You Reap What You Sow

By Omar El-Akkad

A KIND OF MORAL claustrophobia hangs over the opening pages of Imbolo Mbue’s sweeping and quietly devastating second novel, "How Beautiful We Were." In October of 1980, in the fictional African village of Kosawa, representatives of an American oil company called Pexton have come to meet with the locals, whose children are dying. Nearby, the company’s oil pipelines and drilling sites have left the fields fallow and the water poisoned. The residents of Kosawa want the company gone and the land restored to what it was before Pexton showed up, decades ago. The company’s representatives say they’re doing everything they can, though their audience knows it’s a lie — Pexton has the support of the village head as well as the country’s dictator and, with it, impunity. Nothing will be done. But just as the meeting concludes, Konga, the village madman, bursts in. He’s got another idea: Until they get what they want, the villagers should hold Pexton’s men as prisoners.

It’s a propulsive beginning, though one that feels at first as though it’s about to roam familiar ground — a tale of a casually sociopathic corporation and the people whose lives it steamrolls. By the end of the first chapter, I couldn’t help bracing for a long march toward one of two conclusions: the corporation’s inevitable victory, or...
“ENGAGING . . . In Gates’s telling, the Black church, too, shines bright even as the nation itself moves uncertainly through the gloaming, seeking justice on earth—as it is in heaven.”
—JON MEACHAM, THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

“Sweeping, vivid . . . The eminent Harvard historian and connoisseur of American lives turns his compassionate gaze to the black church, illuminating a pantheon of good shepherds who brought a fierce social conscience to the Lord’s work.” —O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE

“A rich story and riveting song of the profound forms of spirituality and musicality that sustained Black sanity and dignity.”
—CORNEL WEST

“As comprehensive as it is celebratory . . . Blending research, interviews with scholars and insights from his own life, Gates illuminates the central role of the Black church in the movement for social justice.” —TIME

“Absolutely brilliant—a book that should spark a very rich conversation . . . A necessary and moving work.”
—EDDIE S. GLAUDE, JR.
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I HAD A MISCARRIAGE: A MEMOIR, A MOVEMENT, by Jessica Zucker. (Feminist Press, paper, $18.95.) The author, a psychologist specializing in maternal mental health, struggled after her own pregnancy ended in miscarriage; this memoir seeks to destigmatize the issue.

SHAKING THE GATES OF HELL: A SEARCH FOR FAMILY AND TRUTH IN THE WAKE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS REVOLUTION, by John Archibald. (Knopf, $28.) In this self-critical exposé of white privilege, a Birmingham News columnist born at the height of the civil rights movement examines his roots in a line of Methodist preachers.

TAKING A LONG LOOK: ESSAYS ON CULTURE, LITERATURE, AND FEMINISM IN OUR TIME, by Vivian Gornick. (Verso, $26.95.) Spanning five decades from the 1970s on, this collection of previously published work includes incisive assessments of Lore Segal, Mary McCarthy and James Salter, among others.

THE PORNIFICATION OF AMERICA: HOW RAUNCH CULTURE IS RUINING OUR SOCIETY, by Bernadette Barton. (NYU, $24.95.) Zippy and well illustrated, this book persuasively argues that “equating hypersexualization with sex positivity is a form of Orwellian doublespeak.”

THE NEW YORK TIMES COOKING NO-RECIPE RECIPES, by Sam Sifton. (Ten Speed, paper, $28.) The first cookbook from The Times’s popular Cooking app is less a recipe collection than a spur to improvisation, with lavish photos.

WHAT WE’RE READING

Growing up watching Bollywood movies might have primed me for romantic stories about people who look and sound like me. But that’s not entirely true, especially when fairness, caste, class and even body type dictate so much of what is depicted. In the literary world, I find myself instead turning to the Y.A. magic spun by Sandhya Menon. In THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT SWEETIE, we have at the center Sweetie: a fat Indian girl who isn’t apologetic about who she is or how she looks, despite her mother’s efforts to convince her of the contrary. She goes against her family’s wishes without inhibitions, eventually finding love with Ashish. Together, they must figure out how to weigh family expectations against the bliss of young love. Menon’s female characters always feel at once relatable and realistic, making it super easy to root for them. With lighthearted banter and a fierce brown girl at the helm, this book remains one of my top favorites to revisit in these difficult times.

—PRIYA ARORA, SOCIAL EDITOR
"Thanks to Florio, as the Village continues to face gentrification, like many neighborhoods across America, we will never forget Bank Street. A charming stroll down Memory Lane and a tribute to a vanishing culture." — KIRKUS REVIEWS

"[A] vibrant, heartfelt memoir...Florio combines historical context with personal experiences in her kaleidoscopic account... Her decades on Bank Street gave her access to “every social, cultural, and economic layer of American life.” — FOREWORD REVIEWS

"Florio charms in her debut memoir about a life well-lived on Greenwich Village’s Bank Street. This sentimental memoir will uplift any reader, no matter where they may call home." — PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"An absolutely delightful book about one of New York’s storied city blocks." — GRAYDON CARTER

Growing Up Bank Street

A GREENWICH VILLAGE MEMOIR

BY DONNA FLORIO
Have a way with words.

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Crossword

50 Years in the OR

By Ron Whitchurch

Ron Whitchurch wrote this wildly entertaining book to offer a firsthand look at what happens after patients are anesthetized and what challenges the staff face in keeping them healthy and safe.

50 Years in the OR will give readers an intimate sense of what it’s like to be the only person in the OR who knows the heartbeat-to-heartbeat status of a surgical patient at any given moment.

Available on Amazon.com
50yearsintheor.com

Letters

From the cover of “Harpo Speaks!”

The Toast of Moscow

TO THE EDITOR:
I was pleased to see Jason Zinoman acknowledge “Harpo Speaks!,” by Harpo Marx, as the gold standard of the comedian memoir (Feb. 21). As a teenager in the early ’60s, I got my hands on the book and found it to be thoroughly entertaining.

Particularly enjoyable is the chapter about Harpo’s trip to Russia in the fall of 1933. He ended up spending eight weeks there and put on shows that earned him standing ovations. Posters that announced his appearances, written in Cyrillic, spelled his name XAPIIO MAPKC. Harpo had no idea how to pronounce it, so he called himself “Exapno Mapcase, the Toast of Moscow.”

His trip to Russia ended in intrigue. On his last day in Moscow he met with the U.S. ambassador, who asked him if he would be willing to smuggle some sensitive dispatches to America. They were taped to his leg and concealed by a sock, and after a nerve-racking ocean voyage he successfully turned them over to Secret Service agents in New York.

As a performer, Harpo never spoke a word while in character, but as a member of the Algonquin Round Table he hobnobbed with the likes of George S. Kaufman, Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker.

He was a fascinating, multitalented man who led an extraordinary life.

RICHARD GALLAGHER
FISHKILL, N.Y.

Making History

TO THE EDITOR:
Discussing Robert Elder’s biography of John C. Calhoun (Feb. 28), Andrew Delbanco writes that in the wake of the Jan. 6 insurrection, a study of the “ideological father of the Confederacy may feel as welcome as an exhumed corpse.”

But when it comes to official approbation, Calhoun isn’t even interred. Go back and watch that man waving the Confederate flag around the Capitol that day, and behind him you’ll see, still occupying an honored spot on the wall, a portrait of Calhoun. Was that a smile on his face I detected as he looked on?

DAVID MARGOLICK
NEW YORK

TO THE EDITOR:
Delbanco concludes his otherwise astute portrait of John Calhoun, that “zealous defender of slavery,” by characterizing those who upheld last year’s vote counts in states challenged by Donald Trump and his supporters as having adopted Calhoun’s states’ rights philosophy — a juxtaposition that Delbanco labels “one of the supreme ironies of American history.”

Not at all. Defending a state’s November 2020 popular vote for president is a far cry from what Calhoun understood as “states’ rights.” South Carolina — in which Calhoun was a leading political figure for four decades — did not even allow its citizens to vote for president until after the Civil War, long after he died.

So my Republican legislators who sought to nullify Pennsylvania’s popular vote — some even proposed that the Legislature itself choose electors — are Calhoun’s heirs, not those of us demanding that “every vote counts.” And just as the idea of Black people voting would have horrified the racist Calhoun, his heirs today objected above all to Philadelphia’s large African-American vote.

ROBERT SHAFFER
MECHANICSBURG, PA.

Who Says

TO THE EDITOR:
In Ibram X. Kendi’s By the Book interview (Feb. 28), one of the questions asks: “How do you advise readers to approach books like ‘The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,’ books with conflicted or hard-to-parse racial attitudes?”

There is nothing conflicted or hard to parse about it. The novel is an unquestionable indictment of racism as well as one of the greatest studies of human nature ever published.

Have we strayed so far that we no longer recognize a true classic of American literature? What a field day Mark Twain would have had with that.

CORY FRANKLIN
WILMETTE, ILL.

CORRECTION

Because of an editing error, a review on Feb. 14 about “Let Me Tell You What I Mean,” by Joan Didion, misstated the criminal offenses that Martha Stewart was convicted of in 2004. Though she was investigated for insider trading, Stewart was found guilty of other related charges. She was not “sentenced to prison for insider trading.”

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM
Jo Ann Beard
The essayist and story writer, whose new collection is ‘Festival Days,’ rarely abandons a book she’s reading: ‘Sometimes what seems like a slog can bring you to a place you wouldn’t expect.’


Are there any classic novels that you only recently read for the first time? Well, I finally finished “To the Lighthouse” after years of starting and stopping. The problem was me, it turns out, not the book, so I’m glad I stuck with it.

Describe your ideal reading experience. End of day, bathtub, novel.

What’s your favorite book no one else has heard of? “Junkyard Dogs and William Shakespeare,” by Mark Lamonica. It’s a curated collection of photographs he took of the dogs guarding the junkyards he visited as a sculptor over the years, and paired with quotes from Shakespeare. You cannot read it without experiencing the nobility and exaltation of these creatures — canine and human alike — in their lonely occupations.

What’s your favorite book to assign to and discuss with your students at Sarah Lawrence?
Because I love my students, I frequently have them read Lynda Barry and David Sedaris. And because I worry about them — about how difficult it is to focus and to write and to interpret the strange “Matrix”-like world we are living in, I’ve been having them read Jia Tolentino’s “Trick Mirror” and Jenny Odell’s “How to Do Nothing.” Both books pose their own powerful, artful arguments for living the examined life.

What’s the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently? Every page of Merlin Sheldrake’s “Entangled Life” had something moving and new for me. But my favorite thing was, and I’m paraphrasing, that some fungi may have evolved their psychotropic properties as a way of encouraging and assisting human enlightenment.

Which genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid? I love the essay. My first moment of wanting to be a nonfiction writer was stumbling across an essay by Loren Eiseley called “The Bird and the Machine.” I thought it was utterly thrilling, what Eiseley did in a few pages — and it was about humans and birds and science and the rights of animals to be free of human interference. So, pretty much a perfect storm for Jo Ann.

What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves? I have a lot of books about dog training for someone whose dogs aren’t that well trained.

What kind of reader were you as a child? I read constantly, voraciously, as though I were actively living those lives instead of my own. It was delirious fun, those Saturdays my mother would come home from a yard sale with a box of random books for us to consume. In those boxes I eventually found all of Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Mary O’Hara, Jack London, Albert Payson Terhune. Leading to a lifelong love of dogs and horses and rowdy boys.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn’t? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing? I tend to finish things, holding out hope. Sometimes what seems like a slog can bring you to a place you wouldn’t expect, like stumbling on a clearing. Mostly that doesn’t happen, but when it does, you have to imagine that it went that way for the writer too, hacking their way toward something they were glimpsing through the trees.

