Tillie Olsen

By A. O. Scott

Tillie Olsen’s reputation rests principally on “Tell Me a Riddle,” a collection of three short stories and a novella published in 1961. It was her first book, but Olsen, who was born in 1912, had started writing many years before, and seems to belong, with respect to style and subject matter, as much to the Great Depression as to the Eisenhower Era or the ’60s. The four pieces in “Tell Me a Riddle” are lyrical bulletins of working-class family life, charged with emotional detail and delivered with an attention to the rhythms of consciousness more rigorous and powerful than most of what is called realism.

Continued on page 24
"A knockout of a novel...which we predict will be viewed as one of 2021's best."
—O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE

“This is a profound and moving novel.” —PEOPLE

“A gifted storyteller whose writing shines even in the darkest corners.” —THE WASHINGTON POST

“A breathtaking story of the unimaginable prices paid for a better life.” —ESQUIRE

“As moving as it is riveting...poised to be one of the most stirring page-turners of the year.”
—THE A.V. CLUB

“An exceptionally powerful and illuminating story about a Colombian family torn apart by war and migration.” —REESE WITHERSPOON

“A gorgeous, moving novel.” —NEW YORK POST

“A sweeping love story and tragic drama...An authentic vision of what the American Dream looks like in a nationalistic country.” —ELLE

“This is a novel our increasingly divided country wants and needs to read.” —R.O. KWON

REESE'S BOOK CLUB PICK
INDIE NEXT LIST PICK
AMAZON BEST OF THE MONTH

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SimonandSchuster.com
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On the cover: Tillie Olsen at the Radcliffe Institute in the early 1960s.
THE TEN YEAR WAR: OBAMACARE AND THE UNFINISHED CRUSADE FOR UNIVERSAL COVERAGE, by Jonathan Cohn. (St. Martin’s, $29.99.) A health reporter and policy expert, Cohn takes readers behind the scenes of the struggle to pass and preserve the Affordable Care Act.

RESCUING THE PLANET: PROTECTING HALF THE LAND TO HEAL THE EARTH, by Tony Hiss. (Knopf, $28.) Traveling across North America to illustrate how the planet is a complex system, Hiss (a former staff writer for The New Yorker) calls for protecting 50 percent of the Earth’s land by 2050 to counter climate change.

VIBRATE HIGHER: A RAP STORY, by Talib Kweli. (MCD/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $27.) Growing up in Brooklyn with hip-hop as a constant soundtrack, Kweli embraced the music’s political potential and became a star in his own right, collaborating with rappers from Mos Def to Kendrick Lamar.


WHAT WE’RE READING

There are words we say a lot when we talk about the queer community: accountability, justice, harm reduction, intersectionality. I can convincingly use each of these words in a sentence, but press me on the brass tacks of how to apply these concepts? I become less eloquent. Kai Cheng Thom is only 30, but she’s been enmeshed in the queer scene long enough to understand the value of lofty ideas and the complexities of trying to implement them. In her collection of essays and poems, I HOPE WE CHOOSE LOVE, Thom doesn’t avoid difficult topics like partner violence, consent, suicide and (OK, fine, yes) “cancel culture.” Her prose easily floats between humor and pain, and her pragmatic but gentle approach to complicated topics sets her apart from some of her more dogmatic peers. Thom calls her book “a trans girl’s notes from the end of the world,” but her book made me wonder if we’re actually just in the painful process of a new world being born.

—SHANE O’NEILL, SENIOR VIDEO EDITOR
“AN OUTSTANDING HISTORICAL SERIES … 
A HEROINE TO CHERISH.”
—New York Times Book Review

“Winspear is writing at the top of her game.”
—Publishers Weekly, starred review

“Fast-paced.”
—Booklist, starred review

October, 1941.
As Europe buckles under Nazi occupation, Maisie Dobbs investigates a possible murder that threatens devastating repercussions for Britain’s war efforts.

AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK
“Join me in cooking this new, improvisational way, without recipes.” —Sam Sifton

The first cookbook from New York Times Cooking
No recipes. You don’t need them.

Self-Created Disasters

TO THE EDITOR:
Thank you, Lucinda Rosenfeld, for highlighting in “Heroines of Self-Hate” (March 14) a trend in the development of female characters that aggravates me regularly in contemporary literature.

Where have the Becky Sharps and Undine Spraggss gone? In their place, we have woman after woman who is her own worst enemy. Usually, these women are white and perhaps white women of a certain class no longer experience enough external barriers to self-realization.

The self-created disaster is a tidy solution to the absence of any more meaningful conflict. Though Rosenfeld’s piece focuses on writing by women, I see this continually in fiction from male writers as well, where I call it the “cup size + emotional damage” approach to character development; in these cases, however, I ascribe it to pure laziness.

ELIZABETH SYLVIA
MATTAPOISET, MASS.

Risking Business

TO THE EDITOR:
Thank you, Emily Mortimer, for the delightful perspective on “Lolita” in your essay, “Witness for the Defense” (March 7).

It saddens me to wonder whether nowadays an author would write and a publisher publish such a book. As I think about it and other works like the creative tour de force “Infinite Jest,” part of what separates them from the prosaic and anodyne is the risk the authors take by challenging and perhaps offending us; by making us uncomfortable; by giving voice to thoughts and ideas we may wish remained silent.

Yet this is what gives depth and meaning to art. I fear the zeitgeist represses its expression.

JAY MARKOWITZ
POUND RIDGE, N.Y.

Letters

In Service

TO THE EDITOR:
In his review of Rosa Brooks’s “Tangled Up in Blue” and Justin Fenton’s “We Own This City” (March 14), Maurice Chammah suggests that the desire of many ordinary beat cops to move from patrol duty to “tactical” — the work of SWAT teams and specialized units — is the result of boredom and dreams of “shoot-outs and high-risk situations.”

Perhaps. But Brooks’s “Tangled Up In Blue” suggests a more nuanced explanation, namely that the real-life experience of policing doesn’t remotely approach the Hollywood version. Brooks describes the many complex and intractable social problems that police officers deal with day to day — the effects of “poverty, addiction and violence,” in Chammah’s words — and the cynicism and fatigue that that experience can give rise to.

A police chief I worked with years ago put it best: “Policing is not about adventure; it’s about service.” As a lawyer who has represented victims of police misconduct for more than a quarter century, my conclusion is that people who go into policing, an honorable profession, need to better understand what it’s all about before signing up. And police agencies need to sort for folks who are ready to do the difficult and thankless work of “service.” When that happens, I will have fewer cases to bring.

ANDREW G. CELLI JR.
NEW YORK

Same Odes

TO THE EDITOR:
In his engaging review of Annalee Newitz’s “Four Lost Cities,” Russell Shorto notes that a woman living in a Turkish city 9,000 years ago replastered her walls, swept and decorated her home with art “much like us,” but was unlike us in burying ancestors beneath her bed and keeping the skulls of deceased loved ones in niches in the walls.

But we also keep ancestors and people we loved in our homes — framed in photographs sitting by our beds and hanging on our walls. Often things others do that seem very different from what we do, are really different ways of doing the same thing.

DEBORAH TANNEN
WASHINGTON

BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM
From the #1 New York Times Bestselling Author

SHE LIVES. AGAIN.

“One of his best.”
— Booklist (Starred Review)

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEAN
KOONTZ

THE
OTHER
EMILY

Now Available
Amazon.com/TheOtherEmily

amazon publishing
Tammy Duckworth

The Illinois senator, whose new memoir is "Every Day Is a Gift," read widely as a child, especially 'anything that had kid detectives solving mysteries.'

What are your favorite childhood books and authors?

I was a voracious reader as a child. I loved the Nancy Drew books, fantasies or a mystery. I read everything except for horror.

What kind of reader were you as a child?

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Tell us about the last great book you read.

When I picked up "Born a Crime," by Trevor Noah, I figured it would be funny and engaging, since he's a comedian. What I didn't expect was how much it would teach me about South African history. I learned so much more about apartheid by reading his personal stories of living through it. And his experience spanned both the Black and white communities, giving him a deeper perspective on the country. It's such a human book, and a great read.

What's the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?

I recently finished "The History of Ancient Egypt," by Bob Brier, and learned the steps to mummifying human remains. I haven't found a use for that yet, but you never know.

What books do you think best capture your own political principles?

I really enjoyed "Team of Rivals," by Doris Kearns Goodwin. I'm not sure it captures my political principles, but I do like the idea of bringing together people from different perspectives to serve the same cause.

What are the best books you've read about the Iraq war?

"The War I Always Wanted," by Brandon Friedman captured the coming of age for my generation of service members. It spoke to the illusions I had in the first half of my military career about what war was, versus the reality of war once I experienced it.

What genres do you like best, and which do you avoid?

I love Doris Kearns Goodwin's biographies. She goes deep into the relationships between people in power, which we don't think enough about. In "The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys," she explored how personal relationships affected policies, which in turn affected the whole nation. And in "Team of Rivals," she wrote about how Lincoln used relationships — human interaction — for his own ends.

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The diary of Anne Frank, Jane Austen's works, "Charlotte's Web" all come to mind. My girls are still young; Abigail is just learning to read, and Maile won't start for a few years, so we're at the beginning of their journey. I want them to be widely read, so I try to make sure there's range in their reading materials.

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Get Busy

Make prep time the new playtime.
Explore curated collections like Recipes to Cook With Your Kids.

BOOM CHICKA BOOM CHICKA WAH WAH. A-BOOM CHICKA BOOM CHICKA WAH — It's time for sex!

Wait, where are you going? Get back here.

Admittedly, 2020 wasn't the sexiest year on record. As I write, there are ongoing studies by the National Institute of Mental Health and various health organizations trying to determine what the pandemic has done to our sexuality. There are studies that find married couples having more sex (because really what else do they have to do?); and single people having way less, abandoning their quest for la petite mort to avoid la grande one. The public service messages want to sound sex-positive in the midst of uncertainty, but somehow I didn't find myself cheered by the oft-quoted “You are your safest sex partner” — and even after that, we were admonished to wash our hands.

But slowly we are being vaccinated, we are being freed; and soon Thanatos and Eros may not be so scarily intertwined. Here's hoping.

THE 80/80 MARRIAGE: A New Model for a Happier, Stronger Relationship (Penguin Life, 240 pp., $26) is extremely well intentioned. Nate and Kaley Klemp, an executive coaching duo, found their marriage was foundering because of a very modern problem: the quest for “fairness.” With the idea that everything needs to be 50/50, life becomes a constant negotiation: If I’m stacking the dishes in the dishwasher, why are you playing Civilization and not reading to the kids? The bickering was endless — and was not even an improvement on what they deemed the 80/20 model of “traditional” married couples, where the women generally had most of the responsibilities for the home. At least, the Klemps theorized, there was comfort in clearly defined gender roles. No one argued over who stacked the dishes.

So Nate and Kaley came up with the concept of the 80/80 partnership, you don’t just say, “I’m not in the mood.” You say, “I’m not in the mood now, but how about tomorrow?” This not only softens the sting of rejection; it quells anxiety and keeps the affection bubbling. (The caveat being, put out, and do it with joy.)

I love the idea of making generosity the focus of a book, and a relationship. Then I think about actual human beings. The book has a chapter devoted to what you do when you have a spouse who is unwilling to change from being a taker to being a giver. Let’s just say that I think that’s the first chapter most readers will turn to.

