMAN

ARE HISTORICAL RE-ENACTORS in a faux-colonial village engaging in craft? Are hobbyists working from a D.I.Y. kit purchased from Hobby Lobby? Is the American Federation of Labor a craft organization? Were the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki products of craft? “Whenever a skilled person makes something with their hands, that’s craft,” according to Glenn Adamson, a scholar and the former director of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. So, yes, to all of the above.

Adamson’s new book, “Craft: An American History,” is less an examination of traditions and techniques than a blow-by-blow chronicle of this country through the lens of craft, from the European settlers to the maker movement and so-called craftivists of today. That no one has ever previously attempted this may be because when we bother to think about craft at all, it is usually through a gauzy haze. Yet Adamson manages to discover “making” in every aspect of our history, framing it as integral to America’s idea of itself as a nation of self-sufficient individualists. There may be no one better suited to this task.

This is, however, no feel-good quilting circle of a book. “Craft” aims to reckon with the shameful way we have treated and viewed those who handbuilt the country: Indigenous people, African-Americans, women and the working class. “Craft” tracks a legacy of extermination, decimation, oppression, forced assimilation and marginalization. Even on the upside, Adamson argues, when we try to do better by craft and its practitioners through philanthropic support and education, we are often guilty of idealization, appropriation, fetishization, commercialization and exploitation.

The story begins with the colonists surviving on the know-how of Native people — remarking on their vital manual skills while disparaging them as uncivilized savages lacking in rational intelligence. A false dichotomy takes hold, involving the denigration of making and the elevation of knowing, and it is one that we have carried nearly intact to the present day. We suffer from a Cartesian dualism of mind and body, between intellect and manual competence. Even before industrialization, which killed craft as the only way of producing the things we need, we seldom valued the meaning or satisfaction that can be derived from skillful manual work. In 1776, in “The Wealth of Nations,” Adam Smith advised that “skill, dexterity and judgment” must give way to the imperative of efficiency. In a world where time is money, a sticking point for craft is always time.

Adamson offers the example of wampum, the lengths of patterned beadwork masterfully crafted by the Wampanoag in the Northeast, which were simultaneously a medium of communication and a form of currency. The beads were painstakingly fashioned from the shells of the whelks and clams that sustained their makers. Makers worked the shells on a loom strung with plant fiber and finished them with hide or gut. Wampum were decorative, useful and culturally significant. The English, appreciating the value of wampum solely as currency, tried to fashion the beads into American coinage, but found it too difficult and time-consuming. The English naturalist John Lawson explained in 1714 that the Indians could afford to make wampum because they “are a people that never value their time.”

When Emerson and Thoreau heralded the slow life in nature, believing that material experience was a means to accessing transcendental truths, they merely turned the old dynamic on its head: They embraced artisanal skills as a way of depreciating modern industrial society. Indeed, none of the myriad well-intentioned but ultimately failed craft revivals of the 19th and 20th centuries, from the Arts and Crafts movement to utopian communes, could bridge the gap between craft and capitalism.

Adamson argues that artisanal work can never have a significant impact on the economy (or the environment), as it is never the most efficient way of producing goods and is impossible to scale. Craft still comes down to one person making one thing at a time. Its value is hidden: Woven into a handloomed blanket are human ingenuity, patience, an understanding of materials and a dialogue of give-and-take with those materials. And invisibly present is the handed-down know-how of weavers past. “Too little value, too much time,” the criticism that Adamson says settlers leveled against wampum, still holds sway.

But isn’t time something we value more than ever? Craft’s current revival is happening in part because making is an essential human impulse with which many of us have lost touch. But another driver may be that modern consumer society has grown dissatisfied with using economic efficiency as a basis for appraising time. Two of the most recent of America’s many craft revivals are craftivism, an unappealing term for feminist-inflected craft activism that draws on traditional women’s work, like the knitted pink pussy hats, and the largely dude-driven maker movement, which hews to pioneer ruggedness. Both utilize craft as a means to change how we view the world, and how we live and behave in it. And this time around, Adamson is hopeful.

What’s new is the digital distribution of ideas and goods through social media and e-commerce. Groups of makers can finally claim their own identities and tell their own stories. They can also sell their wares directly, unimpeded by physical location, middlemen or prejudicial practices. This paradigm shift opens up opportunities and provides market access to makers on their own terms, maybe even offering a way to sidestep what Adamson refers to as Smith’s “imperative of efficiency.” Perhaps, finally, time is on craft’s side.
Statue of Limitations
A sculpture curator contends with infidelity and buried secrets.

By SUE MILLER

DANIELLE MCLAUGHLIN IS a remarkable writer. Reading “Dinosaurs on Other Planets,” her 2018 collection of short stories, one is struck by the sheer gorgeousness of the prose, particularly in descriptions of natural settings; by the quick, seemingly effortless characterizations of her often very complex characters; by the elegant and sometimes devastating economy of the narration; and by McLaughlin’s sure-handed sense of the shape of the short story. It’s exciting to read the work of someone who is so clearly gifted.

In her new novel, her first, “The Art of Falling,” we encounter many of these same gifts, but here they’re not offered with as sure a hand. And when they do make themselves evident, they often seem swamped by a tendency to pile on event after event, as if that were the difference between a short story and a novel — the need for more to happen, and even more after that.

The plot, then. Our main character, Nessa, is struggling to come to terms with her husband Philip’s infidelity with the mother of their daughter’s best friend; and simultaneously trying to cope with this newly hostile daughter. In addition, she’s mounting a gallery show of the work of one Robert Locke, a long-dead sculptor, hoping to bring new attention to what she sees as his strange genius, embodied most perfectly in the faceless statue of a pregnant woman. She’s been working closely with his difficult elderly widow and devoted daughter, who hope, for several reasons — money for them, renewed fame and glory for him — for the show’s success.