What book are you embarrassed not to have read yet? “Middlemarch.”

What do you plan to read next? “Middlemarch.”

An expanded version of this interview is available at nytimes.com/books.
Tourist Attraction

A debut novel asks outsiders to empathize with the lives of locals.

By ESMERALDA SANTIAGO

NOT SO LONG AGO you could travel to other landscapes, peopled with men, women and children who might not look like you, who might not speak your language, who seemed to have been created just so you could build memories. When you're a tourist in someone else's home, you're there to get away from your own life, to preserve and post images of your adventures and experiences on social media, proof that you're curious about the world and that you can still have fun. To you those foreigners — preferably wearing traditional dress or an approximation of it, their bodies adorned in patterns and textures you find charming but wouldn't wear yourself once you touch down at home — are there to fill holes in your life so deep you don't even see them anymore.

It is you, dear tourists, whom Jamie Figueroa addresses in her debut novel, “Brother, Sister, Mother, Explorer.” Her otherwise third-person narration is sometimes spoken directly to you, guiding your gaze with injunctions like “Don’t take your eyes off her,” pointing out what you might otherwise either deliberately or subconsciously ignore: the performers forced by economic circumstance to amuse you, the shopkeepers who sell what they can’t afford to own. The residents of these “exotic” places know they don’t exist for you unless they’re right in front of you, in a shady plaza in a mesa surrounded by mountains, waving their arms, singing, strumming, dancing, begging for your attention. But Figueroa — who describes herself as “Boricua by way of Ohio,” and now lives in New Mexico — knows those picturesque people have lives as complex as yours, with fewer resources to help them cope. She sees them. And, before, she also sees you.

“Brother, Sister, Mother, Explorer” packs a lot of story into just over 200 pages. The titular siblings, Rafa and Rufina, are in their late 20s and mourning the recent death of their mother, Rosalinda. To support themselves they dress in colorful costumes, singing, dancing, begging for your attention. But Rufina — who describes herself as “Boricua by way of Ohio,” and now lives in New Mexico — knows those picturesque people have lives as complex as yours, with fewer resources to help them cope. She sees them. And, before, she also sees you.

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All their lives Rosalinda, Rafa and Rufina have been caught in the maelstrom of history, unable to affect it but scarred by events far beyond their ability to control or comprehend. While pregnant with Rafa, Rosalinda escaped “a country that wanted all of her kind dead,” and made it into this one which remains unnamed thanks to the humanitarian work of the Grandmothers to All, a commune of elderly women who “rescue women in need. Because aren’t women just an extension of the natural world?” Safely across the border, they try to make a life for herself and her children — born 20 months apart by different fathers — and to leave behind her pain, with mixed results. Well into adulthood, her children are still trying to make sense of her erratic, often disturbing behavior. Even once she is gone, Rosalinda’s ghost haunts the house, kicking doors, breaking dishes, rattling cutlery. Rafa, devastated by her loss, considers suicide. Rufina can’t handle her brother’s break from reality, but she can’t just let him go. So she challenges him: If they can make enough money over a weekend performing at the plaza, he will leave Ciudad de Tres Hermanas and live on an island, where he has always been happiest. He agrees, reluctantly, and they return to the plaza, Rafa playing a guitar without strings, Rufina singing, poorly, about a lost baby. A white husband and wife stop to watch the performance, Rafa and Rufina’s “earnest seduction,” and deem the sadness and poverty “part of the charm.”

During the three days we know him, Rafa is a broken man, but Rufina remembers him as a multilingual, well-traveled worker in N.G.O.s. We don’t know how many of his job-related experiences collide against his memories of his mother, but we can imagine, we can understand why and how he’s come to the present crossroads. His mother’s death is only the most recent of his sorrows.

Rufina is also more than the bedraggled performer, ogled by men, feared by women. She too has been traumatized, physically and psychologically, but she doesn’t give up. Her survivor’s spirit is redemptive, even though in a sense we learn she’s had to give up long before we first meet her, bleating in the dusty plaza.

A ghost who loves to sit in a rocking chair on the roof, an angel who smokes cherry-flavored cigarillos, the local vendors Rafa calls the “Original Enduring Ones” watching, the Grandmothers to All protecting: These presences are like characters in a fable. Even those of us who resist magical realism might accept, maybe even celebrate it in this beautifully crafted, poetic book.

Having read “Brother, Sister, Mother, Explorer,” maybe the next time you travel, you might recall that what you see is not all there is. You might see yourselves as Jamie Figueroa sees you, apart from and yet a part of our common human condition.
ON A RECENT sunny winter day, I drove 40 miles from New Orleans to a plantation on the southern banks of the Mississippi. The Whitney Plantation, first opened to the public in 2014, is the only plantation museum in Louisiana exclusively focused on the history of enslaved people. While walking its grounds I listened to an hour-long audio tour, which seemed to conjure ghosts and whispers. I recognized these as the same echoes that had been with me the week prior, in the audiobook I had been listening to: **FOUR HUNDRED SOULS: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019** (Random House Audio, 14 hours, 2 minutes), edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. This museum tour of Black stories was not only a coincidental appendix to that book, but also testament to how aural narratives, for their ability to unfurl in your mind while you are taking in the world around you, can be far more than background. They can be all-consuming.

In the book’s introduction, Kendi equates the project to “a Black choir singing the spiritual into the heavens of history.” It is at once a song and a continuation of a centuries-old tradition of oral histories, in the form of 80 essays and 10 poems, all commissioned to chronicle 400 years of Black life in America. There are academic essays, thoroughly reported profiles and lyrical memoirs side by side, from voices as disparate as the historian Nakia D. Parker’s, the writer Kiese Laymon’s and the journalist and academic Isabel Wilkerson’s. The stories, running chronologically in five-year increments and read by a full cast, can at first sound disjointed in their different approaches, but they have much in common: an urgent mission to autopsy history as it’s long been read by a full cast, can at first sound disjointed in their different approaches, but they have much in common: an urgent mission to autopsy history as it’s long been

and the present as a way of showing just how intact they are.

SORT THROUGH THOSE threads and follow one far into an imagined future, and you might end up at **THE ONLY LIVING GIRL ON EARTH** (Scrib原 Originals, 1 hour, 12 minutes), by the National Book Award winner Charles Yu. This short story — itself a collection of free-floating but connected fragments — takes place in the year 3020 and centers on Jane, who is the sole employee of “Earth: The Gift Shop,” which is all that is left on the planet, after “Earth: A Bunch of Civilizations” became uninhabitable and “Earth: A Theme Park” fell into disrepair. Yes, most of the metaphors and parables packed into this story — a grab bag of sci-fi tropes highlighting humanity’s hamster-wheel existence — are this heavy-handed. But, as a brief and entertaining thought experiment buoyed by some masterly turns of phrase (a telescope described, for example, as a “needle pointing out into the haystack of empty space”), the story will hold your attention, especially in audio form, thanks to a skillful narration by the voice actor Jesse Vilinsky.

**A SHORT STORY** always the opposite of the 14-hour historical epic that swirls around your mind for weeks? A snack instead of a meal? Try telling that to George Saunders, the kind of writer who talks about literature as if it is intricately linked to what makes us human. To listen to his newest book, **A SWIM IN A POND IN THE RAIN: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life** (Random House Audio, 14 hours, 44 minutes), is the closest many of us will get to sitting in on one of his fiction writing classes. Using a selection of stories from 19th-century Russian masters — Chekhov, Turgenyev, Tolstoy and Gogol — Saunders dives deep (occasionally headachingly deep) into what makes a story a story. Saunders calls the form “a frank, intimate conversation between equals” in one moment; in the next, “a continual system of escalation.” This is like one of those lectures-on-tape your grandfather used to listen to, except this time the teacher’s voice is joined by narrators like Glenn Close, B. D. Wong and Nick Offerman, who is unsurprisingly adept at capturing the personalities that might fill a rural Russian tavern.

A UNIVERSE IS LARGE. I know this because Saunders’s book somehow exists in the same “how to” universe as **EVERYBODY HAS A PODCAST (EXCEPT YOU): A How-To Guide From the First Family of Podcasting** (HarperAudio, 5 hours, 9 minutes), by Griffin, Travis and Justin McElroy — with guest appearances from their partners and their father — take turns offering firsthand experience on every step of production, from choosing your co-workers (“a great friend does not inherently make a great co-host”) to how long each episode should be (“I dunno, probably an hour? Next question”). This is a book for hardcore fans of the brothers’ growing roster, but it is also a thorough resource for anyone remotely interested in the world of D.I.Y. podcasting. And that, if my Twitter feed is to be believed, includes basically everyone.
What the Portal Said
Making sense of a life split between virtual and physical worlds.

By MERVE EMRE

“The only solution to the internet was to write bad novels with central personages who do not appear.”

“The only solution was to write bad novels that mimicked the computer network in its obsessions with junk media.

“The only solution was to write bad novels that mimicked the network in its irrelevant and jagged presentation of content.”

Jarett Kobek wrote these self-ironizing words in his 2016 novel “I Hate the Internet”; now they could serve as a rubric for critics asked to review novels about the internet and to determine whether these novels are solemnly, unrepentantly bad or good in spite of themselves. “I Hate the Internet” falls into the latter category, as do Dennis Cooper’s “The Sluts” (2004), Tao Lin’s “Taipei” (2013) and Lynne Tillman’s “Men and Apparitions” (2018). The lasting achievement of these strange, excellent novels is to represent not only the relentlessness with which the internet intrudes on our perceptions, our consciousness, but also the larger and more distant forces that allow it to do so. Such novels speak of trolls and mobs, of identity and authenticity, in the same breath with which they whisper about the overproduction of personal “data,” “the information of existence” (Lin), or how corporations command “the thrill of the new” to create demand for their products (Tillman). They find ways, as the critic Mark McGurl puts it, “to speak back to and against” their own conditions of existence.

The most recent contender in this genre is Patricia Lockwood’s “No One Is Talking About This.” The author of two poetry collections and a memoir, “Priestdaddy,” Lockwood is a modern word witch, her writing splendid and sordid by turns. Her prose rambles from animal gags to dirty talk to infinitely beautiful meditations on the nature of perception that deflate and turn absurd before they can turn philosophical. She has honed her craft on the internet, mainly on Twitter. That platform, as the narrator wonders. “Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote.”

The question many people have demanded that the great internet novel answer is: What does it feel like to be online? For Lockwood, the question of how it feels for one person to be online is indistinguishable from how the internet would narrate its own virtual existence — how it would speak, if it could speak, in a single voice, of the intense, exhausting accretion of matter that makes it feel alive, electric with rage and desperation, greedy for attention and praise, and, as the narrator’s husband says, “like a ventriloquist’s dummy: “just totally, totally dead.”

What is the portal? “A brain, a language, a place, a time?” Lockwood’s unnamed narrator asks in what amounts to an extension of Lockwood’s essay “The Communal Mind,” published in The London Review of Books in 2019. She is a restless narrator, who thinks in beautiful, witty, tidy paragraphs. She shifts between pronouns and points of view the way one might cycle between tabs late at night, half bored, half elated. There is the all-encompassing “we,” magic thinking itself into existence whenever everyone online seems to agree on something. There is the “you,” a direct message to the reader, at times solicitous, at times accusatory. There is the more distracted “she,” who ignores us as she posts, clicks and scrolls to the point of hallucination, disavowing the idea that modern novels, like this one, should accommodate old-fashioned analog devices like plot or character.

“The only solution was to write bad novels with central personages who do not appear.”

“Why were we all writing like this now?” the narrator wonders. “Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote.”