In: SEX POINTS: Reclaim Your Sex Life With the Revolutionary Multi-Point System (Hachette Go, 320 pp., $28), Bat Sheva Marcus has come up with a way to visualize your sex life as a circle with four quadrants — desire, pain, arousal and orgasm — and how many points you gain or lose when taking the mother of all quizzes determines where you are in your satisfaction levels. You might be anywhere from 160 (swinging from the chandeliers) to well below 100 (hanging by a thread). It’s like Sudoku for shitting.

The book then tackles the most common problems that keep us from having great sex; Marcus believes in doing whatever it takes to surmount a sexual obstacle. What’s refreshing about “Sex Points” is that it starts with the assumption that bad sex isn’t always some deep-seated psychological problem — that, for both men and women, it is often physical, and it’s the physical problem left unsolved that leads to anxiety, stress and avoidance.

“I’ve had patients quote their therapist’s telling them that their vaginal pain was their vagina’s way of telling them that they weren’t ready to have sex.” Marcus writes. “Oh, really? Or maybe it was actually their vagina telling them that it was actually time to find a new therapist.”

THE GREAT SEX RESCUE: The Lies You’ve Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended (Baker Books, 272 pp., $16.99) is brought to you by the people who run the popular Christian marriage blog To Love, Honor and Vacuum, and the author, Sheila Wray Gregoire, begins with this premise: “What if our evangelical treatment for sex issues make things worse?”

“The Great Sex Rescue” explores Christian teachings on sex against a backdrop of academic research on evangelism and sexuality. A chapter entitled “Your Spouse Is Not Your Methadone” explores how one idea central to Christian sex education — that men must have to control their lust and women are sexual gatekeepers — has been disastrous for many couples. Traditionally women are blamed for men’s porn addiction. Gregoire puts the blame squarely with the addict.

I don’t want to leave the impression that Gregoire writes about sex in a punitive fashion, though. Far from it. There is a lot of joy in these pages. In fact, I’d like to suggest she retitle her book: “Oh God, Oh God, Oh God.”

JUDITH NEWMAN is the author of “To Siri With Love: A Mother, Her Autistic Son and the Kindness of Machines.”
House of Horrors
In this harrowing novel, seven siblings are held captive by their parents.

By FLYNN BERRY

A TEENAGE GIRL breaks a bedroom window and drops to the ground, then starts to run. For days, she has practiced what she will say when she finds help: “My name is Alexandra Gracie, and I am 15 years old. I need you to ring the police.”

Lex must have a long trek ahead of her; surely the house where her parents have kept the girl and her six siblings hostage is isolated and remote. But within seconds, Lex is running past other homes. Her neighbors were just down the road, almost in earshot, the whole time our narrator was chained to her bed.

“I screamed, trying to summon them from their living rooms, from their sofas, from the evening news,” she recalls. “Festive lights hung from trees and over front doors, welcoming their inhabitants, and I thought, stupidly: Christmas.”

“Girl A,” Abigail Dean’s debut novel, shares a kinship with Emma Donoghue’s “Room” and Alice Sebold’s “The Lovely Bones” in its harrowing portrayal of trauma. Like those titles, “Girl A” is certain to rouse strong emotions. It is a haunting, powerful book, the mystery at its heart not who committed a crime, but how to carry on with life in its aftermath.

By the opening chapter, the crime’s perpetrators, Lex’s father and mother, are, respectively, shot dead in a kitchen and about to be buried in an unmarked prison grave. Their children have wildly different fortunes. Each chapter is named for one of them, a canny structure that gradually moves the spotlight of Lex’s attention across her family. The siblings are sharply drawn and distinct, their ties weighted with rivalry, guilt and betrayal, the novel operating partly as a meditation on the vagaries of birth order.

After their escape, the siblings are placed in different adoptive homes, where they receive varying levels of love and support. The luckiest must be Noah, the baby, raised by affectionate parents with no memory of his past. The position of unluckiest is hotly contested. Perhaps it is Ethan, the eldest, who capitalizes on his family’s fame as a serial killer, or Delilah, who seems suspiciously healed, having “surpassed Survivorhood and reached Transcendence.”

Or is the unluckiest Lex herself, Girl A, the one who escaped? Now a lawyer based in New York, Lex is good at her job, has friends and lovers, can afford spritzes and weddings abroad, but also seems utterly exhausted by the effort of resilience. As a narrator, Lex never tries to win over her audience, or to present herself as plucky or heroic. Her tone is controlled and understated; the flatness is effective but highly unsettling.

Early on in their captivity, the children watch their parents cover the windows and remove the clocks from the house, “old disorientation techniques.” Lex finds that her sense of time remains unstable. As short chapters swing between the past and present, you long for more forward movement — for the heavy weather to break. But that frustration seems deliberate on Dean’s part, mirroring Lex’s own rage to escape her past. And the suppressed tension acts like the winding back of a slingshot, which about halfway through the novel suddenly rockets forward, propelling the story through scenes of genuine fear to its moving, pitch-perfect ending.

I kept wanting to read “Girl A” as a fairy tale or parable, to cauterize some of the suffering in its pages, but Dean resists that impulse at every turn, always rooting Lex’s story in the real. Dean looks squarely at the sort of parents who humiliate their children, or hit them, or deny them food, and the consequences of such monstrousness. In one heartbreaking scene, Lex recalls how during her first holiday in her adoptive home, she “ate Christmas,” waking in the night and stealing down to the dark kitchen to devour the cheeseboard, the gingerbread men, the fruitcake. Faced with the crumbs, her adoptive mother loses her patience. As in life, even the heroes in this novel have their breaking points.

Except, perhaps, for Lex’s adoptive father, who is good as gold, and whose compassion illuminates the novel. Lying on a trampoline beside his adult daughter, he recalls dreams in which he meets her as a child: “You were tiny. Just 6 or 7. Long before I could have known you. They started off as nice dreams, really. But then there would always be the moment when you would have to go. It was like I knew all along that it was coming. And somehow — somehow I knew what you would have to go back to.”

The reader shares his aching sense of powerlessness. Dean tells this story with such nuance and humanity, you’re desperate to step into its pages. To help.

As adults, Lex and her sister Evie imagine an alternate childhood for themselves, in a house on a beach, filled with books. Evie asks:

“Do they know how lucky they are?”
“No. I don’t think so.”
“I wish I could tell them.”
“No. Let them be.”

The suppressed tension acts like the winding back of a slingshot.
Forging an Empire
How Queen Elizabeth I and Francis Drake together made England a global power.

By Laurence Bergreen

Francis Drake, Elizabeth I, and the Perilous

In Search of a Kingdom

Francis Drake, Elizabeth I, and the Perilous Birth of the British Empire
By Laurence Bergreen


England is a nation divided. In one camp, nationalists decry the diabolical threat to their freedom posed by dastardly Continentalists, instead throwing their hopes on a shadow empire of boundless trading opportunities. In the other, pro-Europeans bitterly protest that their country is making a cataclysmic mistake and bid their time. Sound familiar? Just kidding. It’s not Boris Johnson’s Brexit Britain but the England of the late 16th century, the subject of “In Search of a Kingdom.”

In Laurence Bergreen’s colorful assessment, an unlikely alliance between Queen Elizabeth I and Sir Francis Drake empowered English Protestants to see off Continental Catholics and stake out the beginnings of the British Empire. Drake, a flame-bearded firebrand who resembled a cross between Errol Flynn and Yosemite Sam, has a peculiar status in English history. On the plus side, he was a superlative navigator who helped defeat the Spanish Armada. In the debit column, he had an incurable taste in the mouth.

In Drake’s own time there was no British Empire, and no Britain (something to watch again). In England there was a shaky national church, which Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII, had made himself head of, splitting the country in two. The papist powers in Europe considered England a backwater ruled by a heretical monarch — justification enough for the governing Protestant clique to knock off Spain.

Bergreen does not make the link to modern-day Britain, but can it be coincidental that “Brexit” echoes “privateer,” the old term for a state-licensed sea raider?

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Rather, Bergreen appears to lean to the contrary. In England there was a state aligned with protocol. Yet to a scrappy island nation that was spoiling to stick it to the overweening Spanish Empire, a dose of “yah-boo-sucks” went a long way. Wrap it in a flag, and it ran and ran — and still does.

The Elizabeth-Drake combination is fascinating, but perhaps unavoidably it results in a patchy telling. Events at sea and on land are riveting, but perhaps unavoidably it results in a patchy telling. Events at sea and court unfold separately, with few actual interactions between queen and captain. Both make sporadic appearances in the second half, an account of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, to which Drake’s key contribution was a wildly successful pre-emptive strike on the enemy’s preparations at Cádiz. There are oddities, too. The Golden Hind was named after the whole of a female red deer, not its rear legs. Galicia is not due south of London. Flurries of repetitions and recapitulations trip up the narrative. After being sent back once more into the thick of an apparently concluded story line, for this reader it felt like déjà vu all over again. This is a shame, as Drake’s story is both dramatic and timely. His global joy ride extracting the greatest possible wealth at the least possible cost. And what wealth. Golden indeed, Drake’s galleon disgorged the century’s biggest haul of precious metal; Elizabeth’s own share exceeded the crown’s annual income. Rewards followed: the knighthood, coat of arms, country mansion, estates, marriage to an heiress and, most important, favorite status at court. Full acceptance never came, and neither in his lifetime did recognition of his spectacular but illegal circumnavigation. Elizabeth still hoped to avoid outright conflict with Spain and put about the barfaced lie that he had limped home home-handed.

Bergreen, who has written well-regarded biographies of Columbus and Magellan, proposes the haul as the golden counterweight that tipped the balance of power in Europe. This is leaning heavily on the scales; the financial upside for England was greater than the downside for Spain. Yet psychologically, the voyage unquestionably electrified both. It emboldened England to project power at sea and conceive a global trading empire. Conversely, it humiliated the Spanish, to whom the man they called El Drake — the dragon — became the stuff of legend, credited with dialectical powers and, like a Protestant Saladin, admired for gallantry to his foes.

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A Case Against Fatalism

In these essays, art is not a tool of political power, but a power itself.

**By JERALD WALKER**

**JESSE MCCARTHY WELCOMES** everyone to read “Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?”, but he’s expressly keen to reach “the younger generations struggling right now to find their footing in a deeply troubled world.” Some of that potential readership came of age in the period bookended by the police killings of Michael Brown, in 2014, and Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, in 2020 — the same period during which McCarthy wrote the essays in this stunning debut collection. For African-Americans in particular, these were years that yielded much about which to despair, and no doubt much despairing occurred, and does still. The risk of succumbing to that despair is real; but doing so would be at odds with the Black tradition. The Black tradition, McCarthy understands, is resistance.

Its most visible form perhaps is social and political activism — the Black Lives Matter movement, as a recent example, arose in direct response to the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin. But, as McCarthy illustrates, Black resistance just as often happens in the arts, the church, the academy, the streets. All are required. What the author — an assistant professor of English and African-American studies at Harvard — mainly hopes to convey is “the basic premise that nothing is outside of our purview, that there are no limits to the ideas, realms of knowledge, creative traditions or political histories that we can lay claim to and incorporate.” Further, he stresses that “the knowledge of the accumulated genius of our literary, intellectual, political and religious traditions is crucial to determining a course not only through the present crisis, but through those still to come.”

“Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?” is a representative sample of that genius. McCarthy’s analyses and observations are masterfully articulated, as are his dissents — for instance his convincingly explained, personal decision to resist the trend of capitalizing “Black” in reference to the community to which he happens to belong, in part because of the precedent set by Toni Morrison.