Complicating this is the persistent claim made by another, less elderly woman (though her age seems variable) that she, and not Locke, was either the creator of his most famous work, or perhaps only helped to create it; or inspired it; or maybe was the model for it. Tiresomely, she keeps popping up to press or another of these claims: at a talk Nessa gives at the gallery, at the hotel in Paris, at the home of Locke’s widow, and again at the gallery, this time pretending to be a docent, and so on. All of which threatens the integrity of the upcoming show.

The complications to the other part of the story, the marital infidelity and Nessa’s persistent sense of being deeply wronged by it, involve the appearance of one Stuart Harkin and his 20-ish son, Luke. Years earlier, we discover only now, Stuart and Nessa had a long, secret affair while he was still a toddler.

Indeed, McLaughlin herself seems overwhelmed by all these complications, enough so that she loses track of the details of various of its strands — a few of which seem to emerge from a similar situation in one of her short stories. There’s some confusion about just how long ago Philip had his affair. There are different versions of the degree of Stuart’s infidelity. Was he wildly promiscuous? Or unfaithful only once, with Nessa? At one point Nessa tracks down her daughter via a suddenly remembered handy app on her cellphone; in a later moment when she’s desperate to find the girl, she appears to have forgotten that possibility entirely. Occasionally she seems to know what’s happening in a scene she doesn’t have access to.

Finally, it’s hard to get Nessa. Sometimes she seems highly competent. At other times she rushes headlong into situations whose disastrous outcomes are clear to the reader from the get-go. (Don’t do that, Nessa!) Sometimes she seems lost in genuine sorrow about her husband’s infidelity; but later, about to be exposed in her own infidelity and wanting to hold onto the moral advantage her victimhood gives her, she calculatingly decides to confess to Philip only the part of her infidelity that happened before their marriage.

It’s hard, too, to hold onto the sense we have of other characters, because their behavior often seems dictated by the necessities of the complicated plot; and this, in turn, makes it harder to hold onto a clear sense of what, exactly, the plot is.

And yet we want to. We want to go on reading because there are examples of McLaughlin’s gifts on every page, and in them the promise of the pleasure a novel more fully in her control will offer. I, for one, can’t wait.

SUE MILLER is the author of 13 books. Her latest novel, “Monogamy,” came out last fall.

The Art of Falling
By Danielle McLaughlin

Ceaselessly Into the Past
This novel imagines Nick Carraway before he meets Gatsby.

By BEN FOUNTAIN

“SOLDIERS ARE DREAMERS,” wrote the poet Siegfried Sassoon, and the Nick Carraway of Michael Farris Smith’s new “Great Gatsby”-inspired novel, “Nick,” dreams hard. Amid the battlesfields of World War I, he dreams of his lover, Ella, back in Paris, and of his Minnesota parents and his near-idyllic upbringing in the Midwest.

But a more toxic irreality is at work in him as well. “A life divided. A mind divided.” That’s the Nick we encounter on leave in Paris, trying and mostly failing to reconcile his experience of combat with what is generally, and perhaps too loosely, called reality, and he will run this razor’s edge of sanity through the rest of the war and into its only marginally less harrowingly aftermath.

Smith intends to give us the B.G. (Before Gatsby) version of Nick, though how well this Nick meshes with the Nick we know from “The Great Gatsby” is debatable. Farris’s B.G. Nick seems too hard-used by the war to square neatly with the ironic, bantering Nick who will someday, between the covers of that other book, show up for dinner at the Buchanans. But such is the power of “Nick” that I found myself hardly caring whether one Nick squares with the other.

In all the ways that really matter, “Nick” is an exemplary novel. Smith delivers a moving, full-bodied depiction of a man who has been knocked loose from his moorings and is trying to claw back into his own life. “I need to go home,” Nick says at one point, then thinks: “I’m not going home. . . . And I won’t ever say that again.”

The terrors, horrible as they are, aren’t as bad as the forest, and the forest, bad as it is, isn’t as awful as the tunnels. Nick endures them all, suffers, is left for dead and rises again. He finds Ella, loses her, then finds and loses her again. When he arrives back in America after the war, he stumble “sun-eyed and deranged” off a train in New Orleans and straight into a blood feud between his fellow veteran Judah and Judah’s estranged wife, Colette, who runs a brothel.

A great deal happens in this story. Miles are covered, cities explored, people collide to loving or lethal effect, but Smith creates an elegiac, meditative tone that serves as an apt counterpart for the story’s through-line of desperation. “She had felt it all in that moment,” he writes of Colette seeing Judah on his return from the war, “the separation and the pain inflicted upon him and the pain inflicted upon her and the quiet space when she believed that the death which had separated them was nothing as acute as this moment of recognition.” We hear echoes of Fitzgerald, of course, but also of Faulkner, Hemingway and a less baroque Cormac McCarthy. It’s a classic American sound, and Smith renders it with sufficient intensity that his iteration of chaos and depravity in 1919, in the wake of war, feels very much alive and relevant to 2021.

The only time I felt even slightly scanty by this fine novel was remembering that moment at the end of Chapter 2 of “The Great Gatsby,” when Nick is in the elevator with Mr. McKee, the “pale feminine man from the flat below.” One moment they’re discussing getting together for lunch, and the next, following a brief stutter of ellipses, Nick is standing beside McKee’s bed, and McKee himself is sitting up between the sheets in his underwear. I would have liked to see Smith take a run at illuminating this small muddle of a scene, so determinedly ignored by generations of English teachers.

In any case, Smith leaves Nick where he should, where we all first found him, in the cottage at West Egg at the start of summer, noticing a green dock light on the other side of the bay. So it ends, and so it begins.

NICK
By Michael Farris Smith
296 pp. Little, Brown & Company. $27.

Country Burn Again: Democracy, Rebellion, and Revolution.

By SUNDAY, JANUARY 24, 2021
After an absence of seven years, Allie Brosh returns with her sad, funny takes on depression.