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The most recent contender in this genre is Patricia Lockwood’s “No One Is Talking About This.” The author of two poetry collections and a memoir, “Priestdaddy,” Lockwood is a modern word witch, her writing splendid and sordid by turns. Her prose rambles from animal gags to dirty talk to infinitely beautiful meditations on the nature of perception that deflate and turn absurd before they can turn philosophical. She has honed her craft on the internet, mainly on Twitter. That platform, as the narrator wonders. “Because a new kind of connection had to be made, and blink, synapse, little space-between was the only way to make it. Or because, and this was more frightening, it was the way the portal wrote.”

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What is the portal? “A brain, a language, a place, a time?” Lockwood’s unnamed narrator asks in what amounts to an extension of Lockwood’s essay “The Communal Mind,” published in The London Review of Books in 2019. She is a restless narrator, who thinks in beautiful, witty, tidy paragraphs. She shifts between pronouns and points of view the way one might cycle between tabs late at night, half bored, half elated. There is the all-encompassing “we,” magic thinking itself into existence whenever everyone online seems to agree on something. There is the “you,” a direct message to the reader, at times solicitous, at times accusatory. There is the more distracted “she,” who ignores us as she posts, clicks and scrolls to the point of hallucination, disavowing the idea that modern novels, like this one, should accommodate old-fashioned analog devices like plot or character.

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Pilgrim Law
Seeking a fair trial in early America.

By FRANCIS J. BREMER

IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT the Pilgrims. Even during the pandemic, the 400th anniversary of the voyage of the Mayflower has been marked with public events, exhibits and academic conferences in England, the Netherlands and the United States. Numerous books have explored new angles on an old story; some of them directing attention to the Native population, the people who inhabited the land they called Dawnland. In "Terror to the

TERROR TO THE WICKED
America's First Trial by Jury
That Ended a War and Helped to Form a Nation
By Tobey Pearl

"Wicked," Tobey Pearl, a lawyer and educator, focuses on an important episode in the story of colo-nist-Native relations.

In the summer of 1638 an English indentured servant in the Plymouth Colony, Arthur Peach, ran away from his master. He was joined by three other servants. As they jour-neyed through the wilderness they encountered a Native whom they attacked and robbed. The Native, Penowyanquias, though mortally wounded, escaped and was able to tell his tale to Roger Williams in nearby Providence before he died. While one of the runaways escaped, Peach and two of his fellow perpe-trators were put on trial in the Plymouth Colony for murder. The English jury convicted all three and they were speedily executed. The story as such is well known and speaks to the willingness of an English jury to provide justice in a case where Englishmen murdered a Na-tive.

Pearl has not unearthed any facts that have not been previously reported in many studies of the Plymouth Colony. She adds conjecture to what the sources actually tell us, with speculation about what Peach and his associates may have been feeling, the possible motivations of major characters and the supposed thoughts of the jurors, to mention just a few examples.

One can't go beyond one or two pages without encountering something that "may have," "possibly" or "likely" happened. John Winthrop, governor of Massachusetts, must have been present at the trial and the executions, though there is no evidence that he was. Many pages are devoted to imagin-ing the details of a discussion between Roger Williams and the Wampanoag Massasoit. What sources consider possible, Pearl presents as certainty. For such sup-position to be persuasive readers have to be confident in the author's deep knowledge of the times and culture, but there are too many factual inaccuracies and jumbles of chronology to provide that confidence in this case. An example is the citation of the famous 1670 Eng-lish trial of William Penn and William Mede that established a jury's right to act against a judge's in-structions, which Pearl seems to employ to support the independ-ence of the jury in the 1638 Peach trial. "Terror to the Wicked" is well written and draws upon important new insights into Native culture. But the underlying arguments that this was "America's first trial by jury" and that it "ended a war" (as the subtitle has it) are misleading.

As for being the first trial by jury, Plymouth's governor William Bradford recorded that in 1630 "John Billington the Elder . . . was arraigned; and both by grand, and petty jury found guilty of willful murder by plain and notorious evi-dence. And was for the same accordingly executed." As for the claim that this trial "ended a war," the Pequot War was essentially over; churches in Plymouth and other New England colonies had celebrated a day of thanksgiving for their victory 10 months earlier. The Peach trial was important, but Pearl's reasoning exaggerates how important it was. It was not, as she asserts, "the trial of the century."
Scenes From the Anthropocene

The human efforts to confront a changing natural world — and their unintended consequences.

By HELEN MACDONALD

A FEW YEARS AGO YouTube recommended I watch a video with the word “carpocalypse” in its title. I clicked the link — of course I did — and stared in awe at what resembled a mash-up of a video game, nature documentary and war movie. I saw a river full of fish leaping from the water like chaotic piscine fireworks and men in speedboats yelling and holding out nets to catch them as if they were wet and weighty butterflies. Fish hitting people in the face, fish landing in boats, fish flapping between people’s feet in a mess of slime and blood. This, the video informed me, was the annual Redneck Fishing Tournament in Bath, Ill., the object of which was to kill as many Asian carp as possible. An invasive species that has spread throughout the Mississippi basin since its introduction as a “safe” agent of biological control in the 1960s, Asian carp jump when they feel in danger, and the sound of boat engines is sufficiently alarming to push them en masse into the air.

The video was a startling coincidence of science, culture and environmental disaster; and I thought of it often as I read Elizabeth Kolbert’s excellent new book. I did so partly because her opening chapter deals with the continuing struggle to prevent Asian carp from entering the Great Lakes system, with solutions ranging from electrified water barriers to thrillingly impractical suggestions from members of the public to stop them with flying knives. But as I read on, I was reminded of the carp for a different reason. They seemed no longer just a sign of environmental disaster or a ready metaphor for xenophobia. In my mind they became proxies for us — creatures in mass panic, leaping out of their comfort zone, desperate to avoid catastrophe.

“Under a White Sky” is a fascinating survey of novel attempts to manage natural systems of all sizes, from preserving tiny populations of desert fish to altering the entire atmosphere (the title refers to the tiny populations of desert fish to altering the entire atmosphere (the title refers to the color the sky would turn were solar engineers to implement plans to spread mineral particles in the stratosphere to reflect sunlight and cut global warming).

One of the great science journalists, Kolbert has for many years been an essential voice, a reporter from the front lines of the environmental crisis. Her new book crackles with the realities of living in an era that has sounded the death knell for our commonly held belief that one can meaningfully distinguish between nature and humanity. Our world is too much changed for nature to be preserved simply by leaving it alone. “Humans,” she explains, are producing “no-analog climates, no-analog ecosystems, a whole no-analog future.” The systems that support us are now hybrid human-natural ones, and maintaining them increasingly requires us to adopt inventive strategies to correct for our previous attempts at control, efforts that have frequently led to highly unfortunate outcomes.

Kolbert has a phenomenal ability to communicate complex scientific information. She explains CRISPR gene-editing and atmospheric physics in prose that is a model of clarity and generosity; she traces environmental histories deftly. She moves us gracefully across numerous scales, from aerial views of clouds reflected in Louisianas lakes right down to an individual scientist picking aquatic beetles from a mesh screen, a fish egg with a visibly beating heart, a single gene. She has a marvelous eye for the quirky, from the plywood palm tree outside an Arctic research station to the local term for used condoms floating in water (“Chicago River whitefish,” a phrase I will never be able to forget, no matter how hard I try), and she wields figurative language in truly glorious ways: All the desert pupfish in the world, she explains, weigh less than a Filet-O-Fish sandwich. Isn’t that perfect?

All the while, we are introduced to a wonderful cast of people. She interviews scientists and engineers, coastal geologists, solar geologists, tattooed fishermen in gore-smeared overalls, a director of an Arctic institute with an icle-hung beard and a Biloxi-Chitimacha-Chocotaw chief living on doomed land. One frustration I had was the omission of Black voices in the chapter about land loss and environmental disaster in Louisiana. A significant aspect of managing natural systems has to do with the paternalism of such projects — the question of whether the people most affected by these endeavors have a say in how they are carried out.

Kolbert repeatedly turns to attempts by humans to recreate the natural world. She visits large-scale dynamic hydrological models; marine tanks in which corals are subjected to stress to assist their artificial evolution into harder organisms capable of coping with our changing seas; the construction of a desert pool in a building that looks like an industrial warehouse. These spaces, strangely irrigated with both hope and despair, remind us that Earth itself is a discrete system under stress.

and despair, remind us that Earth itself is a discrete system under stress, the site of an experiment in survival we have busily been conducting on ourselves.

Though as a writer she has a transporting ability to conjure place and atmosphere, Kolbert can at times be a strangely elusive presence in her own book. At many points, I wanted desperately to know how she felt about things. When I read her assessment of the scenery surrounding her in northern Greenland — which “could be described as bleak, or alternatively, as sublime” — I blinked, curious as to which she preferred. Pointing out this personal reticence is not a criticism of her work: “Under a White Sky” is important, necessary, urgent and phenomenally interesting. It has, however, made me muse on the ways we choose to write about the environmental emergency.

In 2014, Kolbert was asked whether she found writing about extinction depressing. She said it was, but it had to be looked in the face. “I’ve tried to transcend my own feelings,” she explained. There’s good reason to do so: In such a politically charged field, honest sentiment is too often weaponized as evidence of bias and weakness. Furthermore, the voice of reportage, like the voice of scientific papers, carries enormous cultural power. It bespeaks objectivity. It’s the voice we are told to use when we want to be taken seriously, when we don’t want our conclusions to be interpreted as simply being emotional; we’re taught such things muddy the force of truth.

Yet the people who toil to stop invasive carp or preserve desert pupfish do so for reasons that do not exist solely in the realm of science. All the conservation biologists I know have deep attachments to the creatures they study, and it is these passionate motivations that spur their efforts and assist the continued survival of the creatures in question. I’m reminded of the words of Robin Wall Kimmerer, botanist, writer and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, who maintains that science can be a path to kinship with other species, and that it should be animated by more than simply pure analysis.

Beautifully and insistently, Kolbert shows us that it is time to think radically about the ways we manage the environment; time to work with what we have, using the knowledge we have, with our eyes fully open to the realities of where we are. Rigorous analysis and science journalism, the form in which Kolbert truly excels, is needed now more than ever. But alongside it, to enrich it, there should be other stories too: tender, careful investigations into the feelings that drive and shape our efforts to save the world.
The Squad
New books consider the culture of policing in two American cities.

By MAURICE CHAMMAH

IN LATE 2015, I interviewed several young police officers over lunch in the middle of their patrol shift. We were near St. Louis, not far from Ferguson, where the year before an officer from a different department had shot and killed Michael Brown, sparking protests and a nationwide debate about law enforcement. I asked each officer the same question: What do you want to be doing in 10 years? I assumed one might say “detective,” another “chief.”

Most of them responded with the same word: “tactical.” They wanted to be on a SWAT team, or something like it, handling shootouts and other high-risk situations. They were earnest about wanting to serve the public, but they also seemed a little bored, stopping cars and checking them for guns and drugs. They were mostly white. All the drivers were Black. The officers acted politely; they also seemed a little bored, stopping cars and checking them for guns and drugs. They were mostly white. All the drivers were Black. The officers acted politely;

TANGLED UP IN BLUE
Policing the American City
By Rosa Brooks

WE OWN THIS CITY
A True Story of Crime, Cops, and Corruption
By Justin Fenton

at least in the presence of a white reporter, but the residents told me they felt harassed and under siege. Six years later, policing has drifted even further from a policy dilemma to a full-blown culture war. Between the talk of defunding and the “thin blue line” American flags, it’s not even clear that we agree what the problems of policing and crime in America actually are, much less how to solve them.