McCarthy’s essays are richly varied, and one surmises the abundant intersec-

JERAD WALKER is a creative writing professor at Emerson College. His most recent book, “How to Make a Slave and Other Essays,” was a finalist for the National Book Award.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY NINA SPARLING

Jesse McCarthy

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It is not enough to diagnose social ills; one must emphasize our resourcefulness in overcoming them.
The Dead Can’t Lie
Stephen King’s latest novel is part detective tale, part thriller, with a horror story filling in the seams.

By CHARLES YU

IN HIS CRAFT MEMOIR, “On Writing,” Stephen King describes a moment in his process when he asks himself the “Big Questions.” The biggest of which are: “Is this story coherent? And if it is, what will turn coherence into a song?”

You can feel King reaching for some Big Questions in his most recent novel, “Later.” Told from the perspective of Jamie Conklin, the narrative shuttles between the immediacy of now and the hindsight of “later” to tell a kind of coming-of-age-as-mystery story, an exploration of innocence and what’s on the other side of childhood.

The only child of a literary agent named Tia Conklin, 8-year-old Jamie is a perceptive kid. Unusually so. He can see dead people. If the premise sounds familiar, don’t worry — the novel assures us that his ability is “not like in that movie with Bruce Willis.” For one thing, unlike the boy in “The Sixth Sense,” Jamie can see the deceased for only a short time after their deaths (a “week or so”). And most relevant for this story: The dead can’t lie. If Jamie asks a question, the departed have no choice but to answer with the truth.

Jamie’s gift (or curse) is exploited by adults, including his mother, who uses it to extract the text of the last unpublished novel written by her recently deceased star client, Regis Thomas, an understandable act of desperation by a single parent on the verge of financial ruin. When Tia’s onetime girlfriend, a dirty cop by the name of Liz Willis, sees that Jamie’s ability is for real, she uses it to her own career advantage, exposing Jamie to a host of dangers that will lead to dire consequences for both of them. The result is something of a genre hybrid: part detective tale, part thriller, with a horror story filling in the seams.

The horrors are many. There are hints of evil from another dimension, fractured his skull. That was a lot worse. Then Uncle Harry, troublesome Uncle Harry, still not 50 years old, tripped in the Bayonne care facility and fractured his skull. That was a lot worse. “Mom talked to the lawyer who helped her with book contracts (and took a healthy bite of our agency fee for his trouble). He recommended another lawyer who specialized in liability and negligence suits. That lawyer said we had a good case, and maybe we did, but before the case got anywhere near a courtroom, the Bayonne facility declared bankruptcy.”

Suprise medical bills, shady lawyers, back taxes — here are the true horrors of life. For Tia, who works in publishing, it’s hard enough trying to make a steady living.

On top of all that are economic precarity and downward mobility, being one unplanned health emergency from disaster: “First, Mom’s wisdom teeth went to hell and got infected. She had to have them all pulled. That was bad. Then Uncle Harry, troublesome Uncle Harry, still not 50 years old, tripped in the Bayonne care facility and fractured his skull. That was a lot worse. “Mom talked to the lawyer who helped her with book contracts (and took a healthy bite of our agency fee for his trouble). He recommended another lawyer who specialized in liability and negligence suits. That lawyer said we had a good case, and maybe we did, but before the case got anywhere near a courtroom, the Bayonne facility declared bankruptcy.”

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The horrors are many. There are hints of evil from another dimension, things from “outside the world” and “outside of time.” But mostly the horrors are familiar. Plain old human cruelty. The loss of loved ones to disease or old age, Alzheimer’s. Also, less morbid though no less heavy: the loss of innocence. Growing up too fast. The unexplainable, the incomprehensible in our everyday lives. (Another horror for Jamie: people calling him “Champ” even after he’s asked them to stop.)

On top of all that are economic precarity and downward mobility, being one unplanned health emergency from disaster: “First, Mom’s wisdom teeth went to hell and got infected. She had to have them all pulled. That was bad. Then Uncle Harry, troublesome Uncle Harry, still not 50 years old, tripped in the Bayonne care facility and fractured his skull. That was a lot worse. “Mom talked to the lawyer who helped her with book contracts (and took a healthy bite of our agency fee for his trouble). He recommended another lawyer who specialized in liability and negligence suits. That lawyer said we had a good case, and maybe we did, but before the case got anywhere near a courtroom, the Bayonne facility declared bankruptcy.”

Suprise medical bills, shady lawyers, back taxes — here are the true horrors of life. For Tia, who works in publishing, it’s hard enough trying to make a steady living.

From all of this, King weaves a story of adolescence with a sweetness at its heart — the touching and genuine relationship between Jamie and Tia. Therein lies the book’s strength. King captures in dialogue and description a sense of closeness, the specialness of those key years between childhood and teens, when your mom can be not just your parent but also your best friend and hero.

But this strength is also a liability. Despite its early assurance to the contrary, “Later” is like that movie with Bruce Willis. Beyond the superficial similarities (sensitive kid, single mother, talking to dead people), the emotional core of King’s story — in particular, the parent-child relationship at its center — is also reminiscent of M. Night Shyamalan’s. Whereas the movie evokes depth of feeling through stillness and restraint, King’s novel is more effusive, stating things that could have remained unsaid. And while the earnestness is not necessarily unwelcome, especially given our young narrator, it has the effect of diluting the emotional power of that central relationship.

On a more granular level, King’s sentences snap into each other like Lego bricks, standardized, expertly molded pieces engineered to fit together perfectly. This is not necessarily a complaint; the prose reads easily and enjoyably. To continue the analogy, it’s a bit like seeing an accurate-to-scale roller coaster made entirely of Legos. When you step back, it’s impressive to see what he has built, even if one can’t help wondering whether it would be better if the pieces weren’t quite so fungible. And on further inspection, one sees the places where the rendering only approximates reality, where curves become right angles and true diagonals don’t exist. There’s a trade-off: more coherence, perhaps, but at the expense of making it sing.

But maybe the fungibility of the pieces is the very quality that makes them work. “Later” is yet another example of King’s talent in building stories out of the materials of his choosing, and like so many of his creations, it’s remarkable how well the thing holds together. The pace and ease of reading, the ratio of familiar to new. A roller coaster made of Legos is still a roller coaster, and even if I’ve been on this ride before it doesn’t make it any less fun.
An Accident in the Laguna

In Donna Leon’s mysteries, the setting — Venice — is the most important character of all.

By MARILYN STASIO

THE CITY OF VENICE is such a beguiling presence in Donna Leon’s mysteries, it can eclipse the serious crimes that drive her modern-day plots. Over the course of 30 novels featuring her compassionate police detective, Commissario Guido Brunetti, the American-born author has seized on fundamental Venetian plagues like government corruption, illegal immigration and badly behaved tourists. Which is not to overlook such scourges as bureaucratic inertia, rampant nepotism and rising seas.

In “Transient Desires,” Brunetti raises a judgmental eyebrow at the follies of youth, who tend to get rowdy on warm Saturday nights in Campo Santa Margherita. Two young local men pick up a couple of American girls there and — after an accident in the laguna — abandon them on a dock outside the hospital.

Marcello Vio and his best friend, Filiberto Duso, claim that the romantic midnight-bateau tour came to an unhappy end when they plowed into an underwater pylon. “Water came over the sides and prow and soaked us,” Filiberto remembers. “The boat just stopped, the way you can walk into a wall when there’s caiggo,” or dense fog. Now Marcello is in deep trouble for damaging the powerful motorboat he borrowed from his uncle, who uses it in his clandestine smuggling operation, and both men have been identified by security tapes from the hospital. But why did they dump the badly injured Americans and flee into the night? As Brunetti teases out the connections between the accident and Marcello’s uncle, dramatic scenes play out in the dark and on the water with combat troops from the Guardia Costiera, who snare through the canals where traffickers in small boats with whisper-soft engines can access the mainland. Slipping untaxed goods like cigarettes into the city is an old smuggling tradition, to be sure, but in a new twist, some shipments contain human cargo.

The action in “Transient Desires” takes place largely on the water and focuses on the many manual jobs — and those lucky enough to work at them — that keep this ancient city running. Reflecting on the current state of “the country of Dante, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Galileo and Columbus,” Brunetti notes that 2,000 men — most of them college graduates — recently applied for three open jobs as garbage collectors.

In the course of his investigation, the commissario interviews one of the garbage men, or spazzoni, from whom he gleans a damning piece of evidence. In order to do so, Brunetti is forced to speak the local vernacular, Veneziano, “almost choking on the thickness” of it.

Leon has a lot to say in this book about prejudices, many of which declare themselves through accents. Veneziano may be protectively incomprehensible to outsiders, but as Brunetti ponders a Neapolitan colleague and that city’s inflections of “amiability, flattery, joviality, deceit,” he stops himself. “It was too easy to read history as you pleased, to see what you chose to see in the actions of people and cultures long gone.” Still, he reveals his own biases once again when the case leads him to the working-class district of Giudecca. “For me, going to the Giudecca is like going on an Arctic expedition,” he admits.

Needless to say, by venturing outside the comfort zone of his own prejudices, this deeply simpatico detective learns a lot about his city, his countrymen and himself.

And so do we.

On the Couch

An unorthodox therapist recounts her sessions with a sex-obsessed patient.

By HERMIONE HOBY

AS CHEKHOV DID not quite say, if an analyst describes an analysis as a gun on Page 4, you better bet your bottom dollar that gun’s going off by Page, oh, 200 and something. The nameless narrator of Laura Lindstedt’s sly, intriguing novel “My Friend Natalia,” translated from the Finn-Lindstedt’s sly, intriguing novel “My Friend Natalia,” translated from the Finnish, is the book’s tease, that Natalia — eccentric, brilliant and not quite say, if an analyst describes an analysis as a gun on Page 4, you bet your bottom dollar that gun’s going off by Page, oh, 200 and something. The nameless narrator of Laura Lindstedt’s sly, intriguing novel “My Friend Natalia,” translated from the Finn-Lindstedt’s sly, intriguing novel “My Friend Natalia,” translated from the Finnish, is the book’s tease, that Natalia — eccentric, brilliant and

It’s just too on the nose (or too on the somewhere else). Elaborating on her predica-ment, Natalia speaks in what a dutiful ther-apist might note as phallic terms: “The act forces its way into my mind like a tumor, and I am lost.” Our narrator is indeed dutiful but simultaneously unconventional and puffed with defensive pride over an unorthodox technique: “layer therapy.” (That the therapist’s gender remains undisclosed occurred to me only after I’d finished the novel and read its jacket copy; I’d assumed — analyze this — that the psychologist was female.)

Bragging that his or her or their Ph.D. “re-ceived a grade of cum laude approbator, no less,” the therapist carps that “the Finnish Association of Psychoanalysis did not accept me as a member, a matter that my mentor thought scandalous.” In other words, this narrator’s unreliability may well reside in insecurity and the need to prove something. Under the therapist’s novel methodology, patients’ memories are mere raw material: Via writing assignments, Natalia will, through a kind of Lacanian logic, “uncover different strata of memories and layer them up against,” forging new mental paths that constitute her recovery. The patient will re-write herself while being semi-authored by the psychologist.

Perhaps novelist chauvinism made me read the assignments more as creative writing prompts than credible therapeutic exercises, but then again hasn’t that distinction always been somewhat moot? A glib observation, but also a truism playing within these pages as the psychologist laments and celebrates “this hall of mirrors that we call life.”