I CAME LATE to Allie Brosh’s “Hyperbole and a Half” — later than the outspoken fan Bill Gates and numerous enthusiastic writers for Psychology Today — but when I fell, I fell hard. (I even bought the calendar.) A selection of Brosh’s autobiographical word-and-image stories from her blog of the same name (which she began in college while procrastinating for a final), “Hyperbole and a Half” made me laugh harder than anything I could remember.

First there was her drawing style: a charming, stripped-down visual vocabulary accomplished entirely in the free software program Paintbrush, in which faces — of effervescently manic children, bewildered starring parents and various dogs — took center stage as vehicles of expression.

Then there was her muscular storytelling, which, like her drawing, was economical and effective, hitting just the right beats, both funny and dark, introspective and observant. And often structurally ingenious: “Warning Signs,” a piece about digging up, in the backyard, a bright pink dress and a yellow ponytail. A small baby, in bonnet and ruffled collar, staring meaningfully up from her pram at what we later realize is the full moon. Her little arms rest in front of her, utterly relaxed; when the moon smiles at her, she waves back.

“Lunatic” is a Victorian-era story that charts the life of this unnamed person and her deep love affair with the moon, which leads her to shun human romance and also to pursue astronomy. It’s a feminist book about following your passions over and against convention; its title derives from the Latin, meaning “of the moon,” or “moonstruck,” and the protagonist’s communication with that luminous satellite is certainly mystical.

What animates “Lunatic” is not only its propulsive, chronological story — we are treated to only one image per page and yet move quickly through the stages of the character’s life — but also Mazur’s careful rendering. The style changes meaningfully, from fine and detailed in one chapter to loose thick lines in the next. “I wanted each picture to have its own ‘presence,’” Mazur writes in a postscript about process, which reveals his historical influences and his tools, including tape and toothbrushes. (What I called “charcoal” above? Technically it’s a conté crayon.) As fascinating as the story itself, this section underscores the labor that goes into creating graphic narratives — a feature implicit in the talented Brosh’s messy take on the messiness of life.

More variety here, the stories are uneven. One has a punch line about piles of solid waste. (Sigh: “The Poop Mystery.”) Brosh often doubles down on her prose, explaining and re-explaining a point.

The tautness of her earlier stories is largely missing. Some are fanciful, like “Daydreams,” which cycles through visions of triumph; partway through, after drawing the intrigues of an international chess competition, the narrator proclaims, “I’m not sure where it goes after that, but feel free to enjoy this disjointed stream of victory related images,” which she then presents. (Brosh’s grandiosity is an ongoing joke.) Large parts of the book have a similar meandering feel.

In one story that exhausts itself in action and tone, she details how a determined child, a neighbor, is desperate to show a resistant Brosh her bedroom; what might be a two-page anecdote here runs almost 20 pages.

And yet there are some genuinely moving episodes in “Solutions and Other Problems.” Enfolded into the childhood high jinks and adult meditations is a tribute to her sister, Kaiti, who died by suicide in 2013, shortly after the release of “Hyperbole and a Half.” Within a long chapter called “Losing,” Brosh pays tribute to her in a wordless, 12-page spread that offers images of their shared childhood; the first image is Kaiti as a onesie-wearing infant, looking up from her crib. Brosh draws a reverse shot to open this sequence: The first panel takes Allie’s perspective, looking down at her expectant, cheerful baby sister, followed by what Kaiti sees, a grinning child standing over her, poking toys into the crib for her amusement. “We’d had a strange relationship, and I wasn’t prepared for it to be over,” Brosh writes by way of introduction. Here the silent images show the sisters, who grew up in rural Idaho, coming together and coming apart.

Dan Mazur’s LUNATIC: A WORDLESS STORY (200 pp., Fanfare, $20), is a whimsical tale that unfurls, much like Brosh’s piece about her sister, without dialogue or verbal narration, but in a richly textured black and white. One of my favorite images, in shadowy charcoal strokes, shows a small baby, in bonnet and ruffled collar, staring meaningfully up from her pram at what we later realize is the full moon. Her little arms rest in front of her, utterly relaxed; when the moon smiles at her, she waves back.

HILLARY CHUTE, one of the Book Review’s Graphic Content columnists, is the author, most recently, of “Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere,” now out in paperback.

From “Hyperbole and a Half.”

From “Solutions and Other Problems.”
Wise Services. For a hefty fee, the agency
friends, and a few embarrassed glances at
apartment while that girl’s divorced
ter had use of a bedroom in a schoolmate’s
immediately disapproved, so the couple
reflecting well on her parents, repayment
ations for Margaret, however. She was to
“Don’t let them touch you. Don’t give them
talk” was when her mother said, of boys:
not sex. The closest Margaret came to “the
 talked about: not the comfortable lives the
transparent one. Most things were not
took pride in providing for Margaret, theirs
maker, her father a baker, and while they
fines our present.
ing norms, as our past continually rede-
ration, and in their intimate tale are the seeds
of today’s adoption practices and parent-
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of today’s adoption practices and parent-
for Margaret, however. She was to
“To let them touch you. Don’t give them
The closest Margaret came to “the


ted until she gave birth, then return her
with reassurance that there was “no need
for anyone to ever know.”

The baby she named Stephen Mark Erle
was born on Dec. 17, 1961. When she re-
ected anesthesia because she wanted to
be awake for the birth, she was placed in
restraints and put into “twilight sleep.”
When she came to and asked to hold the
boy, she was told: “You’re one of the girls
from Lakeview. You don’t get to hold your
baby.”

For months the young birth parents in-
sisted they would keep their child, who had
been placed immediately in foster care. Fi-
ally, when a social worker threatened to
have Margaret sent to juvenile hall, she
signed the relinquishments forms without
reading them.