In “Tangled Up in Blue: Policing the American City,” the Georgetown law professor Rosa Brooks takes a novel approach, chronicling her experiences over the past few years as a volunteer reserve officer with the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department. She takes us into neighborhoods steeped in intergenerational poverty, addiction and violence. “When other social goods and services are absent or scarce,” she writes, “police become the default solution to an astonishingly wide range of problems.” The constant deluge of tragic and avoidable conflict is enough to make some of her patrol partners callous and cruel — one even calls the residents “animals” — but Brooks also shows that the officers are coping with their own despondency. “The main occupational hazard of policing is not assault or injury, but cynicism,” she explains. “Sometimes, it seems like everyone you meet is crying or yelling.”

Brooks has an anthropologist’s ear for the language of policing, jumping from the reports full of passive-voice bureaucratese to the darkly humorous, profanity-laden shorthand. She zips from hilarious descriptions of going to the bathroom while overloaded with clunky gear to bone-dry observations: “The ethics lesson was slightly less detailed than the guidance on the high-speed car chases.”

During her training, Brooks notices how all the students seem obsessed with watching videos of officers who briefly let down their guard and end up paying with their lives. Her fellow officers are jumpy, always convinced that a woman is reaching for a gun rather than her wallet, or that a man will pounce if they don’t restrain him. She suggests that an exaggerated sense of risk too often leads to tragedy, and that the police should be encouraged to accept more risk to themselves. “They’re told they have ‘a right to go home safe.’ Too often, they forget that other people have a right to go home safe too.” It’s easy to imagine the criticism she’ll get, but her calm, considered tone, grounded in experience, is itself an achievement.

Culture and training can lead well-meaning officers toward tragic outcomes. But in other cases, departments make it possible for dishonest officers to flourish. In “We Own This City: A True Story of Crime, Cops, and Corruption,” Justin Fenton, a reporter for The Baltimore Sun, traces the rise and fall of his city’s Gun Trace Task Force, a group of officers who spent years robbing drug dealers, selling drugs themselves, skimming money from house seizures, planting evidence and defrauding taxpayers through overtime claims. Their reign produced the death of a civilian and numerous wrongful charges and convictions. Another officer died under mysterious circumstances one day before he was set to testify against members of the task force.

Fenton weaves the career of his anti-hero, Wayne Jenkins, the unit’s head, together with accounts of Baltimore’s high crime rate and the desperation of Baltimore’s leaders to get guns and drugs off the streets, no matter the methods. Jenkins doesn’t go on the record — although he denies many of the crimes for which he was convicted — but some ways this makes for a better story, as a huge range of people offer a pointillistic portrait of this slippery, somewhat mysterious figure. In a perversion of traditional drug investigations, Jenkins asked his victims — mostly drug dealers whom he knows nobody will really see as victims — which other dealers they would rob, as a way of finding new targets. We see a young policeman’s desire for action allowed to foster toward troubling extremes, as Jenkins gets into multiple, dangerous high-speed chases every day.

Clearly inspired by “The Wire,” Fenton populates his narrative with a network of officers, informants and street dealers, all with different motivations and interests. Some of these personalities come through more vividly than others, but the overall effect is to capture the disorienting, churning quality of a city where the good guys and bad guys aren’t easily distinguished. Fenton lays out the meticulous work of F.B.I. agents to unravel the corruption, and at many moments their success seems anything but assured: While this is all playing out, Freddie Gray famously dies in Baltimore police custody, protesters fill the streets and prosecutors fail to get convictions.

“Between those who had experienced the abuse and the relatives, friends and co-workers who heard their stories, people who had never trusted the cops in the first place became only more contemptuous of them,” Fenton writes of the task force. “Baltimore’s Black communities have been both overpoliced and underpoliced.” Favoring hard-boiled reporter’s prose, Fenton mostly emphasizes story over such analysis, but he shows how, in our zeal to combat crime, we have allowed institutions to produce it. There will always be a role for adrenaline junkies among the ranks of emergency workers, and there will always be moral ambiguities when we send people, no matter how well trained, into difficult, chaotic situations. Both Brooks and Fenton implicitly question the value of our culture war over policing, instead offering close observations and cautionary tales. They also offer glimpses of hope. In Fenton’s admiring portrait of the F.B.I. agents who saved Baltimore from its rogue officers, or in Brooks’s encounters with decent people who are attracted to the profession for the right reasons. “I’m worried about getting cynical,” a young officer tells Brooks. “I don’t want to turn into the kind of cop who just shrugs when someone gets shot.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT STOLARIK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
In Ruins
Exploring the fates of four cities lost to time to better understand what leads urban environments to decay.

By RUSSELL SHORTO

I DON’T KNOW about you, but I find myself, throughout this long slog of pandemic-plus-political turmoil, alternating between feelings of warmth and camaraderie for my fellow human beings — it is so heartening to see millions pulling together in an urgent situation — and periods of wanting to punch people’s lights out. Navigating the pools of disinformation and ignorance makes one actually fear for the future of the human race. And the crises are focusing particular attention on our cities. Idea factories as they are, they would seem to hold the keys to that future, yet at the same time they suddenly seem shockingly vulnerable.

Though Annalee Newitz began work on “Four Lost Cities” long before the Covid-19 pandemic, it’s impossible to read it today without periodic is-this-where-we’re-headed? musings. The book functions as a travel guide to places that no longer exist. As with most any guidebook, I found myself drawn to some sites more than others.

The chapters on Pompeii, the volcano-buried city in the orbit of ancient Rome, famous for its exquisitely preserved ruins, its brothels and taverns and graffiti, and on Angkor, a metropolis of medieval Cambodia, didn’t fire my imagination so much, perhaps because I already knew something of their histories.

They still have their charm and their surprises, these sections. I had no idea, for instance, that the Roman emperor Titus, after touring the smoking ruins of Pompeii, initiated a massive and surprisingly modern-seeming project to relocate thousands of survivors to other parts of the empire. Or that Angkor, which reached its height around A.D. 900, had an economy based on a system of debt slavery that sounds much like what middle-class Americans endure today.

But the parts of the book devoted to two other “lost” cities, places I had never known existed, filled me with wonder. Nine thousand years ago, the people of Catalhoyuk, maybe 10,000 of them, lived in cuboid clay houses packed against one another above the Konya Plain of south-central Turkey. Their dwellings were uniform, suggesting a highly regulated society: one or two rooms, painted in white or with red ochre designs. You exited not via a front door but by climbing a ladder to the roof. Much of life was lived up there: cooking, socializing, ambling along sidewalks that ran across the top of the city.

Let me say that again in case you missed it: This was 9,000 years ago. In terms of human society, that is just an imponderable span of time. The oldest of the books of the Hebrew Bible date to roughly 3,000 years ago; the pyramids of Egypt go back about 5,000 years. These were not prehumans or near relatives. They were like us: complex, organized, alive to meaning and living at a time beyond reckoning.

Another way of using “Four Lost Cities” is as a compendium of archaeological findings on humanity’s urban origins. The author bops along with experts from Stanford, Cambridge, the University of Calgary, Middle East Technical University and other institutions, peppering them with questions we’d like to ask, and reveling in the occasionally startling answer. (“I love Nero!” a classicist studying Pompeii’s theater declares at one point.)

At Catalhoyuk, Newitz hangs out with Ruth Tringham of the University of California, Berkeley, who has devoted years to humanizing the remnants of this city of the dim past by focusing on one skeleton, of a woman she has dubbed Dido. Dido plastered her walls regularly, kept her home swept clean, covered the floor in reed mats and decorated the place with art: clay figures of animals and stylized human females. In other words: much like us.

Catalhoyuk was founded by pioneers of urban living. “When the earliest construction began,” Newitz writes, “many people coming to live at Catalhoyuk were only a generation or two removed from nomadism.” It was brand-new, this fixed settlement thing, but it proved remarkably successful. By the time Dido was born, the city was about 600 years old. I’m tempted to repeat a number yet again. Think of the settled, structured history Dido could look back on. As evidence of her awareness of the past, Dido, like everyone else in town, buried her ancestors in her home, beneath her bed. Some were given a special honor: their skulls sat in niches in the walls. Dido could enjoy the comfort of her forebears’ empty eye sockets following her as she went about her daily chores. In other words: not so much like us.

A thousand years ago, meanwhile, East St. Louis, Ill., was the site of an urban sanctuary that archaeologists today call Cahokia. With a population of 30,000, it was larger than Paris was at the time. Like Paris, with its Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame, it had distinguishing physical landmarks in the form of black earthen pyramids. It sprawled across both sides of the Mississippi River, beckoning visitors from all over the present-day Southern United States.

Cahokia seems to have been a place of spiritual pilgrimage, which drew diverse groups of Native American peoples, who spoke different languages and worshiped in various ways but came to share a reverence for this city and its ceremonial customs, which included human sacrifice. Its multiethnic, year-round population apparently serviced the religious pilgrims and, in the off-season, went about their own affairs.

Cahokia died not as a result of sudden catastrophe, like Pompeii, but seemingly because it lost its spiritual significance over time. Its people didn’t perish. The pilgrims just stopped coming; the local residents merged with other tribes. There is linguistic and other evidence that the Siouan are their descendants.

The theme of how cities die runs as a dark undercurrent through the book. Newitz devotes space to debunking the popular notion that civilizations of the past “collapse” and become “lost,” pointing instead to indications of gradual change.

Near the end, Newitz attempts to bring the study of the distant past to bear on today: “Globally, we’re in a period of political instability and authoritarian nationalism. Unfortunately, evidence from history shows that this can be a death knell for cities.” But while warning that “the combination of climate change and political instability we face in many modern cities suggests that we’re heading for a period of global urban abandonment,” Newitz notes too that “if we’ve learned anything from history, we know the death of a few cities doesn’t mean the world will collapse into dystopia.”

I suppose we’re to take some comfort from that. The operative lesson from the past, at least from this curated offering of former metropolises, seems to be that human culture is a plastic thing. Rather than lamenting the fragility of our current urban structures, we might do better figuring out how to bend and shape society for the future.

Perhaps looking back 9,000 years can yield practical guidance on how to move forward from where we are. For me, the effect of reading “Four Lost Cities” was more meditative. This is a long, long, long ride we are on. Much is beyond our control. Humanity trundles on.

The snow-covered peak of the Mount Vesuvius volcano, seen from the streets of the archaeological site in Pompeii.

RUSSELL SHORTO is the author of “Amsterdam,” “The Island at the Center of the World” and, most recently, “Smalltime: A Story of My Family and the Mob.”
Growing Pains
Political revolution and mysticism charge a coming-of-age novel.

By REBECCA MAKKAI

“MAGYAR,” THE ORIGINAL HUNGARIAN TITLE OF GYÖRGY DRAGOMAN’S NOVEL “THE BONE FIRE,” MEANS NOT QUITE A BONFIRE BUT A PYRE, A PLACE WHERE ONE MIGHT BE BURNED ALIVE. FOR THE BOOK’S ENGLISH TRANSLATION, OUR WORD “BONFIRE” HAS BEEN BROKEN BACK DOWN TO ITS ETYMOLOGICAL ROOTS: THE LITERAL FIRES OF BONES (AND HERETICS AND SINFUL OBJECTS), FAMILIAR TO SPEAKERS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH. THAT A WORD WE NOW PERCEIVE AS BEING WOULD HAVE SUCH MACABRE ORIGINS IS A REMINDER THAT WE DON’T LIVE TERRIBLY FAR REMOVED FROM SUPERSTITION AND ATAVISM, EITHER HISTORICALLY OR PSYCHOLOGICALLY.