The instructions for “Recovery Program Week 2” — “Thoughts on pornography” — come with the directive to “use the supporting words I wrote down.” The story that Natalia duly tells involves remembering an explicit comic strip in which the

male genitalia “jutted upward as a plea!” I experienced something of the psychologist’s discomfiture when, a few pages on, I discovered a life-size, photorealistic rendering of a well-veined erect penis. (Na-talia gives her psychologist this pencil drawing at the end of the session.) Ostensi-bly recounted with nothing but clinical cu-riosity, the transgressive patient’s eva-sions, provocations and sleights of hand are in this way craftily enacted by the novel itself.

At one point, Natalia recalls rummaging through paper recycling bins as a child, hoping to find “something forbidden, something that we had no business holding in our hands. And which, for that very reason, belonged to us.” This sounds like the naîve dream of analysis itself — dig deep and you’ll retrieve that interdicted memory, the missing piece that will bring the whole puzzle of selfhood into shining, legible meaning. This is the book’s tease, that Natalia — eccentric, unruly, compelling — will be definitively “solved.” But she’s not a dramatic principal, not a thing able to fire real bullets. This was her psychologist’s figure of speech and as such probably tells us more about the psychologist than the patient. The deeper, in-deed more layered, mystery is, it emerges, the novel’s chimerical narrator.

MLESTASIO

MY FRIEND NATALIA

Translated by David Hackston


HERMIONE HOBY’S second novel, “Virtue,” will be published in July.

Illustrations by DP3

SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2021
“WHAT DOES ONE DO upon discovering a photograph that documents a murder?” Wendy Lower asks in her new book, “The Ravine.” Lower, a historian of the Holocaust who has worked with Nazi hunters, ponders a photograph, taken in October 1941, in the once thriving, now desolate Ukrainian town of Miropol. It shows several men — Ukrainians and Germans — shooting a woman who, bent over, holds the hand of a small, barefoot boy just before they tumble into a death pit. The boy would be buried alive, not shot, since Nazi protocol forbade wasting bullets on Jewish children.) Smoke from the gun blasts ob-}

**By SUSIE LINFIELD**

The town rang out — who could miss the town at this moment of death. Miropol, in October 1941, in the once thriving, now desolate Ukrainian town of Miropol. It shows several men — Ukrainians and Germans — shooting a woman who, bent over, holds the hand of a small, barefoot boy just before they tumble into a death pit. The boy would be buried alive, not shot, since Nazi protocol forbade wasting bullets on Jewish children.) Smoke from the gun blasts ob-

**THE RAVINE**

**A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed**

By Wendy Lower


**For obvious reasons, many of these photographs have never surfaced.**

German guards and Ukrainian militia shooting a Jewish family in Miropol, Ukraine, in 1941.

Lower shows that it takes a lot of people to kill a lot of people. There are the Ukrainian teenage girls forced to dig the mass graves; the Nazi customs guards (including volunteers) and Ukrainian policemen who rounded up the Jews and forced them to the death site; the Ukrainian neighbors who plundered their homes and “assaulted them — throwing stones and bottles.” Then there are the Ukrainian militia who, “armed with clubs, tools and Russian rifles, chased Jews, bludgeoning some to death. . . . They chased young Jewish women, ripped off their clothes and raped them.”

The town rang out — who could miss this? — with gunshots, “yelling, screaming and howling.” This was not the bureaucratic killing many associate with the Holocaust. This was mass murder at its most intimate: The Ukrainians “taunted the victims by name. . . . The victims were known to them from the dentist’s office, the cobbler’s shop, the soda fountain and the collective farm. They grabbed small children and babies by the legs and smashed their heads against the trees.”

There is a vociferous debate among historians and photography critics about whether “perpetrator photographs,” especially from the Nazi era, should be viewed. Some argue that they revictimize the victims. Lower, rightly, disputes this, though in a sparse and not especially illuminating way. Yet her book is a refutation of those who urge us not to look. Indeed, the big surprise of “The Ravine” is the identity of the Miropol image’s photographer: a Slovakian soldier named Lubomir Skrovina. He took the photograph with the full knowledge of his German superiors, but he did not take it in service to their aims. In fact, Skrovina was, or at least became, a member of the Resistance. He smuggled atrocity images to his wife back home as possible material for anti-Nazi forces; wrangled out of further military duty; hid Jews in his home and helped some escape; and joined the antifascist Slovakian uprising of 1944.

Lower describes Skrovina’s photograph as “an expression of defiance.”

Though the Jews in the photograph remained anonymous, the names of their killers were known. West German authorities opened an inquiry in 1969, then quickly dropped it. But a Soviet K.G.B. major named Mikola Makarevyych was more determined. In 1986, his investigation yielded convictions for three of the Ukrainians in the photograph. Two were executed, one sentenced to prison. I oppose the death penalty. But I read this chapter of Lower’s book — entitled “Justice” — with deep and unshakable satisfaction.

**PHOTOGRAPH BY SECURITY SERVICES ARCHIVE.**

**By Wendy Lower**

“Other sources, live and videotaped witness dogged researcher — she uses, among names. Though she is an admirably exactly, the Jewish victims were: to say their surfaced.)

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**SUSIE LINFIELD is the author of “The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Vio-

lence” and “The Lions’ Den: Zionism and the Left From Hannah Arendt to Noam Chom-

sky.”**

**Crime Seen**

Tracing the evidence of genocide in a single photo.

**THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW** 15
ONE OF THE MOST
ANTICIPATED BOOKS OF 2021
Named by Entertainment Weekly, Harper’s Bazaar, O, the Oprah Magazine, Refinery 29, and more!

“A THOUGHTFUL PORTRAIT” of women coming to terms with the difficult decisions they’ve made in their lives—and the betrayals they’ve committed along the way.” —Time

“FIERCE AND POWERFUL.”
—Terese Marie Mailhot, bestselling author of Heart Berries

“A MESMERIZING PATCHWORK” of determination, courage, and survival.” —The Washington Post

“García’s VIVID DETAILS, VISCERAL PROSE and strong willful women negotiating how to survive in this world are easy to fall for.”
—Angie Cruz, author of Dominicana

“A SWEEPING TOUR DE FORCE” about addiction, displacement, and the legacy of trauma.” —Harper’s Bazaar
WE ARE FORCE.
WE ARE MORE
THAN WE THINK
WE ARE.

“Gabriela Garcia
captures the lives of
Cuban women in a world to which they
refuse to surrender and she does so with
precision and generosity and beauty.”
—Roxane Gay, bestselling author of
_Hunger_ and _Bad Feminist_

“A meditation on motherhood, displacement,
and cultural identity...this stunningly
accomplished first novel is both epic
and intimate.”
—OprahMag.com
A book caught between two languages.

In 1963, a 12-year-old Minae Mizumura left Tokyo for New York, when her father was transferred to his company’s American office. 美里, her sister 美里 and their mother came to a suburb on Long Island.

I’m trying to give a feeling for what it’s like to read the newly published English translation of AN I-NOVEL (Columbia University, paper, $20), Mizumura’s fictionalized account of her American life. In Japan, where book text is normally printed from right to left and in vertical lines, the original version was published in 1995 the way you’re reading this now — horizontally, from left to right. It also included a large number of words and even entire dialogues in English. This created the effect of a book caught between two worlds, two languages, two ways of being — exactly how Mizumura felt during her 20 years in America.

In bringing this book to Anglophone readers, she and her distinguished translator, Juliet Winters Carpenter, faced an unusual challenge. For editions in any other language, they could have left the English words as they were to preserve their foreignness. For the English translation, though, they came up with another solution: placing that text in bold. This has the funny effect of calling attention to the particularly local echoes of words that don’t usually sound strange to American ears. Catnip, mug, New Jersey, I don’t care, silliness, thrift shop, cafeteria, and alongside Cindy, Robin and Linda. The shift makes the whole country seem exotic, as do the novel’s photographs of things we wouldn’t ever notice: “Colonial house,” for example, or “Sidewalk.”

But in this coming-to-America novel, the promised land is somewhere else. Mizumura moved to New York when she was a bit too old for English to become a natural language for her. As it was, she already had one. “I loved the Japanese language,” she writes, “and, more than anything, Japanese literature written with the three distinct systems of Japanese writing: graceful kana,清扫 shokugan 〇 5, spartan katakana カタカナ, and dense kanji 漢字.” She arrived in the 1960s, before everywhere was “multicultural,” before there was a sushi restaurant on every corner, before Japan was considered posh. It’s not long before home becomes an obsession. She feels at home only in the novels she has brought with her, though they are set in a Japan that she is painfully aware — exists only in literature. As the years pass, she feels trapped: by inertia, by a rising yen, by the need to finish school, by her father’s illness, by her parents’ failed marriage, by being too old to marry. Twenty-five was the upper limit for a decent Japanese girl.) Her own mother scoffs when she says she longs to become a Japanese writer, telling her daughter that she can’t even write proper Japanese.

Yet Mizumura is sure she can. What she’s not sure about is how or when to return. “An I-Novels” takes place on a single day: Friday the 13th, appropriately enough, the 20th anniversary of her exile.


Bringing this novel to Anglophone readers posed an unusual challenge.

Language and they do so without the slightest whiff of nationalism. She speaks warmly of the kindness she encountered in America, and has said that the modern Japanese literature she cherishes, including that of writers like Soseki, emerged from engagement with the West. (Her riveting "A True Novel" was inspired by “Wuthering Heights.”) What’s difficult about her work is the questions it raises. How to be national without being chauvinistic? How to be local without being provincial? How to use identity as the beginning of the discussion rather than — as it is so often today — the final word?

In Mizumura’s works, the question is always open. She knows, from the very beginning of her American story, that this is not her country, not her language. But it’s one thing to realize that. It’s another thing to get back home.
Go West
This novel begins with one ending — and then another.

By LIZ MOORE

THE BIGHEARTED “We Begin at the End,” by the British crime writer Chris Whitaker, straddles a host of genres. Part thriller, part bildungsroman, part Dickensian tear-jerker and — most startlingly — part western, the novel centers on 13-year-old Duchess Day Radley, a self-described “outlaw” who has been forced to grow up quickly by her troubled mother, Star.

In the prologue of the novel, the roots of Star’s trouble are made clear: When she was a teenager, her little sister was killed, a tragedy from which the remaining members of the family have never recovered. The rest of the story takes place 30 years later, in 2005, when the man held accountable for Sissy’s demise is released from prison. Vincent King’s return to Cape Haven sets off a series of events that imperil the lives of Star, Duchess and Duchess’s younger brother, Robin.

The present-day narrative of “We Begin at the End” centers on another death in Cape Haven — only this time, the culprit isn’t clear. Chief Walker, known as Walk, a childhood friend of both Vincent and Star, begins an investigation. But the procedural aspects of the novel, while satisfying, aren’t the main attraction. What stands out about this novel is Whitaker’s portrayal of Duchess and Robin, Star’s children, who suddenly find themselves on their own, afflicted by tragedy after tragedy. While Walk continues to hunt for answers in Cape Haven, Duchess and Robin are dispatched to rural Montana to live with a series of people they’ve never met.