The possibility of being declared a delin-
quent was very real, but nearly everything
Margaret was told was a lie. Glaser de-
scribes in powerful detail how both David’s
first and second mothers were told what
they wanted to hear about each other and
about the baby they shared. Louise Wise
would excuse it all in the interest of giving
the boy — renamed David Rosenberg —
the best possible life. But for the next 50
years Margaret would carry guilt about her
lost son; Ephraim and Esther Rosenberg
would be mystified by their adopted
son; and David, constantly reassured by
his adoptive mother that he was special be-
cause she “chose” him, would wonder,
“What was it about him that made his birth
mother not choose him?”

That Margaret and David find each
other is not a spoiler. “I found my birth
mother,” he tells Glaser on Page 5, in May
of 2014. The hows of the search, and what
happens next, read like a novel, one likely
to bring tears.

“American Baby” is a braided tale. Mar-
geet and George Erle are one thread (they
married and go on to have three children);
David Rosenberg is another (he grows up
and needed a kidney transplant. The
agency used the lag time for such studies
which weaves itself through every chapter
of Margaret’s actions. The number of babies surren-
dered for adoption in the United States dropped 26 percent between 1970 and 1975.
The number of couples seeking to adopt
fell as well, as reproductive medicine in-
creased their ability to conceive.

The adoption rights movement gained
traction, arguing that “access to one’s own
birth certificate is a human and civil right.”
As a result, 10 states opened previously
sealed adoption files, although New York
did not do so until 2019, and some of the
largest — Texas, California and Florida —
are still closed. In many cases the availabil-
ity of government records is a moot point,
as genetic testing companies make it pos-
sible for adoptees and birth parents to find
one another with a swab and a members-

One powerful message of “American
Baby,” though, is that the shadows of the
past cannot be easily dismissed as mis-
takes of an unenlightened moment. Today,
the nearly half a million international
adoptees in the United States do not have
access to their birth records. And the tens
of thousands of babies created from donor
eggs are not legally entitled to identifying
information. The American foster care
system, no longer a waystation for white
infants being studied, is now more likely a
death for Black and brown babies shut-
ted from one home to the next. (Glaser ac-
knowledges that the story of adoption in the
1950s and ‘60s was focused on white
babies and parents, and that the experi-
ence of Black families during that period
“is deserving of its own detailed examina-
tion.”)

In the end one is left with a question —
one Glaser does not articulate directly, but
which weaves itself through every chapter
of her book. What about the future?

The stories of Margaret and David and
the millions of others who lived through
the Baby Scoop are vivid evidence that pol-
icy and culture change the trajectory of in-
dividual lives. “Again and again,” Glaser
writes of the era, “the nation’s powerful re-
ligious and political institutions collabo-
rated to control women’s bodies and the
destinies of babies.”

What decisions being made today will
some future author — and readers — look
back on as having had profound and unex-
pected consequences? What future books
will be written about today’s assumptions,
choices and mistakes?
Everyday Strangeness
This story collection offers vivid, often fantastical portraits of life.

By NOOR QASIM

WOULDN'T LIFE BE SIMPLER IF WE COULD JUST SLENDER through it? In "The Sleep," the opening story of Caitlin Horrocks's new collection, the residents of a shrinking Midwestern town explore this enticing proposition. Faced with a death in the community and the practical costs of surviving harsh winters, the residents of Bounty decide to try hibernation. "Why stay?" ask nosy reporters. The residents answer: "Our people had moved to Bounty because the land was there and it was empty, and now all we had was the emptiness and one another." Bounty's decline has been severe but gradual; residents hardly notice it until the town's dilapidated buildings are shown on television. Hibernation is their strange yet dignified response.

With this opening tale, one might expect a fanciful collection about the white Midwest, about lives in rural communities that once flourished and now, to varying degrees, lie dormant. And indeed, several of this collection's strongest stories take place in Michigan, near lakes, both Great and small, along highways bordered by dense wood. In "Teacher," a teenager in the state's north-central region throws a brick off an Interstate overpass, killing a young mother. The teenager's former fourth-grade teacher learns about the woman's final hours from a local nurse, and retreats into her memories of the boy, considering his sadistic impulses and her failure even to try to curb them. The story is brief but vivid, its opening and closing lines full of searing clarity.

But this collection ranges farther afield, to Prague and the (virtual) Oregon Trail, and into internal territories, from the mind of a young girl obsessed with a lost blanket to that of a retired English teacher nearing death and trying to parse the events of her day. "Paradise Lodge" takes place in the Peruvian jungle, and has an omniscient narrator who reveals the perspectives of three tourists and their guide with flashes of insight. Alben, a wealthy Canadian, gazes lovingly at her "long-limbed, fuzzy children, but the emotion that lingers longest is sympathy at how many hours of life her daughter is destined to spend shaving or waxing."

The support evident in her debut collection, "This Is Not Your City," Horrocks is adept at playing with perspective, delving into the minds of puzzling, sometimes troubling, characters. The loss feels greater, then, when her intriguing premises sap the characters of interiority and her stories of life. Horrocks cleverly draws upon games to determine the structures of "Better Not Tell You Now" and "On the Oregon Trail," but little else can be said for them. "The Untranslatables," the story of a man obsessed with foreign words that capture indescribable experiences, treads into territory better ceded to Lydia Davis. The words truly are untranslatable, so we are left with a slurry of useless definitions and

Tip of the Iceberg
A memoir set against the backdrop of the climate crisis.

By BEN EHRENFREICH

WHEN WE THINK of migratory peoples, the images that most likely come to mind are of pastoralists clinging to dwindling herds, their cultures threatened by climate change and the cruel expansion of modern ways. But there exists another class of semi-nomadic people, an exceedingly small one, who are still able to migrate freely as the weather moves them. They pride themselves on their grit and independence and tend not to mention the key resources — money and petroleum — that make their lifestyle possible.

Gretel Ehrlich is an exemplary member of this tribe. "Unsolaced," her latest book, opens "in an off-grid cabin set on a glacial moraine" in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming. She has another house in Ha-
Figuring It Out
Adolescent identity on center ice.