“The Bone Fire” is Dragoman’s fourth work of fiction and his second to be translated into English, after “The White King” (2005). It achieves, like its English title, a disconcerting juxtaposition of the mundane and the primeval. On one level, it’s a real-world coming-of-age story, in which a teenage librarian at her new school sees a family resemblance, having known Emma’s grandmother, like Dragoman’s, left Transylvania during the regime and the upheaval — adolescence, regime change, a new city, a new home — and it’s in such shaky times that foundational superstitions rise more easily to the surface, making the ordinary seem extraordinary and vice versa. The result is not so much a work of traditional magical realism as a 471-page object lesson in the uncanny.

THE BONE FIRE
By Gyorgy Dragoman
Translated by Ottilie Mulzet

Dragnoman depicts the prosaic (the destruction of an ant colony, the yield of a walnut tree, the eating of sardines) with meticulous pacing normally reserved for the magic, with a focus on details that other authors might gloss over: Emma’s dead grandfather, for one, may have been a Securitate informer — or perhaps his roles in the regime and the revolution were more complicated.

The new order does not mean an easy peace. Revolution follows revolution, and vengeance keeps coming not only for those who were complicit in the Securitate’s rein, but even for the family members left behind, like Emma’s grandmother. “The more dead people there are,” as Emma bitterly understands the calculus, “the more truth there will be.”

Everything about Emma’s life is liminal, upheaved — adolescence, regime change, a new city, a new home — and it’s in such shaky times that foundational superstitions rise more easily to the surface, making the ordinary seem extraordinary and vice versa. The result is not so much a work of traditional magical realism as a 471-page object lesson in the uncanny.

It’s in shaky times that foundational superstitions rise more easily to the surface.

Whether this novel will find the same success in the United States that it has found elsewhere depends perhaps on the extent to which American readers will surrender themselves, as Emma has, to the whims of a skilled but inscrutable abductor. Like the mysterious grandmother, Dragnoman seems to have our best interests at heart. This is a story, after all, in which dreams and phantasms are more plausible than the random brutality of the concrete world. To that end, his telling is not just magic, but enchantment.
Migration in Reverse
A call for Black Northerners to move to the South.

By TANISHA C. FORD

LEADING UP TO THE 2020 presidential election, Stacey Abrams, LaTosha Brown and other grass-roots activists successfully registered an unprecedented number of Black voters in Georgia who had been stymied in the past by voter-suppression tactics. Their work brought key victories to Democratic candidates in the state and demonstrated the political power of Southern Black women.

Georgia’s recent presidential and Senate elections are relevant to the argument of the New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow in “The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto.” There are two Black Americas, he says. One is the world of those who remained in the postslavery South.

The other is inhabited by those who fled the South for refuge in what he terms “destination cities” across the North and West during the Great Migration. But these cities are now broken, according to Blow, and the Great Migration has been a “stinging failure.” Blow, a son of Louisiana who recently moved back south — to Atlanta — says Black Americans must bridge this divide.

In what he believes would be “the most audacious power play by Black America in the history of the country,” Blow calls for African-Americans to reverse-migrate south, to collectively dismantle white supremacy by using their ancestral homeland as a political base. He imagines a New South where “our trauma history is not our total history.” That Black people have been returning south for at least the past 40 years, he adds, demonstrates that there is fertile ground for his idea in the region, intellectually and materially.

His is a familiar argument, revitalized by the South’s recent political developments. A genesis for Blow’s Black power proposition could have been the Black Belt nation thesis, proposed by Black Communists in the 1920s, or the agenda of the Republi- can Party of the 1960s. But Blow instead builds upon the political thought of the freethinking white hippies who moved to Vermont in the early 1970s with the intent of transforming the state’s conservative electoral politics. They succeeded, he says; young Black people today should follow their blueprint.

Seeing Georgia flip blue in the 2020 election became Blow’s “proof of concept,” and for him, one thing now seems clear: The path to lasting Black power is through the vote. Forming a “contiguous band” of Black voters across the South — Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina, in particular — would “upend America’s political calculus and exponentially increase” Black citizens’ influence in American politics. The weakness in Blow’s plan is that it requires faith in a political system that has consistently failed Black Americans at nearly every turn.

For Blow, however, the reality that Black Northerners have no recourse but to leave is a painful truth that crystallized for him one night in 2015 when he learned that his son, a student at Yale, had been stopped at gunpoint by a university police officer.

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW
A Black Power Manifesto
By Charles M. Blow

Stories like this fuel the book’s searing account of police violence, systemic racial disparities and social unrest in cities like New York, Minneapolis and Portland. This is where Blow is at his best.

As a historian, I wish he had spent more time exploring the nuances of the Black migration framework the book hinges upon. Blow’s claim that the Great Migration “hit the South like a bomb,” causing an intellectual and cultural brain drain that stunted its growth, rings hollow. It obscures the truth that the region was an incubator of radical political activism — often led by its most disenfranchised citizens — during the Great Migration and beyond. The New South to which Blow is now beckoning people to return was created largely by the Black visionaries and community builders who remained in the rural and urban South.

A strength of “The Devil You Know” is its affirmation of Black Americans as a formidable political bloc with whom the nation must reckon. The book is a helpful introduction for those seeking to make sense of fractious political debates about race and voting rights in the South, and the broken promises of American democracy.
In the Mango Orchard
A book about India’s rape culture ends up telling a bigger story.

By NINA BURLEIGH

IN 2012, a gang of men set upon and horrifically raped a female student on a bus in New Delhi. The crime made international news and provoked national protests that led to some changes in the laws. But Indian women with big dreams were on notice anyway. Seven years on, the Indian National Crime Records Bureau logged an average 88 rape charges a day.

Sonia Faleiro set out to examine India’s rape culture, but what she ended up revealing was something even more mundane and terrifying.

In 2014, photographs of two teenage girls hanging from a tree in a mango orchard landed in Indian headlines and on social media. The girls’ deaths were quickly assumed to have had something to do with sexual assault.

Faleiro, who was born in India and lives in London, drew more than six hours from the nearest airport to the village of Katra in Uttar Pradesh, an agricultural region of India that abuts Nepal, to find out what happened.

The story she weaves in exquisite language is as tragic and ugly as it is engrossing.

In life, the tiny girls hanging from the tree by their colorful scarves had been so inseparable that their families and tiny community elided their names and called them as one. Because of India’s rape laws, their names can’t be published, so Faleiro uses the pseudonyms Padma and Lalli.

“Padma Lalli,” as she calls them, were cousins, “alike as two grains of rice,” who spent all day in the fields before coming home to sleep in the compound of their extended family.

Their grandmother is “whispers and tears.” Their mother is not invited to go to the Hindu burial ceremony — per custom, she doesn’t even ask. She goes into a semi-catatonic state in the courtyard, only returning to herself a few years later, revived by a rumor the two girls have been reincarnated in a set of identical twins a few villages over.

“The Good Girls” is a puzzle with a surprise at the end. It’s a riveting, terrible tale, one all too common, but Faleiro’s gorgeous prose makes it bearable. She concludes, “What I had come to learn was this — that while the Delhi bus rape had shown just how deadly public places were for women, the story of Padma and Lalli revealed something more terrible still — that an Indian woman’s first challenge was surviving her own home.”

This feminist document looks straight at men’s twisted obsession with controlling female sexuality. From Saudi Arabia to Washington, D.C., where brutal enforcement is veiled only by wealth and privilege, the story remains the same.

NINA BURLEIGH is an author, journalist, lecturer and feminist cultural critic. Her next book is “Virus: Vaccinations, the CDC, and the Hijacking of America’s Response to the Pandemic.”

People gather at the mango tree where victims were found hanging in 2014.
Feeding Frenzy

A sweeping history of our sources of food, tracking the shift from agriculture to agribusiness.

By TED GENOWAYS

MARK BITTMAN’S LATEST book arrives at a momentous time. In the opening weeks of his term, President Biden has not only rejoined the Paris climate accord, announced new emissions reduction targets, and canceled permits to build the Keystone XL pipeline and drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but also made climate change an essential consideration in foreign policy and national security, directed federal agencies to invest in communities of color that are bearing the brunt of climate change, and promised to address the impact of this crisis on immigration and the economy.

But there is at least one area where Biden’s climate critics remain skeptical: his approach to reforming the food system. Tom Vilsack, the nominee to head the Department of Agriculture, is not just a holdover from the era of Barack Obama but a Clinton-style, pro-corporate moderate. Vilsack has promised to tap the U.S.D.A.’s Commodity Credit Corporation to encourage sustainable and climate-conscious growing methods, but he has said little about how he plans to convince farmers and ranchers in threadbare and dying rural communities that now is the time for big change.

So Bittman’s “Animal, Vegetable, Junk,” a comprehensive treatise on humanity’s relationship to food, matches our moment — evincing a necessary sense of urgency but also making no bones about the challenge before us. “You can’t talk about agriculture without talking about the environment,” he writes. “You can’t talk about animal welfare without talking about the welfare of food workers; and you can’t talk about food workers without talking about income inequality, racism and immigration.” Every issue touches another.

Just recognizing the awe-inspiring scale of the problem has persuaded most writers to take on some narrower slice and go deep. But Bittman clearly relishes the mad ambition of his undertaking (“perhaps too ambitious,” he says in a sly aside, “you’ll be the judge of that”), often buoying the reader across waves of information with the sheer momentum of his narrative. If it feels a bit breathless at first, Bittman settles into his story soon enough, delivering a clear and compelling compendium of modern agriculture.

In particular, his rendering of the early mechanization of the American farm is epic and engrossing. We feel swept up in the promise and possibility of all that new technology, so much so that the turn from agriculture to agribusiness, though we know it’s coming, still delivers a crushing blow. “It wasn’t an entirely cynical process, and some might even call it an innocent one,” Bittman writes, but “intended or not, the tragic result of the push to

standardized monoculture was that scientists and researchers became allied not with farmers but with bankers, equipment manufacturers, and sellers of seeds and chemicals.”

This is a keen insight — and it points to what may be Bittman’s greatest strength. He doesn’t lapse into the polemic of some policy wonks who too often want to make every error seem foreseeable or the product of some unforgivable flaw. His careful delineation of the difference between the ignorant and ruthlessly statist food policies of Joseph Stalin and the American-style “laissez-faire attitude toward unchecked corporatization,” for example, is extremely welcome. Likewise, he recognizes that the development of canned food and later fast food was an outgrowth of the increasing importance of women in the workplace after World War II and the large numbers of middle- and upper-class women who were, for the first time, “doing the majority of domestic labor themselves.” These nuances not only allow us to approach policy issues with more complexity, they also temper our moral certainty. By the time Bittman reaches his final section, simply titled “Change,” he has earned the right to damn the evident flaws of our system. He has the wisdom not to dwell on the shortsighted ambition that brought us here but rather to offer an equally even-handed assessment of several failed attempts to undo our errors. “Humans’ im-

You can’t talk about agriculture without talking about the environment.”
What's with all the female literary characters who can't stand themselves?

FOR GENERATIONS, Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary have loomed as the nonpareils of self-loathing literary heroines. For Anna, guilt over having abandoned her husband and child, paired with a jealous nature, compels her to destroy the love she shares with Count Vronsky — and head for the train tracks. For Emma, dumped by a conscience-free bachelor with whom she has an extra-marital affair — and unable to repay the debts she accrues on account of her shopping addiction — a spoonful of arsenic ultimately beckons.