The sibling relationship at the heart of the book is affecting. I found myself worried for both children, wanting badly for them to catch a break, or just a breath — much in the same way I once wanted Oliver Twist to find a home, or Dicy Tiller to discover a family. For one thing, there is the matter of their names: Dickie Darke, Vincent King, Thomas Noble, Star Radley (who has a knack for singing) — even Sissy Radley, whose role in the book is primarily to be, well, a sister. If this choice felt more playful, it might work; there is, after all, a long tradition of apostrophe in crime writing and westerns, two of the genres to which Whitaker seems to be paying homage.

But Whitaker seems deeply earnest in this choice, and I fear this earnestness has infected his characters as well. When they speak, it is often in blunt declarations about themselves and their circumstances. Duchess, in particular, has a sort of catchphrase she often employs: “I am the outlaw, Duchess Day Radley,” she says at one point, to a man who has heckled her mother, “and I’ll cut your head clean off.”

This diction, from a 13-year-old living in Mendocino in 2005, is not completely implausible. But it’s so stilted and formal that it implies a level of social unawareness — even noddiness — in Duchess that the author doesn’t seem to intend. When she isn’t making such proclamations, Duchess sometimes speaks in full poems: “This purple” — she waved a hand at the huckleberries beside — “makes me think of her ribs, beat dark like that. The blue water, that’s her eyes, clear enough to see there’s no soul behind them anymore.”

Yes, Duchess is meant to be precocious; but this version of precocity feels scripted. It does not have the rhythm of human speech.

One explanation might be that “We Begin at the End” is an extended homage to the work of American writers of the West, Charles Portis in particular. Duchess — who is said to be descended from an outlaw — feels a lot like Mattie Ross, the 14-year-old protagonist of Portis’s “True Grit,” who also speaks in an unusual cadence. But unlike Mattie, who narrates her own story with a sort of quiet assurance that immediately affords her both agency and respect, Duchess is described only from the outside, by a narrator who seems to have a particular agenda.

Despite how often we are assured that Duchess is acerbic and tough, she seems in this novel more like an adult’s fantasy of what a tough 13-year-old girl would sound like. In several scenes, Duchess is shown to inspire fear and awe in her peers, but in real life her snappy retorts might be likelier to provoke something akin to second-hand embarrassment among her friends.

Descriptions of her appearance also serve to remind us that someone else is telling Duchess’ story. “She was too thin,” Whitaker writes, “too pale, too beautiful like her mother.” And again: “Her hair was tousled, blond like her mother’s. . . . She was pretty enough that the boys would have lined up, if they didn’t know, if everyone didn’t know.” And once again, as Walk drives her away from a traumatic incident: “She wore shorts. He saw grazed knees and pale thighs.”

It is possible that Whitaker, here, is trying to demonstrate that good looks have been a misfortune in the lives of Duchess and Star. Another explanation might be that describing women’s appearances in this way is simply a convention of the genre in which the writer is writing. (Particularly their legs, as when the young Walker first sets eyes on Star: “The rear door opened to the longest legs Walk ever saw.”) The femme fatale is a familiar trope. The problem is that Whitaker doesn’t seem to be doing much with it beyond employing it.

A final issue worth noting is Whitaker’s prose. He writes in a style that is self-consciously poetic and often difficult to follow, relying heavily on sentence fragments, misplaced modifiers and comma splices. I’m in favor of disposing with conventional grammar if a written voice calls for it; here, though, the writing isn’t assured enough to convince us Whitaker is in control. At one point, Whitaker writes: “If it wasn’t for the wire that carved the landscape with such brutality it might have been a scene that stopped breath, ‘Our Good Earth,’ men in jumpsuits nothing but the lost children they once were.”

The novel’s confusing syntax often makes the reader double back, checking for understanding. Whitaker is clearly attempting the style of writers of the American West, but in his hands the voice sounds like a parody.

I’d like to be clear about something, lest anyone think that I’m looking down on the genres in which Whitaker is working (and in which I myself often work): “We Begin at the End” struggles hardest when it ventures toward the literary, not away from it. Self-consciously elevated diction that includes word usage errors can work well in a first-person voice when it’s serving to characterize the narrator, as in “True Grit”; in “We Begin at the End,” which is written in third person, it seems instead to characterize the author.

In the end, Whitaker’s prose — both within the context of his narration and within his characters’ forced-sounding dialogue — hampers what is otherwise a moving, propulsive story.

For a first-person voice when it’s serving to characterize the narrator, as in “True Grit”; in “We Begin at the End,” which is written in third person, it seems instead to characterize the author.
Impossible Position
A novel revisits a thorny episode in the Algerian War.

By KAIAMA L. GLOVER
FRANCE HAS NEVER BEEN very good at grappling with its colonial past. Among the most stubborn ghosts to haunt the contemporary republic is the brutal war it waged in Algeria, its former colony, from 1954 to 1962. After the conflict, France long denied the human rights abuses committed in its name and censored numerous works of fiction and nonfiction that exposed facts to the contrary. This censorship has had the effect of muting the tangled personal and political realities underlying the grand narrative of this anticolonial struggle — the distinct and shifting investments of communists; pieds-noirs, or Algerian-born European settlers; colonial soldiers and officials; pro-French Indigenous harkis; and Algerian migrants, among others.

TOMORROW THEY WON’T DARE TO MURDER US
By Joseph Andras
Translated by Simon Leser

It is precisely this complexity that colors Joseph Andras’s electrifying debut novel, “Tomorrow They Won’t Dare to Murder Us.” Originally published in France in 2016, the novel won the Prix Goncourt for first novel (which Andras refused) and was heralded as a singularly vivid re-creation of this tragic period in French and Algerian history. Andras gives an unsparring account of the capture and execution of the real-life revolutionary Fernand Iveton at the hands of the French Army. Iveton, a pied-noir, communist and supporter of Algerian independence, planted a bomb in a factory just outside of Algiers in November 1956. He timed the bomb to detonate after work hours, intending to avoid casualties, but it was discovered and defused. Still, Iveton was savagely tortured, hurriedly tried and guillotined — the only European to meet this fate during the Algerian War. Andras is most interested in the intimate dimensions of this radical life. He hurries the first pages of his novel through Iveton’s would-be act of sabotage and his subsequent arrest, and then asks us to bear witness not only to the excruciating details of his trials but also to the conflation of family history, political conviction and love that ultimately landed him in that “interrogation” room in the first place. Despite a translation that struggles to render the tautness and lyricism of Andras’s prose, the intensity of both Iveton’s principles and the political moment he’s embroiled in still manages to shine through. Toggling between past and present, Andras allows multiple voices onto the same page — into the same sentence, even — and so sketches the landscape of politics and emotions that sealed Iveton’s fate. In Andras’s telling, it is Iveton alone who seems convinced that “barbarity cannot be beaten by emulation,” that “blood is no answer to blood.”

“I love France, I love France very much, I love France enormously, but I have no love for colonialists,” Iveton says to the presiding judge in the middle of his trial. This was an impossible position to take in the French imperial world of the mid-1950s. There was no France without its colonies. If Iveton aspired only to a future for Algeria that would see France “recognizing all of its children, wherever they’re from,” as Andras makes the case, the unlikelihood of that humanist dream coming true is made equally clear. This moment in history had no room for the idealism that animated Iveton or others like him. The insidious poison of political cynicism stood firmly in the way of fellowship and forgiveness during the Cold War.

The year 2022 will mark the 60th anniversary of Algeria’s war of independence, and France has begun to prepare the necessary rituals of reckoning. In January, the French historian Benjamin Stora submitted a 147-page report on “the progress made by France on the memory of the colonization of Algeria and the Algerian War” to President Emmanuel Macron, a report Macron commissioned to signal his “willingness to promote reconciliation between the French and Algerian people.” Macron has made clear that while “recognition” of this gruesome history is on the table, “reparation is out of the question.” So while the report appears to be a step forward in acknowledging the French postcolonial present with its troublesome colonial past, it will most likely fall short of true reconciliation for those who survived that past or who remain haunted by its ghosts. “Tomorrow They Won’t Dare to Murder Us” insists on plumbing the thorniest details of history’s scandal, suggesting — convincingly — that certain truths are best revealed in fiction.

Little Green Men
A zoologist uses his knowledge to imagine extraterrestrial life.

By KERMIT PATTISON
IS ANYBODY ELSE OUT THERE? For as long as humans have recognized Earth as but one planet in a vast, orb-speckled universe, we have pondered the mystery of extraterrestrial life.

After Nicolaus Copernicus introduced heliocentric theory to 16th century Europe, astronomers began to dream about “other worlds” — and populate them with imaginary creatures. Pioneering astronomers such as Johannes Kepler (father of planetary motion) and William Herschel (discoverer of Uranus) believed in the existence of alien life. Peering through his telescope, Herschel thought he spied towns and forests on the lunar surface. We’re still looking. In 2017, a mysterious object named “Oumuamua” was observed passing through our solar system and some astronomers have made the controversial suggestion that it may be a scout probe sent by an alien civilization. In February, the NASA Mars Perseverance Rover landed on the red planet to search for traces of ancient microbial life.

The search field is incomprehensibly large: Astronomers estimate that there are more than 100 billion planets in the Milky Way alone — plus exponentially more in the rest of the universe. What might we find elsewhere?

One zoologist suggests some answers actually may be hiding in plain sight, right here at home. In a provocative new book, “The Zoologist’s Guide to the Galaxy: What Animals on Earth Reveal About Aliens — and Ourselves,” Ark Kershbaum contends that life on Earth provides hints of what we might expect to find on other planets.

Kershbaum, a scientist at the University of Cambridge, asserts that the “universal laws of biology” that govern life on Earth also apply to aliens. The most important is that species evolve by natural selection, the bedrock idea of evolutionary biology proposed by Charles Darwin. No matter how alien biochemistry might work and no matter how planetary environments might differ, Kershbaum argues that some version of Darwinian selection would be at work — and would have shaped intelligent aliens.

KAIAMA L. GLOVER is a professor of French and Africana studies at Barnard.

KERMIT PATTISON is the author of “Fossil Men: The Quest for the Oldest Skeleton and the Origins of Humankind.”

By SIMON LESER

Indeed, the word inevitable pops up repeatedly in this book. Consequently, some extraterrestrials envisioned by Kershbaum might turn out to be quite familiar: “Finally, possibly inevitably, a social and intelligent organism, with the skill of language, develops complex technology. It is hard to see how any other outcome is possible. Soon, they will be building spaceships and exploring the universe — if they manage to avoid destroying themselves first.”

It has become a cliché in evolutionary studies to repeat a quote from L. P. Hartley: “The past is a foreign country: They do things differently there.” With alien planets, that caution might be increased exponentially.

Life on Earth flourished for 3.5 billion years before humans appeared. We are latecomers to the long biological saga on this planet and just one lineage among millions of species. We also are biological oddballs: upright bipeds with big brains, language, increasingly complex technology and the ability to alter our planetary habitat — and even explore other planets.

Our big brains come with big imaginations. Kershbaum offers some otherworldly ideas, such as musing that “alien seeders” possibly gave us life — which would make us earthlings just an experiment conducted by a superior intelligence. The author acknowledges his arguments might not convince all readers and are unlikely to be tested in our lifetimes because the likelihood of meeting intelligent aliens anytime soon is “so remote as to be almost dismissed.” Until that first encounter, though, theorists like Kershbaum will be free to float through an atmosphere unweighted by evidence.
Welcome to Group Text, a monthly column for readers and book clubs about the novels, memoirs and short-story collections that make you want to talk, ask questions and dwell in another world for a little bit longer.