By SUSAN KITTENPLAN

Maxine wants to skate at Nationals, but she has to win one of the top four spots at Sectionals to get there. She is also navigating life at the local middle school, where she is the only Chinese-American student in an almost all-Caucasian student body.

Maxine loves her supportive parents, her wry but understanding coaches and her best friend, Victoria. Or at least she used to. Victoria has a crush on a popular bully named Alex, a boy who picks on Maxine constantly. Alex tells Maxine that a self-portrait she’s painting in art class should have narrower eyes and that she should let him cheat off her pop quiz because “you people are good at math.” He writes nasty ethnic slurs on his computer that he can erase quickly from his screen but not from her memory.

In her skating world, things start turning upside down too. Maxine isn’t doing well in ballet class, struggles to keep up with homework and puts herself through a painful experiment with cosmetic stickers that an Asian girl in a video claims made her eyes wider. Then Maxine faces a new blond-haired, green-eyed girl named Hollie, who competes at her level, has an elite Russian coach and is a far better skater. Maxine fights internal battles about rivalry, sportsmanship and standing up for herself.

When Alex’s racist bullying comes to a head, Maxine surprisingly gets support from Hollie, who helps her cut Alex down to size. The perfect blonde also confides in Maxine that she finds skating lonely, hates being judged and is thinking about quitting. Maxine learns there can be insecurity and self-loathing behind a tormentor’s bravado and the pretty trappings of a successful skater.

With fast-paced prose and an ear for authentic dialogue, Shen brings big emotions and ideas to the hyper-focused world of the obsessive skater. Her sharp depiction of an eager and courageous Maxine makes the lessons about the ebb and flow of friendship less clichéd than they might have been. A touching moment comes when Maxine’s parents tell her they had tried to shelter her from experiencing bigotry but now know it was a fool’s errand. Maxine is strong enough to defend herself. Maxine agrees, realizing she’ll always be, as they put it, “a fighter,” whether at the rink, at school or anywhere else in the future. In a novel whose title refers to both Maxine’s tenacity as a skater and her ability to counter Alex’s slurs, Shen has created a high-spirited character worth cheering for.

“Ana on the Edge,” by A.J. Sass, takes the reader on a different voyage of discovery. Twelve-year-old Ana-Marie Jin, the new juvenile girls’ national champion, is facing difficult changes. She follows her coach to a new skating complex farther from her home in San Francisco where a new choreographer insists she wear a skirt during their lessons, contrary to her wishes. Ana is given no say about her new program (“Sleeping Beauty”) or her costume for it, which she finds too dainty and princess-y.

Meanwhile, she starts to realize how much her single mother has sacrificed to make her dreams a possibility. But Ana isn’t sure what her dreams are anymore. Even with her success on the ice, she has never felt at home in her own skin, and not because of her unusual half-Chinese, half-Jewish heritage. She finds herself wincing when people call her “Miss” or use her full name, and she can’t shake the visceral shudder she feels when pressured into acting like a typical girl. Still, she can’t pinpoint the source of her anguish.

While her best friend, Tamar, texts constantly, wanting to hear about her life at the new rink, Ana is fascinated by a skater named Hayden who has just moved to the area from Minnesota and will be starting group lessons. Ana works as a skating assistant and is curious as to why Hayden’s mom has requested an update to his name and asked everyone to use male pronouns for him. She learns terms she never knew before — gender-neutral, nonbinary — and an entire world opens up to her, one she desperately wants to explore but doesn’t understand why. “Can people really ask others to call them whatever they want?” she asks herself, since she doesn’t trust anyone to give her the answer.

When they meet, Hayden starts calling Ana “Alex” and thinks she’s a boy because she’s wearing the wrong name tag by mistake. She doesn’t correct him. Ana becomes good friends with Hayden, spending a lot of time with him and his family, who all think she’s one of the guys. Every time she has an opening to clear up the misunderstanding she doesn’t take it. She even goes so far as to avoid entering a public bathroom in front of him. Ana wants to clarify her identity in her own mind before she defines herself to others.

Tamar feels her pull away and misconstrues her evasion as selfishness. Her mom and her coach are kept in the dark about her hatred of the new program and costume. If she can’t even get her mother to call her Ana instead of Ana-Marie, how can she explain that she doesn’t know where she fits in terms of gender?

“It’s not my body that makes me feel uncomfortable, or the shimmering, sparkling costume,” Ana realizes when she looks in the mirror at herself in the “Sleeping Beauty” dress. “It’s what other people will think of me when they see me wearing it: girl, princess, Intermediate lady.”

Setting the record straight is hard to do when you don’t know what your truth is, especially at 12. Ana has some difficult encounters when she finally unburdens herself to Tamar; to her mom, to her coach and, toughest of all, to Hayden. But their responses surprise her. She feels at peace with letting go of her secrets and ready to make her own choices — at school, at home, at the rink.

Sass has created dynamic, original characters who are believable and fun to follow. Sometimes it’s unclear where he’s going with his story lines — especially Hayden’s love of cosplay, which he introduces halfway through the novel — but the plot comes together nimbly toward the end. You can’t help rooting for Ana, though we’re left wondering how she will move forward. “I haven’t figured it out if I want to try different pronouns yet,” she tells her mother, “so you can keep using ’she’ for now.”

Ana decides to continue skating, and raises the possibility of competing someday in the men’s category, a new challenge that could be a book in itself.
### COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

**SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 3-9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>This Week</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>THE DUKE AND I, by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton’s reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series “Bridgerton.”</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING, by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>A TIME FOR MERCY, by John Grisham. (Doubleday) The third book in the Jake Brigance series. A 16-year-old is accused of killing a deputy in Clanton, Miss., in 1990.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>OUTLAWED, by Anna North. (Bloomsbury) Ada, who apprentices midwifery under her mother, must decide whether to aid a band of outlaws who want to create a safe haven for outcast women.</td>
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**Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review**

- I CAME AS A SHADOW: An Autobiography, by John Thompson with Jesse Washington. (Holt, $29.99.) Standing 6-foot-10 with a booming voice and an urban dictionary’s worth of curse words, the one-time Georgetown basketball coach inspired a potent mixture of fear and respect. In this lively and entertaining book, Thompson, who died in August, finally gets to cast his legend on his own terms.