Lately, however, Tolstoy and Flaubert have had stiff competition on the self-harm front, thanks to women novelists intent on exploring their female characters’ propensity to act out their unhappiness on their bodies. The 20-controversy protagonists of Sally Rooney’s two novels ask their lovers to hit them in bed. Frances, of “Conversations With Friends” (2017), a college student and aspiring poet, also scratches, pinches and gouges her skin. “I felt that I was a damaged person who deserved nothing,” she muses, describing her body as “garbage.” Marianne, in “Normal People” (2019), sabotages the love she shares with a sensitive classmate in favor of, first, a rich guy who mistreats her and, later, a creepy artist who takes nude pictures of her in degrading positions and does “gruesome” things to her during sex. This is all apparently because Marianne regards herself as “a bad person, corrupted, wrong,” and “all her efforts to be right, to have the right opinions, to say the right things... only disguise what is buried inside her, the evil part of herself.” Similarly, Edie, the self-described “office slut” in Raven Leilani’s debut, “Luster” (2020), encourages her married lover to shove and punch her, and sticks a samurai sword in her hand.

Meanwhile, in Ottessa Moshfegh’s “My Year of Rest and Relaxation” (2018), the unnamed young narrator abuses her body with sleeping pills and tranquilizers in an attempt to spend the bulk of her waking hours — asleep. “Besides sleeping, what do you want out of life?” her best friend asks her during a rare moment of sentience. “I chose to ignore her sarcasm,” the narrator reports. “I wanted to be an artist, but I had no talent, I told her.” Soon enough, she falls unconscious again.

And in Melissa Broder’s “Milk Fed” (2021), Rachel, an underling at a Los Angeles talent management agency, goes from starving herself to gorging on junk food. This transformation is set in motion when Rachel falls in love with a plus-size frozen yogurt server — and begins to release her fear of “spinning out into infinity, a nothing, a blob, so big I could be seen only in fragments, so unwieldy I could never be held, just an overwhelming void, just devastated, just dead.”

Finally, in the Swedish novel “Willful Disregard” (2016), by Lena Andersson, Ester, a brainy 30-ish writer who is not so much self-loathing as self-defeating, leaves her live-in boyfriend to pursue an arrogant older artist. Never mind that the artist makes it clear that his amorous interests lie elsewhere. Ester’s unanswered texts to him are likely to send “a chill of pained recognition” through any reader who has sacrificed self-respect in pursuit of some mirage of love or desirability.

But where Anna and Emma can be seen as prisoners of the oppressive gender roles of their respective eras and milieus, it’s far less clear why this latest batch of self-loathers, blessed with social and sexual freedom that would have been unimaginable to their forebears, are so racked with self-disgust and hellbent on hurting themselves.

Of course, the human condition is a trying business, regardless of one’s sociological data points. Yet it’s hard not to notice that these protagonists are all young, intelligent, attractive and, with the exception of Edie, white and well off. Readers might be forgiven for wondering what the matter is.

The motives that Rooney ascribes to her alter egos range from the ravages of “late capitalism” (Frances) to familial physical abuse and being a dork in high school (Marianne). Because none of these ideas are fully developed, none are entirely convincing. Broder posits Rachel’s parents as the cause of her eating disorder and cratered self-esteem. When she starves herself to the point of no longer menstruating, her mother insists, “Anorexics are much skinnier than you,” adding: “They look like concentration camp victims. They have to be hospitalized. You aren’t anorexic.”

In “My Year of Rest and Relaxation,” Moshfegh resists providing any explanation for her narrator’s desire to slumber away her life. Readers learn details of her complicity and noncommitment — and unable to repay the debts she accrues on account of her shopping addiction — a spoonful of arsenic ultimately beckons.

It’s as if the protagonists of these novels, faced with the choice between being their own worst enemies or men’s victims, have all chosen the former. And it’s not hard to imagine that the books’ legions of female readers might prefer it that way. For one thing, the stance renders those same men almost beside the point. “It turned out that a person could miss someone she had never met, except in her imagination,” Andersson writes of her hyper-aware heroine’s pre-emptively obsessive longing for a guy who neither knows her nor (later) wants her.

The attitude also makes for an interesting contrast with that struck by Judith Rossner’s best-selling 1975 novel, “Looking for Mr. Goodbar,” another book featuring female self-destruction. Loosely based on an actual murder case, the novel features a Bronx-reared schoolteacher named Theresa who is burdened with a limp, a complication of childhood polio. Like her contemporary fictional counterparts, Theresa regards herself as damaged and therefore unworthy not only of love but of life: “How could they not believe it would have been better for her to have died the first time she was ill instead of turning into whom she had?”

Theresa’s self-esteem issues become entangled with the sexual revolution, which provides justification for her fear of being tied down. Her attempts at self-protective noncommitment go increasingly awry, however, beginning with a humiliating affair with her married college professor. Later, Theresa ends up rejecting the kindly lawyer who wants to marry her in favor of anonymous sexual escapades with unvetted strangers she picks up in dive bars. As we learn in the novel’s first few pages, one of those strangers is a bona fide psychopath who bludgeons her to death.

But even without the foreshadowing of her violent demise, Theresa seems vulnerable and helpless in male company in a way that today’s fictional self-loathers do not — maybe because the latter all seem like experts on their own dysfunction and therefore in control even when out of control. Rossner depicts Theresa as “dizzy,” “frightened,” “upset” and “endangered,” yet unable to make sense of her own tears. What’s changed in 45 years? The mainstreaming of “therapy” — a subject played for laughs in both “Milk Fed” and “My Year of Rest and Relaxation” in the form of wacky and unprofessional shrinks whom the narrators outwit — may be the decisive factor.

In the final pages of “Looking for Mr. Goodbar,” Theresa contemplates seeking professional help. In a plot point almost unimaginable today, her life is cut short before she ever makes it onto the couch.

Lucinda Rosenfeld is the author of five novels, including “What She Saw...” and “Class.”
You Reap What You Sow

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Imbolo Mbue

its wildly unlikely but inspiring defeat.

I was wrong. What carries Mbue’s decade-stand, and the clear-cut, and what starts as a David-and-Goliath story slowly transforms into a nuanced exploration of self-interest, of what it means to want in the age of capitalism and colonialism — these machines of malicious, insatiable wanting.

Not long after the villagers of Kosawa kidnap Pexton’s representatives, a group of national soldiers show up asking questions about their whereabouts. It’s one of the narrative’s first — and least violent — confrontations between the state and the village, and an introduction to the myriad ways in which Kosawa’s residents must scheme in order to avoid the wrath of a government that would think nothing of wiping them out altogether. In the months and years that follow, the villagers try everything they can think of to get the oil company off their land. They meet with an American journalist, hoping that an article might change public (i.e., Western) sentiment in their favor; they travel to the capital to plead with the national government; they consider taking up arms.

In Kosawa, Mbue has created a place and a people alive with emotional range. There is no consensus among the villagers about what to do — whether to free their Pexton hostages after one falls severely ill; whether to lie to the soldiers; whether to take the oilmen’s money; whether to buy guns. The central moral and philosophical conflict of this novel boils down to one between those willing to trust Pexton to do what’s right, those who want to solicit the support of well-meaning American activists and those who see no difference between the two. “Someday, when you’re old, you’ll see how this world became amusing,” she asks, “why do humans fight when we are so close?”

Konga says. “No matter their pretenses, they all arrive here believing they have the power to take from us or give to us whatever will satisfy their endless wants.”

The story unfolds in the alternating points of view of individual villagers — the most fully realized of whom is Thula, a young girl who eventually becomes a guide for Kosawa’s resistance movement — and a chorus of children. At their best, the choral chapters have an impact similar to the collective voice of the seaborne brides in Julie Otsuka’s “The Buddha in the Attic,” a sense of hardship dispensed on masse yet suffered individually. But over

the course of 360 pages, the constant return to this collective voice become a bit cumbersome. Describing individuals within their group, the children use the awkward phrase “our age-mate” so often that eventually I couldn’t not notice it. At times, the individual and collective narrators seem to step on each other’s toes, covering the same events and recollections in a manner more repetitive than it is illuminating.

But these are minor quibbles, and easily overlooked given the novel’s incisive appeal to the reader’s empathy. Mbue is masterly at shading in the spaces where greed and guilt intermingle: the loneliness that follows a spouse’s early death, and on its heels the secret desire to be touched again; the wavering between whether to fight the Americans or take their money. Like Car-
By LAUREN FRANCIS-SHARMA

IT IS 1992 WHEN Naima Coster’s sophomore novel, “What’s Mine and Yours,” opens in the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina. Two men, smoking cigarettes outside an empty cafe, share the stories of their families. Though their chat seems little more than “15 minutes of smoking and standing together,” it is through this brief but candid exchange that we come to share two fathers’ dreams for four children who will be brought together by the impending misfortunes of these very men.

After a harrowing and gut-wrenching opening chapter, we discover Gee, a contemplative and grieving Black boy living with two steely women who have chosen to love him despite not loving each other. Gee masturbates compulsively — and the compulsion only worsens when he finds himself in the midst of a school busing dispute where he will be emotionally terrorized, not only by new classmates and their parents, but by his own mother, who pushes in the tensions that animate a life. But there’s living at life’s hub.

WHAT’S MINE AND YOURS
By Naima Coster

THE RICHES OF DAVIS

Private Transit
In North Carolina, fates change because of a busing initiative.

By BRANDON TAYLOR

MICHAEL LOWENTHAL’S NEW STORY collection, “Sex With Strangers,” is nimble in its particulars. The stories take place in gay clubs, on cruises, along beautiful beaches and in humble small-town kitchens. His characters are men and women, gay and straight, at home and abroad, beautiful and less beautiful than they once were. There’s an ease to his storytelling, too. Nothing feels strained, and the stories slow down and speed up until their climaxes arrive with a weirdly deadening ambivalence.

This is a collection about relationships, with ourselves and with others. The opening story, “Over Boy,” takes us into the familiar bump-and-grind of a gay club as a man, partying on his 29th birthday, grapples with the angst of growing older. In the long and mildly enervating “You Are Here,” a newly ordained priest, Father Tim, spends his first weeks on the job stationed on a cruise ship and finds himself at odds with his role in the clergy when he encounters an old flame while also trying to counsel a married woman through a queer awakening. There’s the off-kilter kitchen drama “Uncle Kent,” in which a woman worries her young daughter might be drawing the lascivious attention of the titular Kent, a family friend and father figure. Then we have a handful of lukewarm set-piece stories, including the tepid “Thieves,” which takes place at a resort as a middle-aged gay man in an open marriage thinks reproachful thoughts about his own body.

The stories are studded with memorable flashes of brilliant writing and stunning details. A scene of a character’s night out, for instance, offers this meditation on the nature of club culture: “The generations of club kids succeeded themselves as rapidly as lab mice.” There are also moments of genuine human connection, such as when Father Tim wrestles with his responsibility to a new charge: “Can he condemn her in a change he, too, has felt? She’s just described — better than he’s ever managed to — the centripetal force of opening himself to God, when suddenly he started living a life that didn’t fit.”

Lowenthal is a sensitive chronicler of the tensions that animate a life. But there’s also a mean streak running through the book. Sagging bodies and limp hair and bad skin populate the stories. Sometimes it’s to useful effect, as in “Over Boy,” when the narrator reflects: “For him, who had been a young beauty, beauty was youth, and as he drifted farther from his own ideal, he felt doomed.” But just as often, Lowenthal’s narrators linger on the burned skin and the “sauerkraut hair” and tacky makeup of the secondary and tertiary characters, as though a lack of remarkable beauty were a moral failing. I found myself thinking while reading these stories, “OK, he’s not hot, but he still has to get up in the morning.” And the women fare worse than the men, with descriptions like “the skin below her eyes looks like dough that’s risen and been punched down.”