IN THE PAST YEAR, I have booked and canceled three vacations — two to South Carolina (Kiawah Island and Charleston) and one to Brunswick, Maine. Each aborted rental came with its own disappointments: the fleet of mint green beach cruisers my family will never steer down palm-lined lanes at dusk; the pleather-covered hot tub we’ll never overflow with our collective mass; the short stroll I will never take from my riverside cottage to my sister’s front porch with a warm box of doughnuts in hand. Don’t worry, I’ll live.

But as we mark the first anniversary of our confinement, I see how the planning of these thwarted trips provided a break from the status quo. Every hour I spent on Airbnb, every moment I whiled away examining amber-lit photos like a jeweler peering through a loupe, added up to a welcome, if imaginary, escape.

Andrea Lee’s frangipani-infused new novel, RED ISLAND HOUSE (Scribner, 288 pp., $27), has the same effect — and is all the more enjoyable for its depiction of a complicated Shangri-La. Who wants to read about unadulterated bliss right now? I want to be reminded why I’m better off at home.

“‘There are houses you don’t want, that, nevertheless, enter your life and bring with them other lives, whole other worlds,’” Lee writes. “‘There are countries you visit that lay hold of you and don’t let go, even if you diligently attempt to remain a tourist.’”

In “Red Island House,” the tourist is Shay Gilliam, a Fulbright scholar and university instructor from Oakland, Calif., who is Black and has “scant interest” in Africa “except as a near-mythical motherland.” That doesn’t dissuade her older, semi-sleazeball husband (“a rich but stingy Italian businessman”) from building a deluxe mansion on Naratrany, a tiny island in Madagascar; he is, as Lee puts it, “dizzied by the infinite possibilities offered by using first world money in a third world country, one of the poorest on earth.”

The construction of the place runs parallel to the couple’s courtship. Shay won’t realize until it’s too late — the house’s thatched roof peak already dominating the landscape, staff hired to sweep, cook and minister to the couple’s every need, including late-afternoon massages in the garden — that the Red House (so known for its painted floors) will become an unwelcome, perennially problematic third party in her marriage.

“How bad could it be? you wonder. The on-demand back rubs sound divine, as do drinks served in tall glasses topped off with bougainvillea blossoms. But Shay learns that her summer home is haunted in more ways than one. Not only does it provide a rotating door for troublesome guests and an effortless backdrop for her husband’s philandering, it will force her to reckon with a colonial tradition that makes her deeply uncomfortable. Shay knows what is expected of her as the mistress of the Red House — she is supposed to exert “iron control” over her employees — but, “to a Black American from an academic family in California, the concept has always smacked far too much of plantation life.”

For two decades, we follow Shay around Naratrany, with occasional interludes in Milan (also not too shabby). Her son and daughter grow up, cycling through their own mixed feelings about the island; her relationships with the locals deepen, especially with Bertine la Grande, a housekeeper “whose blood seems to flow in the same rhythm as hers” in spite of their “inconceivably different lives”; and her marriage strains under the weight of its fundamental mismatch.

In this slim but sweeping story, Lee shows a woman facing up to contradictions that make her life easier and harder at the same time, and figuring out where she belongs in the world — geographically and on a deeper, psychic (but never woo-woo) level. In her author’s note, Lee writes, “Red Island House” is a novel about foreigners in Madagascar; its viewpoint and its “voice” are those of an outsider looking in.” Never before has this perspective felt so timely and so familiar.

To join the conversation about “Red Island House,” go to our Facebook page, @nytbooks, or our Instagram, @NYTBooks.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What did Shay have to give up for her life with at the Red House? Were the sacrifices worthwhile?

Lee doesn’t always tell her story in a straight line; sometimes she dips into the past when you least expect it. How did the structure of “Red Island House” contribute to your experience of the story?

SUGGESTED READING

REBECCA, by Daphne du Maurier. Manderley was no picnic either, and the mansion’s stone cold vice grip on its inhabitants reads like a British precursor to the abundant but occasionally menacing beauty of the Red House.

DO NOT BECOME ALARMED, by Maile Meloy. Two families far from home find themselves in an unimaginable crisis. How — and whether — they navigate their way out of it will change their perspectives on whom to trust and where they belong.
“AN ILLITERATE, UNDERBRED” book it seems to me: the book of a self-taught working man, & we all know how distressing they are, how egotistic, insistent, raw, striking & ultimately nauseating.” So goes Virginia Woolf’s well-known complaint about “Ulysses,” scribbled into her diary before she had finished reading it. Her disparagement is apt to those many critics who like to view “Mrs. Dalloway” — that other uber-famous, if more lapidary, modernist novel that spans the course of a single day — as Woolf’s rejoinder to Joyce. More than that, though, it tells us something important about our literary history. Nineteen twenty-two, the year of “Ulysses,” may well be ground zero for the explosion of modernism in literature. But the resultant shock wave is better captured by another year: 1925, that of “Mrs. Dalloway” and several other works, all now in the spotlight in 2021, as they emerge from under copyright.

If an English-majored ear perks up at the sound of “1922,” it’s mostly because of the two somewhat ordinary men who published their masterpieces that year: Joyce and T. S. Eliot. “Ulysses” and “The Waste Land” are taught everywhere and almost without exception as “signifying a definitive break in literary history,” to quote the critic Michael North from his book “Reading 1922.” Both the novel and the poem are notoriously challenging, obscuriously elusive and highly uneasy about their modern time and the rubble of tradition astride which it stood. Both are also often distressing, egotistic, insistent, raw, striking and (depending on one’s mood) ultimately nauseating. And it is precisely these qualities that account for their hold on our literary imagination. They represent everything that literary modernism is meant to: rupture, difficulty and, of course, making it new.

Yet 1925 is arguably the more important date in modernism’s development, the year that it went mainstream, as embodied by four books whose influence continues to shape fiction today: Woolf’s “Mrs. Dalloway,” Ernest Hemingway’s debut story collection, “In Our Time,” John Dos Passos’ “Manhattan Transfer” and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby.” Compared with the masterpieces of 1922, these books — all slated for reissue in new editions this year — entered our culture in relatively unspectacular fashion. But it’s precisely their unassuming guise that allowed them, by osmosis rather than disruption, to diffuse their modernist conceits throughout the literary field, ensuring their widespread adoption.

In her 1919 essay, “Modern Fiction,” Woolf rebukes the popular novels of her time: “Is life like this? . . . Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this.’ Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions — trivial, fantastic, evanescent or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. . . . Life is not a series of gig lamps fastened together through which many of our canonized poets and novelists have since passed. As the scholar Mark McGurl puts it in his book “The Program Era,” “It would be hard to overestimate the influence of Hemingway on postwar writers, . . . too easy to forget that the medium of his influence has been the school.”

The legacy of John Dos Passos is less distinct, though no less potent. You do not hear his name much now, but in his day Dos Passos was among the most celebrated novelists writing in English. To Sartre, he was “the greatest writer of our time”; there was none other “in which the art is greater or better hidden.” Perhaps this is because novels like “Manhattan Transfer” were among the first to try to recreate the seamless artifice that cinema appeared to lend to its fictions. Dos Passos’ novel takes as its protagonist not a character but New York City itself, and makes liberal use of literary jump-cuts and montage against a backdrop of action-filled narration that moves at a relentless clip. His is a multimedia literature, a modernist twist on the flabby forms of social realism that stitches a collage of press-clippings, newscasts, and radio announcers’ voices into the narrative fabric.

With Fitzgerald, by contrast, we have the inverted alternative to Dos Passos’ reallist modernism. In “The Great Gatsby” Fitzgerald — just as Eliot would do in fits and starts throughout his career — seeks the preservation of Symbolism in modern American literature. That a writer could opt not to deploy a literalist account of the American past, but instead “laid out like a mist between the people she knew best.” That a narrator need not fiddle with chess pieces from on high but might linger like a cloud among foggy minds is a feature of modernism that has, as it were, contaminated literature ever since. Opposed to the singularity of a work like “Ulysses” or “The Waste Land,” we have in “Mrs. Dalloway” the innovation of an enduring, deep structure — something like geometric perspective in painting, that contributes to the development of technique, rather than driving it up a dead end. So it is with “In Our Time,” “Manhattan Transfer” and “The Great Gatsby.” With “Big Two-Hearted River,” the last story in Hemingway’s collection, writers on either side of the Atlantic learned about the power of economy in writing. As if by revelation, it became clear that the solution to the problem of representing a collective trauma like World War I was not blabbering effusion, but its opposite.

“I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg,” Hemingway told The Paris Review in 1958. The “iceberg” technique became the calling card not only of postwar American writers like Raymond Carver and Cormac McCarthy, but also of the influential cadre of French existentialist novelists, including Céline, Malraux, Sartre and de Beauvoir. Most important, though, Hemingway became an exemplary stylist for the M.F.A. programs that sprang up across America after the war, and through which many of our canonized poets and novelists have since passed. As the scholar Mark McGurl puts it in his book “The Program Era,” “It would be hard to overestimate the influence of Hemingway on postwar writers, . . . too easy to forget that the medium of his influence has been the school.”

It is fitting that “The Great Gatsby” sold few copies when it was first published to the development of technique, rather than driving it up a dead end. So it is with “In Our Time,” “Manhattan Transfer” and “The Great Gatsby.” With “Big Two-Hearted River,” the last story in Hemingway’s collection, writers on either side of the Atlantic learned about the power of economy in writing. As if by revelation, it became clear that the solution to the problem of representing a collective trauma like World War I was not blabbering effusion, but its opposite.
Bet You Can’t Eat Just One
Companies make a profit by manipulating our biological instincts.

By DANIEL E. LIEBERMAN

AS AN ENTREE to Michael Moss’s excellent new book, “Hooked: Food, Free Will, and How the Food Giants Exploit Our Addictions,” try this experiment. Imagine or — even better — place two bowls in front of you: one with potato chips; the other with whole walnuts. Make sure they are both good quality brands and fresh from a never-opened bag. Sample a walnut first. Enjoy how its initial slightly bitter crunch transforms into something soft, buttery, faintly woody. Next munch a potato chip. Its flavor is less complex than the walnut’s, but every chip instantly delivers an intense combination of salt, sugar and fat. They are so crispy you can hear them clatter between your teeth, and then they miraculously dissolve into nothingness on your tongue, making you want another. And another. And another.

As for yourself which is more likely to make you fat. From a purely nutritional perspective the answer is easy: the walnuts. According to the nutrition labels helpfully provided on both packages, an ounce of walnuts contains 186 calories, 25 percent more than the 150 calories delivered by an ounce of potato chips. To be sure, walnuts pack more protein and fiber and less salt, but if weight gain is your worry, you should eat the potato chips.

Obviously, it is preposterous to consider potato chips less fattening than walnuts — because potato chips are among the most addictive foods on the planet, along with french fries, pizza, cheeseburgers and Oreos. Too many of us can’t help eating too much of this stuff. And that’s the chief motivation for “Hooked,” which is in many ways a sequel to the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist’s 2013 tour de force, “Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us.” That book exposed how multinational food companies, in gastro-Orwellian fashion, hook us by expertly tapping into our memories, introducing endless new varieties.

To trick us to eat more they also lure us with low prices, dazzling packaging, convenience and trumped-up variety. One example among many: Differently colored M&M’s taste the same but dupe our brains to consume more than if they were all just brown. Perhaps most cunningly, Big Food has also acquired many major brands of processed diet foods like Weight Watchers and Lean Cuisine. One has to admit it’s clever to make money helping us get fat and then profit from our efforts (usually futile) to lose weight.