- THE PROPHETS, by Robert Jones Jr. (Putnam, $27.) A lyrical and rebellious love story about two enslaved boys in Mississippi, whose relationship is accepted and even cherished until a Christian evangelist, also enslaved, turns the plantation against them. The novel is about their choice to love in the face of the forces that would crush them, and the repercussions of that love.


- NINE DAYS: The Race to Save Martin Luther King Jr’s Life and Win the 1960 Election, by Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $28.) The Kendricks tell the story of how the arrest of Martin Luther King Jr. in Georgia led to a telephone call that may have changed the direction of American politics.

- THE PUSH, by Ashley Audrain. (Pamela Dorman, $26.) Audrain’s taut, tense thriller considers the legacy of childhood trauma and the evergreen parental question of whether one’s child is “normal.” A mother grapples with these issues along with the disintegration of her marriage in this chilling debut.

- THE LIAR’S DICTIONARY, by Eley Williams. (Doubleday, $26.95.) Two story lines, one set in the 19th century, the other in this one, playfully echo each other in this word lovers’ feast of a novel revolving around a fictional British dictionary company and overflowing with delectable linguistic arcane.

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

**Homebody**
A few years ago, Fredrik Backman was looking for a new apartment in Stockholm when inspiration hit during an open house.

“We’d seen maybe nine apartments and I was like, ‘I’m good with all of them.’ I could live basically anywhere as long as my wife and kids are OK with it,” Backman said in a phone interview. “So I started looking at the people. Everyone in these places is insecure. Everyone is making a really big life decision. Everyone is standing there asking themselves a lot of questions: Where do I want to live? Is this the person I want to spend the rest of my life with? Are we going to have kids? Are the schools good here? Can we afford this? And everyone feels a little bit invaded: This could be my home and what are all these strangers doing here?”

The author of “A Man Called Ove” and “Beartown” knew he was standing in the setting for his next novel, “Anxious People,” which was an instant No. 1 best seller in the United States and is now at No. 10 on the hardcover fiction list. The book is equal parts comedy, relationship drama and locked-room mystery — “It’s not a murder or something gruesome” — in which a failed bank robber blunders into an open house and holds the attendees hostage. They’re a motley crew: on the first page, Backman writes, “This is a book about a lot of things, but mostly about idiots.”

As the title suggests, anxiety is a theme. It’s also an accelerant in Backman’s own creative process, although he didn’t use this term. “You create your own universe that you can step into.”

‘You create your own universe that you can step into.’

**Print/Hardcover Best Sellers**

**Fiction**

1. **STAR WARS: LIGHT OF THE JEDI,** by Charles Soule. (Del Rey) In this instalment of the High Republic series, a disaster in hyperspace may cause far greater damage.

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

3. **THE VANISHING HALF,** by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of two 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.

4. **THE WIFE UPSAIRS,** by Rachel Hawkins. (St. Martin’s) A recently arrived dog walker in a Southern gated community falls for a mysterious widower.

5. **WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING,** by Delia Owens. (Putnam) In a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, a woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.

6. **OUTLAWED,** by Anna North. (Bloomsbury) Ada, who apprentices midwifery under her mother, must decide whether to aid a band of outlaws who want to create a safe haven for outcast women.

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

8. **THE PROPHETS,** by Robert Jones Jr. (Putnam) When an older slave begins preaching on a Southern plantation, the love between two slaves, Isaiah and Samuel, is seen in a different light.


10. **ANXIOUS PEOPLE,** by Fredrik Backman. (Atria) A failed bank robber holds a group of strangers hostage at an apartment open house.

**Nonfiction**

1. **A PROMISED LAND,** by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.

2. **UNTAMED,** by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.

3. **GREENLIGHTS,** by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.

4. **CASTE,** by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning author shares moments through his first term.

5. **BECOMING,** by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House, and how she balanced work, family and her husband’s political ascent.

6. **BREATH,** by James Nestor. (Riverhead) A re-examination of a basic biological function and a look at the science behind ancient breathing practices.

7. **WORLD OF WONDERS,** by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. (Milkweed) In a collection of essays, the poet celebrates various aspects of the natural world and its inhabitants.


9. **HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST,** by Ibram X. Kendi. (One World) A primer for creating a more just and equitable society through identifying and opposing racism.

10. **UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN,** by Emmanuel Acho. (Flatiron) A look at some questions and concepts needed to address systemic racism.

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**Paperback Row** by Barry Gewen

**EVERYWHERE YOU DON’T BELONG,** by Gabriel Bump. (Algonquin, 288 pp., $15.95.) It’s “the rare book” that can be funny describing essentially sad moments like trauma and loss, our reviewer, Tommy Orange, said, but this novel about growing up on Chicago’s South Side achieves the appropriate balance between heaviness and levity, while also providing “social commentary at its finest.”

**THE CAMERON GIRL,** by Mary Kay McFadden. (Penguin, 320 pp., $15.95.) A daughter of an artist searching for the explanations of her estranged father’s disappearances.

**WHERE REASONS END,** by Yiyun Li. (Random House, 192 pp., $16.) An imagined conversation between a grieving mother and her 16-year-old dead son forms the core of this novel. Lauren Oyler said in these pages that “the humor in this book is subtle yet potent,” and that Li, who lost her own son to suicide, has written “an interrogative form — an exploration of what fiction can do and what it can’t.”

**THE THIRD RAINBOW GIRL:** The Long Life of a Double Murder in Appalachia, by Emma Copley Eisenberg. (Hachette, 336 pp., $17.95.) An investigation by the author into an unsolved crime turns into a portrait of a small rural community that has been nearly torn apart trying to cope with the lingering memories of the case. Our reviewer, Melissa del Bosque, called the narrative “evocative and elegantly paced.”