In the early 2000s, there was something particularly fatalistic about the onset of one’s 30s for gay men. It seemed to pervade much of queer popular culture, that to turn 30 marked the sharp drop in one’s value on the meat market. Youth and beauty had a kind of moral force. This theme dominates the stories in “Sex With Strangers,” sometimes successfully, as in “Over Boy,” which seems keenly aware of the limitations of such a vision of the world. But more often than not, Lowenthal’s gaze seems to delight scornfully in his characters’ physical flaws.

Then there’s the back-story issue. These stories are absolutely bloated with flashbacks. Some of the stories are little more than underdeveloped vignettes swimming in oceans of backfill. Lowenthal spends pages establishing the starting conditions of his stories. It almost feels like an epiphany until you realize that what the reader has just learned has been known by the characters all along. It has the hollow thrill of close-up magic, and it’s frustrating because Lowenthal is clearly such a skilled and sensitive storyteller. One wishes he had used his considerable gifts to develop his conflicts rather than spend his time clearing his throat and setting them up.

Private Transit

In North Carolina, fates change because of a busing initiative.

By LAUREN FRANCIS-SHARMA

WHAT’S MINE AND YOURS
By Naima Coster

I n North Carolina, fates change because of a busing initiative. The Well Runs Dry and Book of the Little Axe.

Insignificant Others

Short stories about casual relationships and life’s tensions.

By BRANDON TAYLOR

what’s mine and yours” is a coming-of-age story — one that, in its foreground, examines the unraveling of marriages, complexities of siblinghood and reckonings with parents. Beneath it all lie tragedy and myriad loves that are tender and rich and fraught.

As the children fall in lust and love, grapple with angst and battle the tides of New South politics, Coster’s writing shines. Its witty and cutting dialogue is reminiscent of an early Gloria Naylor, and the dynamics of siblinghood are not unlike the works of Julia Alvarez. Sentences slice through the story’s in-depth and for love. It is in this space between them where Coster, who writes with unflinching power of redemption and the possibility of an awakening. There’s the off-kilter kitchen drama “Uncle Kent,” in which a woman worries her young daughter might be drawing the lascivious attention of the titular Kent, a family friend and father figure. Then we have a handful of lukewarm set-piece stories, including the tepid “Thieves,” which takes place at a resort as a middle-aged gay man in an open marriage thinks reproachful thoughts about his own body.

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by BRANDON TAYLOR

Michael Lowenthal
Ancient Souls
A spoiled girl and an enslaved boy share an immutable connection.

By NATALIE HAYNES

THE AMBER IN Laura Amy Schlitz’s confident, playful historical novel is Melisto, a girl born in fifth-century B.C. Athens to a rich father who adores her and a mother who does not. The clay is Rhaskos, a Thracian boy whose mother is enslaved and who therefore is enslaved himself. Once, when he was a small child, she sneaked him into a storeroom and opened a jar of honey for him to taste. “My time with my mother has been like that,” he notes, “golden and secret / and over too soon.” Although they live in very different worlds and haven’t met, Melisto and Rhaskos are soon connected in a way they don’t realize: Unbeknownst to Rhaskos, his mother has been sold to Melisto’s family and become her nurse.

Both children are powerless about their futures — Melisto because she is young and female, Rhaskos because he is enslaved. Melisto is chosen to leave home and serve the goddess Artemis; Rhaskos is sold without warning to a potter in Athens when his master, Menon, grows weary of him. They each experience terrifying physical violence: Melisto has clumps of her hair torn out and is pushed down a flight of stairs by her mother; Rhaskos has his nose broken twice by Menon.

Schlitz (“The Hired Girl”) is a Newbery Medal winner, and hops from one style to another with tremendous skill. The story is told partly in verse and partly in prose; the voice alternates between first person and third person, with the gods — Hermes in particular — stepping in as occasional choruses to the action.

The text is complemented by Julia Iredale’s delightful illustrations of imaginary archaeological finds: an ostracon (or pottery shard), a strigil (or scraper used to clean the body after exercise), some painted vases. They’re accompanied by museum exhibit cards, to give the reader information about what they depict.

Schlitz ably conveys children’s wordless emotions, like the feeling of not really wanting to do something destructive but not being able to stop yourself. When Melisto smashes her new terracotta doll because she is angry with her mother, her rage is palpable: “She was bad even to herself. She crooked her elbow over her face and sobbed.” Later, she finds herself the friend and protector of an irritating young girl, who wants to share a riddle with their other friends. Melisto refuses: “Elpis was a nuisance; Melisto had accepted that, but she wasn’t about to share her.”

The Acropolis acts as compass and inspiration to Rhaskos and Melisto, as they lead their separate lives, amid the noise and stench of Athens. Rhaskos even manages to befriend Socrates. Schlitz reveals what her keenest Platonic readers might already have guessed: Rhaskos is the slave with whom Socrates discusses geometry in Plato’s “Meno” dialogue.

When Melisto leaves the city to join the Artemis cult, the pace of the novel slows.

Then lightning strikes as she dances with a bear; she’s freed from sacrifice and her nurse sets in motion a chain of events that will tie together Melisto’s and Rhaskos’ story lines at last.

Curious typographical decisions mean that some Greek words are printed in the Greek alphabet, some names are transliterated (Akhilleus for Achilles) and others are given in their usual English form (Apollo). Oddly, one is shifted into Anglicized modern Greek: The town of Laurium becomes Lavrion.

But this shouldn’t deter Schlitz’s readers from time-traveling to ancient Athens and joining her adventure.

Hanging With the Mythbusters

Being mortal at Mount Olympus Junior High is easier if you get to sit at the cool kids’ table.

By GEORGE O’CONNOR

FAMILIES CAN BE a tricky business. Just ask Karen, the protagonist of “Oh My Gods!,” the new graphic novel by Stephanie Cooke, Insha Fitzpatrick and Juliana Moon. On the surface, Karen is pretty much a typical 13-year-old girl: She plays video games, texts constantly and is close to her mother. Speaking of which, Karen’s mom has just been asked to curate a gallery show, and to contribute a piece of artwork. The only downside is that, well,

GEORGE O’CONNOR’S many graphic novels include the Olympians series, a retelling of classic Greek myths in comics form.

... this dream job isn’t local. She’s going to have to relocate for a while, which means Karen will need to stay with her father.

“Oh you want me to go live with Zed?” Karen screams, clearly not thrilled. Karen’s dad, it turns out, hasn’t been a steady presence in her life. He visits only on holidays, and even then only weird ones no one has heard of, like Panathena. But Karen is a sweet kid, so she soon finds herself on a trans-Atlantic flight from New Jersey to Mount Olympus, in Greece.

If you think you know where this is heading, you’re not wrong. Karen, however, stays blissfully, improbably unaware. The clues are subtle at first — did that flight attendant have ram’s horns? — but credulity is thoroughly strained when Zed meets his daughter at the airport in a chariot pulled by winged horses. “Whatever you paid for these horse costumes is too much!”

If “Oh My Gods!” has a fault, it’s that its lead character ventures a bit too far into Amelia Bedelia obtuseness. It’s not until nearly halfway through the book that Karen realizes Zed is none other than Zeus, king of the gods, and she herself by extension is a demigoddess. The Mythbusters, by the way, turn out to be actual Olympian gods — immortality lasts a loooong time, so to alleviate boredom the gods choose to be reborn periodically as kids.

The rest of the plot hinges on which mythological creature is turning students to stone. In this era of Percy Jackson, most readers will be able to see the major twists from a mile away, but there are still lots of smaller details to parse out. And there is a lot to recommend in “Oh My Gods!” The dialogue and characterizations are spot on and snappy. Kudos also to Juliana Moon’s cartooning. Her artwork is immensely engaging — filled with expressive, appealing faces and a wide variety of body shapes and sizes.

While the mystery may be slight, readers will be happy to know the Mount Olympus Junior High world building hasn’t been for naught. On the last page, a lost student discovers a maze guarded by a bullheaded man in the school’s basement. I think we all know where that’s going, but when the journey is this fun, why knock it?

### COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fiction</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nonfiction</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>WEEKS ON LIST</strong></td>
<td><strong>WEEKS ON LIST</strong></td>
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<td><strong>THE FOUR WINDS</strong>, by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin’s) As dust storms roll during the Great Depression, Elsa must choose between saving the family and farm or heading West.</td>
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<td><strong>FIREFLY LANE</strong>, by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin’s Griffin) A friendship between two women in the Pacific Northwest endures for more than three decades.</td>
<td><strong>THINK AGAIN</strong>, by Adam Grant. (Viking) An examination of the cognitive skills of rethinking and unlearning that could be used to adapt to a rapidly changing world.</td>
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<td><strong>NOMANDLAND</strong>, by Jessica Bruder. (Norton) A look at an expanding low-cost labor pool, which largely consists of transient older adults, and what this might portend.</td>
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### Editors’ Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review

- **KLARA AND THE SUN**, by Kazuo Ishiguro. (Knopf, $28.) Klara, the solar-powered humanoid who narrates the Nobelist Ishiguro’s powerful eighth novel, is an “Artificial Friend,” purchased as a companion to a sickly teenage girl. Through the robot’s eyes, and haunting mechanical voice, we encounter a near future in which technology, ominously, has begun to render humans themselves obsolete.

- **GLADIUS: The World of the Roman Soldier**, by Guy de la Bédoyère. (University of Chicago, $30.) This comprehensive account about what it was like to be in the Roman military offers many surprises about the lives of ordinary soldiers 2,000 years ago, among them the fact of widespread literacy and record-keeping in the troops.

- **Landslide**, by Susan Conley. (Knopf, $26.95.) In this enveloping novel, a mother of teenage boys tries to find her footing in coastal Maine after her husband is injured in a fishing accident. Little cracks have sprouted in every inch of the fortification around this family’s life, and Conley shows their battle to keep vulnerability at bay.

- **CONSENT: A Memoir**, by Vanessa Springora. (Harper-Via/HarperCollins, $27.99.) When Springora was 14, she was seduced by a 50-year-old who was a celebrity in French publishing; she has triggered a cultural reckoning with this devastating memoir of the two years they spent together. This gleaming, teeming biography of the legendary director — undertaken with the blessing of Nicholson’s widow, Diane Sawyer, and fortified with interviews that turn the acknowledgments into a red carpet roll call — is nothing less than a midcentury fairy tale.

- **DRESS CODES: How the Laws of Fashion Made History**, by Richard Thompson Ford. (Simon & Schuster, $30.) Taking readers around the world from the 1200s to today, Ford embarks on an ambitious and comprehensive exploration of how fashion has been used by people both with and without money and power.

- **MIKE NICHOLS: A Life**, by Mark Harris. (Penguin Press, $35.) This gleaming, teeming biography of the legendary director — undertaken with the blessing of Nichols’s widow, Diane Sawyer, and fortified with interviews that turn the acknowledgments into a red carpet roll call — is nothing less than a midcentury fairy tale.

- **CONCRETE ROSE**, by Angie Thomas. (Balzer + Bray, $19.99.) This Y.A. novel, a prequel to the popular “The Hate U Give,” follows its 17-year-old hero as he learns he’s going to become a father, considers leaving his gang and envisions his family legacy.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: nytimes.com/books
Dive In
Like most authors, Heather McGhee had strong opinions about what her book’s cover should look like. This former president of Demos, a progressive think tank, was well aware that “The Sum of Us,” her exploration of the economics of racism, had the potential to be packaged in a dry, boring way that would appeal to a narrow audience.