In Philip Morris’s case they regarded new kinds of disordered eating as a way to make money helping us get fat and then profit from our efforts (usually futile) to lose weight.

All in all, “Hooked” blends investigative reporting, science and foodie writing to argue that the processed food industry is no different from tobacco companies like Philip Morris that for decades lied about the harmful addictive nature of cigarettes. In Philip Morris’s case they were the same company (until recently, Philip Morris owned Kraft and General Foods).

Which leads to a question: Who is at fault? No one is forced to eat at McDonald’s or drink Dr Pepper, and few Americans are unaware that a salad for lunch is healthier than a hamburger with fries. But Moss’s argument is that free will is an illusion, at least for certain foods.

He’s right. It is sometimes said that for some of us sugar is as addictive as cocaine, but from an evolutionary biological perspective, cocaine is actually as addictive as sugar, because it takes advantage of ancient mechanisms we inherited from our distant ancestors that helped them acquire rare but needed calories. To stay healthy in our current, modern food system, consumers have to overcome instincts and make choices over which we have little control.

Moss’s attention to food addiction should open eyes and convert some free market advocates. On legal grounds, Big Food may be safe in court for now, but their actions raise ethical questions. Should we judge companies solely by their profits or by how they affect the world? Regardless of debates about the law and free will, it is acceptable to market to children breakfast cereals like Cotton Candy Cap’n Crunch, which is nearly half sugar? These and many other harmful habit-forming foods have fattened corporate bank accounts at the cost of fattening hundreds of millions of Americans, contributing to countless premature deaths and debilitating illnesses as well as costing trillions of dollars. Even if you don’t consume these foods, you are paying big time for their consequences.

“Hooked” can also help us pay more attention to the relationship between food quality and quantity. Over the last few decades modern, westernized attitudes toward food have increasingly focused on nutrition labels that inform us how many grams of saturated fat, fiber and other stuff are in the foods we buy. These labels can make many highly processed foods seem deceptively harmless compared with more calorie-dense natural foods like avocados, salmon and walnuts. Yet how many people eat unprocessed wholesome foods?

Nutritionist perspectives on food combined with the challenges of losing weight also generate confusion over the relative merits of alternative diets, sometimes promoting new kinds of disordered eating as we Google the glycemic index of muffins or bananas, and worry about whether chocolate, eggs or peanuts are “good” or “bad.” I’ve done my share of Googling and fretting, but I’m done with this. One doesn’t need a degree in nutrition science to recognize that just about every traditional, nonprocessed diet from every culture on the planet that isn’t loaded with junk food is probably generally healthy. What’s more, like these walnuts, those diets are tastier too.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 23
The Americans: Tillie Olsen

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

In the first story, “I Stand Here Ironing,” a classic almost from the moment it appeared in “Best American Short Stories of 1957,” we don’t just inhabit the mind of the narrator, a woman reflecting, in the midst of housework, on her daughter’s childhood and her own experience as a mother. Her words, addressed directly to someone—a social worker, a teacher or another well-meaning stranger—land with an almost physical weight. “All that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me that I cannot endure it tonight,” she says. You can feel the gravity of the words, and the presence of the body that utters them.

The woman isn’t named, and her situation is shorn of the kind of references that might situate her in a particular place or time. You could say that she speaks for generations of women who have faced poverty and disappointment. But there is nothing abstract or general about the story she tells—which is mostly the story of how, in a period of hardship and domestic instability, she temporarily gave up custody of her firstborn child—because the difficulty of telling it registers in every sentence. Whenever I reread this story, I’m startled by how little space it takes up: less than 10 pages in the most recent paperback edition, from the University of Nebraska Press. And yet it’s somehow as dense, as rich, as packed with life and feeling and “all that compounds a human being” as something 10 or 100 times as long.

The other parts of “Tell Me a Riddle”—“Hey Sailor, What Ship?,” “O Yes” and the long title story—are a bit looser and more discursive, with expansive dialogue and a wider range of characters, but they all share this sense of compression, of experience distilled to a piercing, concentrated essence.

A mother contemplates her own past and the future facing a child “of anxious, not proud, love.” A couple with young children make room for a beloved, difficult family friend who tests their patience and the limits of his charm. Two little girls, one Black and one white, find their treatise on the first page of “I Stand Here Ironing”: “And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to talk?”

IT GOES WITHOUT saying that there is no time to write, and Olsen’s career is built on sifting and weighing the forces that conspire to prevent writing from happening. Even though she was almost 50 when “Tell Me a Riddle” appeared, she wasn’t exactly a late bloomer. Olsen came to her career early, embarking on a novel—published in 1974 as “Yonnondio: From the Thirties” with a title borrowed from Walt Whitman—when she was barely in her 20s. The themes and moods of “Tell Me a Riddle” are prefaced in “Yonnondio,” an episodic chronicle of a family chasing work and security in the mining camps and factory towns of the Great Plains.

The raw material was Olsen’s own childhood. She was born Tybile Lerner in Omaha, one of six children of Jewish immigrant parents who had fled Russia after the failed revolution of 1905. Like many Americans of her generation and background, she spent the 1930s balancing— or rather juggling, while riding a unicycle on a high wire — radical politics, artistic ambition, wage labor and domestic life. With Jack Olsen, a printer and labor organizer, she raised four children while working various office and factory jobs. She was also a journalist and an activist, publishing (in an early issue of Partisan Review) a vivid account of the San Francisco general strike of 1934, during which she was briefly jailed. “Listen, it is late,” she wrote at the end of that dispatch. “I am feverish and tired. Forgive me that the words are feverish and blurred. You see, if I had time, if I could go away. But I write this on a battlefield.”

The battle continued, even if the terrain shifted. Olsen was a writer her whole life—who died in 2007—but she didn’t write much. Not because she was blocked or lacked material. The blockage—the obligation of earning a living and tending children, the “immersion” in caring that was a source of fulfillment as well as frustration—was the subject matter. The silence that surrounds those stories is its own kind of statement.

Is there a place in literature—in our canons and course listings, in our criticism and theory—for unwritten work? The idea seems almost preposterous; it’s hard enough to keep up with the books that have been written without worrying over the ones that haven’t. But every writer knows the weight, the power, the literal, palpable reality of silence. It isn’t just that negative space gives shape to words; it’s an active presence, an animating ghost in the machine.

Literary ethics prompts us to attend to the unheard and the marginal; curiosity or impatience with the same old stuff sends us in search of the forgotten and the neglected. But what kind of attention do we owe—what kind of attention is it even possible to pay—to the unvoiced?

This isn’t an epistemological question: It’s a political question, having to do with privilege and visibility, with how the resources that make writing possible—the time, the space, the confidence—are distributed. The best-known articulation of the problem of unequal access to the tools of writing is surely “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf’s clear-sighted feminist polemic from 1929. In “Silences,” an essay that appeared in Harper’s in 1965, Olsen broadened the terms of Woolf’s argument, surveying the gaps and lost years in various careers and the different reasons (censorship, illness, temperamental reluctance) that even outwardly successful writers didn’t write. But she homed in on a vaster silence of “those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women. Their silence the silence of centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity.”

She included herself. “Where the gifted

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among women (and men) have remained mute, or have never attained full capacity,” she continued, “it is because of circumstances, inner and outer, which oppose the needs of creation.” And she concluded with a brief survey of the circumstances that accounted for her own silence and its occasional breaking: “This was the time of festering and congestion. For a few months I was able to shield the writing with which I was so full, against the demands of jobs on which I had to be competent, through the joys and responsibilities of family. For a few months. Always roused by the writing, always denied. ‘I could not go to write it down. It convulsed and died in me. I will pay.’ My work died. What demanded to be written, did not. It seethed, bubbled, clamored, peopled me. At last moved into the rooms meant for sleeping. I worked now full time on temporary jobs, a Kelly, a Western Agency girl (girl!), wandering from office to office, always hoping we could manage two, three writing months ahead. Eventually there was time.”

IN HER 40S, Olsen, who had never gone to college, was admitted to Stanford’s creative writing program as a Wallace Stegner fellow. It was there that she found the physical and psychic room, and the material support, to finish three of the stories that would appear in “Tell Me a Riddle.” In the wake of that book’s success, she was awarded one of the early fellowships at the Radcliffe Institute, which had been established to provide money, office space, collegiality and institutional backing for women scholars and artists. According to “The Equivalents,” Maggie Doherty’s history of the institute’s early years, Olsen arrived in Cambridge with the intention of producing “the great proletarian novel,” an epic of toil, oppression and resistance in early industrial America, turns out to be a parable about art. And those subjects aren’t as far apart as they might appear, at least if you read Rebecca Harding Davis through the lens of Tillie Olsen.

As a teacher, Olsen developed pioneering courses in feminist and working-class literature. She helped change the study of American literature, opening its canon to neglected voices and traditions. This project continues, not without controversy, and is sometimes faulted for politicizing art, for putting matters of gender, class and race in the way of supposedly more universal concerns. Olsen’s slender oeuvre delivers a mighty rebuke to that objection, since there is no experience more common — and also, paradoxically, none more unique — than dwelling in a body that desires, all at once, to work, to love, to create and to rest. This is the essence of both her weary, patient maternal wisdom and her radical criticism of the way things are. How to sustain? Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom — in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know — help make it so there is cause for her to know — that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.
Children, animals and, yes, a piece of toast try on other identities, and learn not to judge books by their covers.

**I AM A BIRD**
Written by Hope Lim  
Illustrated by Hyewon Yum

“I fly like a bird on Daddy’s bike,” the narrator joyfully croons as we watch father and daughter whizz through a coastal, colored-penciled town. “CA-CAW!” she calls, and “the birds sing back.” We smell the sea air and feel the salty breeze. Suddenly she spies “a woman with a blue coat and a big bag . . . walking very fast,” and clutches her dad’s sweatshirt, as gouache graffiti demons appear on a wall and a graphite shadow joins the gray-haired figure like an evil twin. Yet there she is one day in the park, “whispering a song to the birds!” Lim’s text and Yum’s art identities, and learn not to judge books by their covers.

**MILO IMAGINES THE WORLD**
Written by Matt de la Peña  
Illustrated by Christian Robinson

In this brilliant new collaboration from de la Peña and Robinson (“Last Stop on Market Street”), a boy sets out with his sister on a monthly subway trip. To occupy himself, he “studies the faces around him” and draws “pictures of their lives.” At his stop, Milo is surprised to see a boy he’s drawn in a castle join the line to pass through the metal detector. Is he visiting his mother in prison, too? Milo rethinks his pictures. Maybe the whis- kered man isn’t lonely; maybe the wedding-dressed woman married a girl; maybe the breakdancers live in a fancy building. And what must they all think of him?

32 pp. Margaret Ferguson/Holiday House. $17.99. (Ages 4 to 6)

**SATO THE RABBIT**
Written and illustrated by Yuki Ainoya  
Translated by Michael Blasikowsky

This first book in a trilogy about a boy who one day “became a rabbit” and has “been a rabbit ever since” won the 2007 Japanese Children’s Book Award. In lushly painted, highly immersive vignettes, we’re shown that while Sato wears a costume, his sensory nature has been transformed. The taste of watermelon spreads throughout his body. He cracks a walnut and finds rooms inside. He plucks a cloud from a puddle’s reflection and hangs it over his bed, where he “sips stories” from melted multicolored ice containing the emotions of a fully lived and dreamed life.