**THE MOTHER,** by Alex Berenson. (Riverhead, 304 pp., $16.) Our reviewer, Curtis Sittenfeld, called the character, a former CIA agent turned reporter, “jaded, determined, and whip-smart.”

**FIGHT OF THE CENTURY:** Writers Reflect on 100 Years of Landmark ACLU Cases, edited by Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman. (Avid Reader, 336 pp., $17.) The editors of this anthology asked 40 writers, including Scott Turow and Brit Bennett, to reflect on cases, both prominent and forgotten, that led our reviewer, Monica Youn, to praise the A.C.L.U.’s “many indisputable acts of heroism.”

**THE SECRET GUESTS,** by Benjamin Black. (Picador, 304 pp., $17.) Black, a.k.a. John Banville, imagines King George VI shipping his young daughters, 14-year-old Elizabeth and 10-year-old Margaret, to Ireland during World War II to protect them from the Blitz. Our reviewer, Tracy Goodwin, said the novel “a mordant observation of the palimpsest of arrogance and resentment” surrounding Britain’s dealings with its neighbor.

**The Secret Guests** by Benjamin Black.

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**Everywhere You Don’t Belong** by Gabriel Bump.

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**Where Reasons End** by Yiyun Li.

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**The Third Rainbow Girl: The Long Life of a Double Murder in Appalachia** by Emma Copley Eisenberg.

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**Fight of the Century** by Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman.

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**The Secret Guests** by Benjamin Black.
MONTHLY BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF NOVEMBER 29-JANUARY 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MONTHS ON LIST</th>
<th>THIS MONTH</th>
<th>Graphic Books and Manga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>CAT KID COMIC CLUB, by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic)</td>
<td>Stories within a story come to life as L'il Petey, Flippa and Molly show baby frogs how to create comics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A WEALTH OF PIGEONS, by Steve Martin and Harry Bliss. (Cedaron)</td>
<td>The multi-award winning comedian teams up with the New Yorker cartoonist for this collection of humorous cartoons and comic strips.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>MY HERO ACADEMIA, VOL. 1, by Kohei Horikoshi. (VIZ Media)</td>
<td>Will Izuku Midoriya’s chance encounter with a superhero change his fate? Most likely!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>GUTS, by Raina Telgemeier. (Scholastic)</td>
<td>Raina finds her tummy trouble might be more than it first appears to be when she goes back to school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>MY HERO ACADEMIA, VOL. 2, by Kohei Horikoshi. (VIZ Media)</td>
<td>Midoriya can barely control the All Might’s abilities he inherited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>STRANGE PLANET, by Nathan W. Pyle. (Morrow Gift)</td>
<td>Moments from the life cycle of a planet’s inhabitants including “Being Gains a Sibling” and “Being Begins a Vocation.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>DEMON SLAYER: KIMETSU NO YAIBA, VOL. 1, by Koyoharu Gotouge. (VIZ Media)</td>
<td>A young charcoal seller must avenge his family by destroying the demon that slaughtered them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>CLASS ACT, by Jerry Craft. (Quill Tree)</td>
<td>Drew Ellis finds he must work 10 times as hard as his privileged classmates at the Riverdale Academy Day School.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>REMINA, by Junji Ito. (VIZ Media)</td>
<td>An unknown planet discovered in a wormhole by Dr. Oiguro threatens Earth’s existence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>SMILE, by Raina Telgemeier. (Scholastic)</td>
<td>Raina experiences bruises, boy troubles and other plagues of the sixth grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>NEW KID, by Jerry Craft. (HarperCollins)</td>
<td>Jordan Banks, an artistically inclined seventh grader from Washington Heights, has a tough time navigating an upscale private school where diversity is low.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>HAPPY NARWHALIDAYS, by Ben Clanton. (Tundra)</td>
<td>The fifth book in the Narwhal and Jelly series. The Merry MerNicorn, warm waffle pudding and a hunt for the perfect present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>BABY-SITTERS LITTLE SISTER: KAREN’S ROLLER SKATES, by Ann M. Martin. Illustrated by Katr Farina. (Scholastic)</td>
<td>After taking a tumble, Karen sets out to get her friends and someone famous to sign her cast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ATTACK ON TITAN, VOL. 1, by Hajime Isayama. (Kadokawa)</td>
<td>A group of survivors must go into production of “Moon Over Mississippi.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>DRAMA, by Raina Telgemeier. (Scholastic)</td>
<td>Callie becomes the stage manager for her middle school’s production of “Moon Over Mississippi.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MONTHS ON LIST</th>
<th>THIS MONTH</th>
<th>Mass Market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>MORAL COMPASS, by Danielle Steel. (Dell)</td>
<td>Shortly after Saint Ambrose Prep goes co-ed, a student is attacked and the community is thrown into disarray.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>UNSOLVED, by James Patterson and David Ellis. (Grand Central)</td>
<td>A string of seemingly accidental and unrelated deaths confound F.B.I. agent Emmy Dockery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>THE RIVER MURDERS, by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Grand Central)</td>
<td>Three thrillers: “Hidden,” “Malicious” and “Malevolent.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>THE MORNING AFTER, by Lisa Jackson. (Zebra)</td>
<td>The journalist Nikki Gillette pursues a serial killer whom she has nicknamed the Grave Robber.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE, by Debbie Macomber. (MIRA)</td>
<td>Two holiday stories: “Christmas Letters” and “Call Me Mrs. Miracle.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>WYOMING TRUE, by Diana Palmer. (HQN)</td>
<td>The 10th book in the Wyoming Men series. The independently wealthy Ida Merridan’s past catches up with her as she gets to know the rancher Jake McGuire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>SOMEDAY WITH YOU, by Nora Roberts. (Silhouette)</td>
<td>Two romance stories: “Cordina’s Crown Jewel” and “Unfinished Business.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>WHITE HOT, by Sandra Brown. (Pocket)</td>
<td>Sayre Lynch returns to her hometown, where she confronts corrupt family members and her feelings for Beck Merchant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>WHEN YOU SEE ME, by Lisa Gardner. (Dutton)</td>
<td>D. D. Warren and Flora Dane join the F.B.I. agent Kimberly Quincy’s taskforce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>THE DESERTER, by Nelson DeMille and Alex DeMille. (Pocket)</td>
<td>Two members of the Criminal Investigation Division must bring back a Delta Force soldier who disappeared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>THE NIGHT FIRE, by Michael Connelly. (Grand Central)</td>
<td>Harry Bosch and Renée Ballard return to take up a case that held the attention of Bosch’s mentor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A WARM HEART IN WINTER, by J. R. Ward. (Pocket)</td>
<td>In the Black Dagger Brotherhood world, a winter storm interrupts Blay and Qhuen’s official mating ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>SPY, by Danielle Steel. (Dell)</td>
<td>Alexandra Wickham, an espionage agent during World War II, must keep her secret hidden into the Cold War.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sales are defined as completed transactions between vendors and individual end users during the period on or after the official publication date of a title. Graphic book rankings include all print and digital formats. Adult, children’s, young adult, fiction and nonfiction graphic books are eligible for inclusion on the graphic books and manga list. ONLINE: For complete lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.
In the first sentence of this sweeping history, Kreike tells us that most books about total war begin in 1914, in the fields and forests of Flanders, out of the mistaken perception that World War I was the first time that chemical warfare was deployed.