So she created two Pinterest boards: one consisting of covers she liked, and the other of covers she did not like — jackets with primary colors and lots of text, loudly telegraphing, “This is going to make you smarter.” In a phone interview conducted shortly after she learned that her book had debuted at No. 3 on the hardcover nonfiction list, McGhee explained, “I wanted my cover to be an invitation. I wanted people to have an emotional response; for it to look more like a book of literary fiction than a book about the economy.”

Stories of individual Americans are what propelled McGhee to write “The Sum of Us,” so she was pleased to see humanity on her cover, which was created by the Random House senior designer Rachel Ake. In a painting by David McConachie, we see a white boy taking a flying leap into a swimming pool while, just below him, a Black girl grips a bright red ladder with one hand. The image seems to pose a question that speaks to McGhee’s subtitle: “What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together.”

McGhee was pleased with the result and has been “aglow” at the response to the book, which is the result of a three-year series of trips from her home in New York City to Maine, Mississippi, and California, among other states.

“I talked to hundreds of people and they all shared their America,” she said. “Each one thinks of their lives as a series of choices they made, but you can find all the doors that were open or closed because of decisions we’ve made as a country. The closer you get to the inside of any individual’s story, the more the collective is revealed — the more the policy is apparent.”

Above all, McGhee wanted to deliver a message of hope to readers. It’s a realistic, roll-up-your-sleeves note of optimism, and the feeling is there, front and center, beginning with the cover. “I tried to include stories of people who are living in the America we want for everyone,” McGhee said. “Even when the book tells a very hard truth about racism, I want people to see the world we might have.”

**Inside the List**

**ELISABETH EGAN**

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**PRINT/HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS**

**Fiction**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>WEEKS ON LIST</th>
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<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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<td>130</td>
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<td>WHERE THE CRADLE SINGS, by Leifeg Fitsome. (Putnam) This “sweeping love story” the author set in the 1920s in the Pacific Northwest.</td>
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<td>GREENLIGHTS, by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.</td>
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<td>WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS, by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann with Chris Moore. (Little, Brown) A collection of interviews with troops who fought overseas.</td>
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<td>CASTE, by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>51</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>THE SUM OF US, by Heather McGhee. (One World) The chair of the board of the racial justice organization Color of Change analyzes the impact of racism on the economy.</td>
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<td>FOUR HUNDRED SOULS, edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. (One World) A compendium featuring 90 writers covering 400 years of African-American history.</td>
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**Paperback Row / BY JENNIFRA KRAUSS**

**THE YELLOW BIRD SINGS, by Jennifer Rosner. (Flatiron, 304 pp., $16.99.) A 5-year-old music prodigy who must be quiet while hiding with her mother in a hayloft in World War II Poland, after the rest of their family has been murdered, takes comfort in the trill of a bird she grasps in her hands. Rosner’s novel, which our reviewer, Mary Beth Keane, called “exquisite” and “heartrending,” was a 2020 National Jewish Book Award finalist.**

**THE GIRL WITH THE LOUD VOICE, by Abi Daré. (Dutton, 400 pp., $17.) This coming-of-age story, narrated in pidgin by a “sassy, strong-willed” Nigerian girl who wants to be a teacher, opens with her father marrying off her to a polygamous, abusive taxi driver. Our reviewer, Tatsi Danagarambe, found Daré’s “brave, fresh voice,” which articulates “a resounding anger” toward Africa’s patriarchy, “unforgettable.”**

**THE DEPOSITIONS: New and Selected Essays on Being and Ceasing to Be, by Thomas Lynch. (Norton, 352 pp., $17.95.) Some of the finest, wryest and most stylish essays by the poet and funeral director appear here, where they “light up the dark details” of what our reviewer, Scott Simon, referred to as “the one demographic to which we will all belong.”**

**DIRT: Adventures in Lyon as a Chef in Training, Father, and Sleuth Looking for the Secret of French Cooking, by Bill Buford. (Vintage, 432 pp., $17.) Our reviewer, Lisa Abend, declared the New Yorker writer’s second food memoir “a delightful, highly idiosyncratic exploration” of how a dish is arrived at by discovering, as Buford puts it, “everything about it: the behavior of its ingredients, its history and a quality that some chefs think of as its soul.”**

**28 SUMMERS, by Elin Hilderbrand. (Back Bay, 448 pp., $17.99.) Back on Nantucket, “where Hilderbrand fans feel like locals even if they’ve never had the pleasure of visiting,” a dying schoolteacher asks her son to notify a man with whom, it turns out, she’s had a secret rendezvous every Labor Day weekend for almost three decades. Our reviewer, Elisabeth Egan, crowned this “swimming love story” the novelist’s “best ever.”**

**THE NIGHT WATCHMAN, by Louise Erdrich. (Harper Perennial, 464 pp., $18.) “High drama, low comedy, ghost stories, mystical visions, family and tribal lore . . . mix with political fervor,” according to our reviewer, Luis Alberto Urrea, in this “magisterial epic” inspired by the letters Erdrich’s grandfather sent to politicians in Washington in the 1950s to save his Native American tribe from termination.”**
## AUDIO MONTHLY BEST SELLERS

### Audio Fiction

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<th>#</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>THE FOUR WINDS</td>
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<td>A COURT OF SILVER FLAMES</td>
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<td>THE VISCONTI WHO LOVED ME</td>
<td>Julia Quinn</td>
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<td>THE SANATORIUM</td>
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<td>THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE</td>
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<td>Isabel Wilkerson</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>UNTAMED</td>
<td>Glennon Doyle</td>
<td>Random House Audio</td>
<td>19 hours</td>
<td>3 minutes</td>
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<td>EXTREME OWNERSHIP</td>
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<td>Trevor Noah</td>
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<td>SAPIENS</td>
<td>Yuval Noah Harari</td>
<td>Harper Audio</td>
<td>15 hours</td>
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Audio rankings are composed of sales in the United States of digital and physical audio products from the previous month. Sales of titles are statistically weighted to represent and accurately reflect all outlets proportionally nationwide. Free-trial or low-cost trial audiobook sales are not eligible for inclusion. Publisher credits for audiobooks are listed under the audiobook publisher name. ONLINE: For more lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.
“I was totally in favor of the death penalty until I witnessed Jesse Tafero’s execution,” writes McGarrahan, who watched Tafero die in 1990 as a young staff writer for The Miami Herald. In her article, she noted how the electric chair malfunctioned, with flames and smoke visible above Tafero’s head covering; soon after that, she quit journalism, worked in construction, then became a private investigator. She found herself drawn back to Tafero’s execution and the crime that led him there: a double murder at a highway rest area in February 1976. Had she witnessed the execution of an innocent man?

“Old murder cases are like coffins,” McGarrahan writes. “You have to be careful, opening them up.” This one is particularly puzzling. A state trooper and a visiting Canadian constable were shot at close range while checking on a Camaro full of sleeping people: Tafero, his girlfriend Sunny Jacobs and her two children, and their friend Walter Rhodes. There’s a good reason to believe each of the three is the murderer. Two truckers saw gunfire explode from the back seat, where Jacobs was. Tafero was apprehended with the murder weapon strapped to his hip. And Rhodes, who had gunshot residue on his hands, confessed — before he recanted, confessed again, recanted again, and so on.

Jacobs wound up being freed, writing a memoir and smoke visible above Tafero’s head covering; soon after that, she quit journalism, worked in construction, then became a private investigator. She found herself drawn back to Tafero’s execution and the crime that led him there: a double murder at a highway rest area in February 1976. Had she witnessed the execution of an innocent man?

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Jacobs wound up being freed, writing a memoir and participating in a play about her life titled “The Exonerated” (although she was not technically exonerated). She maintained her innocence, presenting herself as “a hippie peace-and-love vegetarian,” but as McGarrahan finds in her investigation, all of them were doing enormous amounts of cocaine and dealing even more. They were associated with the so-called Dixie Mafia; their circle included murderers, extortionists and one colorful jewel thief.

McGarrahan’s obsession with rooting out the truth in the case leads her to Florida, Ireland and Australia, where she tracks down any detail that might potentially help her know what happened. It’s not a triumphant story.

After all, she writes, “your gut instinct isn’t always right. Sooner or later, I have come to find out, everyone gets fooled.”

Confident Women
Swindlers, Grifters, and Shapeshifters of the Feminine Persuasion
By Tori Telfer

“There’s no point in denying it; the women in this book are extremely charming,” writes Telfer, an author and podcaster whose beat is women in crime. In her latest effort, Telfer profiles those whose misdeeds are more of the grifting than the murdering variety.

“Her victims almost never end up dead,” she writes. “Almost never!” (One of Telfer’s con artists most familiar to New York readers will be Sante Kimes, who started out as a poor kid with an “obsessive and pathological” relationship to money and ended up a murderer.)

Collected here are 13 tales, each around the length of a juicy podcast, about women whose relationship to truth and justice was, at best, a bit wobbly. Some are already well known — the slew of young women pretending to be Anastasia, the lost czarina, or the Fox sisters, whose hoaxes launched spiritualism into stratospheric popularity. Other stories feel newer, like that of Margaret Lydia Burton, a midcentury scammer whose antics sparked uproar in the polite world of cocker spaniel breeders. Their relationship to crime ranges from murderers like Kime, to victims like Bonny Lee Bakly, to more spectacular con artists like the 18th-century Frenchwoman Jeanne de Saint-Rémy, a rabid social climber who leveraged a corrupt cardinal’s desire into a scandal involving Marie Antoinette and the “most beautiful diamond necklace in the world.”

The farther away from our own time and place, of course, the easier it is to find charm and romance in these tales. Still, Telfer narrates them with great verve, grace and even humor. Whether or not we buy her assertion in the book’s introduction that we want to be like the confidence women she profiles (“doesn’t it sound sort of delicious?”), it can be hard to resist the allure of their stories.

Officer’s Daughter
A Memoir of Family and Forgiveness
By Elle Johnson

Johnson was 16 when her cousin Karen, the same age, was shot and killed during a botched robbery at the Burger King where she worked in the Bronx. Both girls’ fathers were Black men in law enforcement, Karen’s a homicide detective and Elle’s a parole officer. As the family gathered in their grief, Johnson overheard her father and the other men plotting revenge on those who had killed Karen. In the end, three teenage boys were convicted of their parts in the crime; 33 years later, Johnson finds herself pondering whether to write the court on the occasion of the last remaining defendant’s parole hearing.

“The Officer’s Daughter” is a slim, immensely moving book. Johnson, who writes for television (“cop shows and crime procedurals,” she tells us), skips back and forth from her teenage years to the present, telling her story in plain-spoken language and examining her own reactions to Karen’s murder from both perspectives. “If a good girl like Karen could be killed,” she recalls, “then anything could happen. There seemed to be no point in listening to your parents, or doing as you were told.” As an adult, she finds herself thinking about the decades the men have spent in prison: “I wondered what kind of men they had become behind bars. What kind of men could they become, except for prisoners?”

As Johnson contemplates asking the parole board to keep her cousin’s killer locked up, she finds herself remembering different events; on her mind most of all is her father. “He was controlling yet protective,” she writes, “and sometimes someone to be protected from.” Johnson ponders pain caused by the killer, her father, even herself, especially after losing the religious faith that once provided a framework. When you live in a family forever experiencing “the background buzz of lifelong mourning,” the only way to peace is to find a path to forgiveness.

Kate Tuttle is a freelance writer and editor.
Awkward encounters with Sally Rooney’s intense, lovelorn characters.
“Yankee history is rich and deep, with players so iconic their first or last name, or their nickname, is identification enough.”

– ALEC BALDWIN, from the introduction

More than 350 articles, profiles and essays, and over 200 vintage and current photographs, that capture every era of the most storied franchise in baseball history.

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