Kreike, however, starts in the sudden fields of the Low Countries during the Dutch Revolt in the 1500s, visits the European wars of conquest in the Americas and Asia and the internal European conflicts during the “Age of Reason,” then ends in southwestern Africa during the early 20th century.

Kreike’s argument is that environmental warfare, in which nature is a tool and a target, has occurred for hundreds of years, perpetrated by people all over the world, and that environcide (a term my brain wants to autocorrect to “envirocide”) should be considered a crime against humanity.

“Environcide consists of intentionally or unintentionally damaging, destroying or rendering inaccessible environmental infrastructure” — which he broadly defines as homes, agriculture, water sources and more — “through violence that may be episodic and spectacular . . . or continuous and cumulative.”

At times, this seems like tautology — it’s hard to imagine a war of any kind that wouldn’t fit this description. But there are significant contributions here. First, Kreike, despite relying heavily on Dutch sources (damp environmentalists will love the details), helps return historical agency to non-European actors in the wars of colonization around the world. He writes about often forgotten and impressive environmental infrastructure, resistance to European invasion and successful adaptation — for example, many tribal nations of the American West turned to buffalo hunting only after Europeans had made their previous sedentary agricultural traditions impossible.

Kreike offers a stark corrective and an implicit warning: Humanity is not distinct from nature, and assuming it is can have tragic outcomes. Climate change is one; pandemics are another. In this book, catastrophic warfare is a third. Waiting for the fourth horseman would seem unwise.

In September 2019, millions of people around the world participated in nonviolent demonstrations demanding action on climate change. Over and over again, politicians and business leaders have said that we face an existential threat. And yet, from 2017 to 2019 investments in new fossil fuel infrastructure projects have grown. To become profitable (and then some), these new projects will pump more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere for decades. Meanwhile, the polar icecaps melt, sea levels rise, hundreds of thousands of species may go extinct, fires rage, hurricanes boil, people continue to suffer and die.

“Now to say that the signals have fallen on the deaf ears of the ruling classes of this world would be an understatement. If these classes ever had any senses, they have lost them all,” writes Malm, a Swedish professor of human ecology and climate change activist, in his compelling but frustrating treatise.

A proportionate and rational response, Malm argues, should be to target fossil fuel infrastructure: Destroy fences around a power plant; occupy pipeline routes, as protesters did for the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines; at coal mines or similar sites, set up climate camps, which Malm believes are effective as laboratories for activism and for shutting things down by putting bodies on the line.

He also advocates powerfully against despair and powerlessness. One of the most satisfying parts of his book comes when he brutally dispatches with “climate fatalists” like Jonathan Franzen, who argue that we should all just give up. “Climate fatalism is for those on top,” Malm writes. “Its sole contribution is spoilage.”

So Malm wants us to fight back (though I should add that there aren’t any actual instructions here about how to blow anything up).

He argues that there should be room for tactics other than strict nonviolence and peaceful demonstrations — indeed, he is a bit contemptuous of those who offer strategic pacifism as a solution — and notes that fetishizing nonviolence in past protest movements sanitizes history, removing agency from the people who fought, sometimes violently, for justice, freedom and equality.

Sure. But the problem with violence, even if it’s meant only to destroy “fossil capital,” is that ultimately it’s impossible to control.
Sketchbook / Robert Burns’s Birthday / By R. O. Blechman

Remembering the Jan. 25 birthday of Scotland’s national poet, with bagpipes and a mouse.

In the 1940s, when
I was a teenager living
on Central Park West, ...

... I would hear a lone bagpiper
outside my window
every late January afternoon.

I later learned that he was celebrating the birthday of the poet Robert Burns.

Robert Burns experienced great success
early in his career.

But he was ignored when taste shifted,
and he became desperately poor.

Penniless, he begged his cousin for money.
“Ten pounds,” he wrote, “by return post,
Save me from the horrors of jail.”

Nine days later he died, age 37.
He left behind a poem about a mouse
whose nest was destroyed by a plow.

Here is a stanza:

But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane (art not alone)
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best-laid schemes o’ mice and men
Gang aft a-gley, (go often awry)
An’leave us nought but grief an’ pain
For promised joy.

R. O. BLECHMAN is an artist and illustrator. His new double-volume book, “On the One Hand” and “On the Other Hand,” will be published this spring.
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