60 pp. Enchanted Lion. $17.95. (Ages 4 to 8)

**TOASTY**
Written and illustrated by Sarah Hwang

A refreshingly unusual grandmother — wearing “very, very long” white hair, dark red toenail polish on bare feet and an animal-print blouse — gets on the carpet and grows. “Let’s be jaguars,” she says to her grandson, who’s “met her once before” and hides behind a large potted plant. By the time we reach the metamorphosis-depicting gatefold, the two are crawling together side by side into a wondrous, breathtakingly painted night of bonding and adventure.

44 pp. Chronicle. $18.99. (Ages 5 to 8)

**BEAR OUTSIDE**
Written by Jane Yolen  
Illustrated by Jen Corace

Yolen has said a picture by Corace, of a little girl looking out confidently from the mouth of a bear, inspired her to write this book. It’s easy to understand why. Innovative in its perspective and moving in its execution (gouache that, like our emotions, sometimes bleeds outside the lines), Corace’s art perfectly matches Yolen’s words in this nuanced exploration of our inner selves. “Some folks have a lion inside, or a tiger . . . . I wear my bear on the outside.” And yes, it’s a “she.”


**WE BECAME JAGUARS**
Written by Dave Eggers  
Illustrated by Woodrow White

**SUNDAY RAIN**
Written by Rosie J. Pova  
Illustrated by Amariah Rauscher

While a storm rages on the other side of the ship curtains at his bedroom window, Elliott buries himself in a book. A princess endlessly fights a dragon and a watercolor sea keeps “swallowing the royal boat,” with Elliott at the helm. Later, he peeks out shyly at two puddle-jumping children on the sidewalk. “Make some friends while I finish unpacking,” his mother urges. He joins them with a toy boat. Soon the S.S. Elliott is life-size, the puddles are an ocean and the dragon is a kite. Elliott’s new house feels like home.

32 pp. Lantana. $17.99. (Ages 4 to 7)

**ITTY-BITTY KITTY-CORN**
Written by Shannon Hale  
Illustrated by LeUyen Pham

A kitten who has crafted a horn and tied it on her head (thanks to a handy ball of yarn) “feels so perfectly unicorn-y” when she catches her statuesque reflection in the tall mirror. Unfortunately a taunting parakeet fights a dragon and a watercolor sea keeps “swallowing the royal boat,” with Elliott at the helm. Later, he peeks out shyly at two puddle-jumping children on the sidewalk. “Make some friends while I finish unpacking,” his mother urges. He joins them with a toy boat. Soon the S.S. Elliott is life-size, the puddles are an ocean and the dragon is a kite. Elliott’s new house feels like home.

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**FROM “WE BECAME JAGUARS.”**

**FROM “TOASTY.”**

**FROM “ITTY-BITTY KITTY-CORN.”**

**FROM “SUNDAY RAIN.”**

Clockwise from left: “I Am A Bird”; “Sato the Rabbit”; “Milo Imagines the World.”
BestSellers
The New York Times

COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS
SALES PERIOD OF MARCH 7–13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Weeks on List</th>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
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<td>THIS WEEK</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>THE FOUR WINDS</td>
<td>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>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>LIFE AFTER DEATH</td>
<td>by Sister Souljah. (Aria/Emily Bestler) In a sequel to “The Coldest Winter Ever,” Winter Santiago emerges after time served and seeks revenge.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>LATER</td>
<td>by Stephen King. (Hard Case Crime) An N.Y.P.D. detective asks the son of a former single mother to use his unnatural ability to track a killer.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>FAST ICE</td>
<td>by Clive Cussler and Graham Brown. (Putnam) The 18th book in the NUMA Files series. Kurt Austin and Joe Zavala uncover a decades-old conspiracy when they search for a missing former colleague in Antarctica.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>THE ROSE CODE</td>
<td>by Kate Quinn. (Morrow) As a post-World War II royal wedding approaches, an encrypted letter resurrects an alliance between three female code breakers.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY</td>
<td>by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>DARK SKY</td>
<td>by C. J. Box. (Putnam) The 21st book in the Joe Pickett series. The Wyoming game warden becomes a target when taking a tech baron on an elk hunting trip.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>KLARA AND THE SUN</td>
<td>by Kazuo Ishiguro. (Knopf) An “Artificial Friend” named Klara is purchased to serve as a companion to an ailing 14-year-old girl.</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>THE CODE BREAKER</td>
<td>by Walter Isaacson. (Simon &amp; Schuster) How the Nobel Prize winner Jennifer Doudna and her colleagues invented CRISPR, a tool that can edit DNA.</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>THE SUM OF US</td>
<td>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>13</td>
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<td>CASTE</td>
<td>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>14</td>
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<td>HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER</td>
<td>by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what businesses, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE</td>
<td>by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td>BECOMING</td>
<td>by Michelle Obama. (Crown) The former first lady describes her journey from the South Side of Chicago to the White House, and how she balanced work, family and her husband’s political ascent.</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td></td>
<td>A PROMISED LAND</td>
<td>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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Editors’ Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, NEW YORK: Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation, by Thomas Dyja. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $30.) This capacious account of New York’s recent rise describes the men and women in every facet of life who helped revitalize the city. Yet for Dyja, who sees the need for another reinvention of New York, the city has in many ways fallen prey to its own success.

MONA, by Pola Oloixarac. Translated by Adam Morris. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $25.) The title character of this ruthless, very funny Argentine literary satire is a woman who won the 2020 Nobel in Chemistry for her work on the gene-editing technology CRISPR.

THE CODE BREAKER, by Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race, by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster, $35.) Isaacson, the biographer of innovators from Einstein to Leonardo, reprises some favorite themes in this book about the woman who won the 2020 Nobel in Chemistry for her work on the gene-editing technology CRISPR.

RED WIDOW, by Alma Katsu. (Putnam, $27.) Katsu, a former intelligence analyst best known for her paranormal and horror novels, finally writes what she’s most familiar with: This inside-the-C.I.A. thriller, about the friendship between an agent and the widow of a Russian asset, is replete with falsehoods, betrayals and double-dealing.

FLOATING IN A MOST PECULIAR WAY: A Memoir, by Louis Chude-Sokei. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, $27.) This debut memoir tells the story of a young Black man trying to find himself in a world where he never quite seems to belong. Too African for Jamaica, too Jamaican for America, too American for Nigeria, Chude-Sokei grows up in search of a Blackness that fits him.

LAST CALL: A True Story of Love, Lust, and Murder in Queer New York, by Elin Green. (Celadon, $27.) Restoring dignity and detail to the lives of four gay men murdered in the 1990s by a killer who picked up victims at Manhattan piano bars, Green’s immersive account unfolds against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis and widespread homophobia.

ALL GIRLS, by Emily Layden. (St. Martin’s, $27.99.) A Connecticut boarding school is rocked by rape allegations in this assured and tender debut novel. Layden explores complex bonds between students and the slow-turning gears of a revered but old-fashioned institution.

COUNT DOWN: How Our Modern World Is Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, Threatening Sperm Counts, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race, by Shanna H. Swan with Stacey Colino. (Scribner, $28.) From 1973 to 2011, Western sperm counts dropped by 59 percent. Swan, an epidemiologist, blames chemicals found in everything from plastics to pesticides to cosmetics.

WHAT DOESN’T KILL YOU: A Life With Chronic Illness — Lessons From a Body in Revolt, by Tessa Miller. ( Holt, $26.99.) With passion and precision, a reporter describes her fight for competent care after she developed inflammatory bowel disease.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: nytimes.com/books
Poison Pen(ner)  Fans of historical fiction are familiar with the vehicles authors use to transport a story from the present to the past: A bundle of letters tied with ribbon, hidden in a steamer trunk; black-and-white pictures, tucked into a grandmother's jewelry box, or better yet, her diary; a newspaper or paper map stashed in the rafters.

Sarah Penner went with a grittier approach in her debut novel, “The Lost Apothecary,” which is No. 11 on the hardcover fiction list. In present-day London, an aspiring historian joins a mudlarking expedition on the banks of the Thames; there, she discovers a small blue vial that leads her to a 200-year-old mystery involving a poison-dispensing apothecary and a 12-year-old girl who makes a deadly mistake.

You may be wondering, what in the world is mudlarking? “It’s like beachcombing, but you’re looking for historical artifacts instead of sea glass or gold,” Penner explained in a phone interview. “Every day the River Thames rises 23 to 24 feet. That turns over the riverbed. You can find anything from Roman coins to old clay pipes to leather shoes from the Tudor era. There are animal bones and little sewing pens the Victorians used. About two years ago, someone found a human skeleton.”

Suddenly those letters languishing in the attic seem like small potatoes! Future mudlarkers, take note: You’ll need to secure a “foreshore permit” from the Port of London Authority: Restrictions apply.

Penner described her own riverbank adventure with the fondness of a person combing, but you’re looking for historical artifacts instead of sea glass or gold,” Penner explained in a phone interview. “Every day the River Thames rises 23 to 24 feet. That turns over the riverbed. You can find anything from Roman coins to old clay pipes to leather shoes from the Tudor era. There are animal bones and little sewing pens the Victorians used. About two years ago, someone found a human skeleton.”

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thousands of stores of all sizes and demographics across the United States. Statistically weighted to represent and accurately reflect all outlets proportionally nationwide. The panel of reporting retailers is comprehensive and reflects sales in tens of thousands of stores of all sizes and demographics across the United States. For a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.

NEW FROM THE EDITORS OF THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE

When reality is surreal, only fiction can make sense of it.

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

ALSO AVAILABLE AS AN EBOOK AND AN AUDIOBOOK

SCORBING

Soma and Richard's art

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 29
THE RAIN HERON
By Robbie Arnott
269 pp. FSG Originals. Paper, $16.

What exactly is a rain heron, the fantastical creature at the heart of the Australian writer Arnott’s daring, atmospheric novel? Is it just a “fairy tale” or is it real — and why is the military so intent on tracking it down? These are some of the questions propelling this dark eco-fable set in a no man’s land ravaged by marauding soldiers, floods and freezing winds.

It makes sense, then, that Ren, on the run from the army and her past, seeks refuge in a remote cave, foraging to survive. But Ren, it turns out, has actually seen the rain heron and will be forced by a hardened officer named Zoe Harker to lead her to it. And what an amazing sight she is: an iridescent, translucent bird truly is: an iridescent, translucent — or weapon — for whoever captures it.

The heron itself will wreak havoc on Ren, who tries to stop the landscape they cross to deliver it to her. The novel moves at a quick pace, shimmering with menace and electric visions of forests and lake-filled valleys. Harker’s own metamorphosis, as she later drifts remorsefully through “the quiet carnage of the world,” is as remarkable as the heron’s. “I felt suddenly transparent,” she says, on re-encountering Ren, “as if she could see through my skin and flesh, and into the air behind me.”

AMERICAN DELIRIUM
By Betina González
Translated by Heather Cleary

“American Delirium,” by the Argentine author González, takes place in a Middle American town in the not-so-distant future, also troubled by political turmoil and a natural world gone haywire.

Homelessness and unemployment are rampant, and many are turning their backs on society, heading to the woods to join a Finnish mystic and his commune. There, under the influence of a powerful hallucinogenic plant called albaria, they embrace an “animal time where consciousness disappears.”

But these searchers and dropouts, who leave their children to become wards of the state, aren’t the only ones acting strange. The deer, too, have become rabid, violently attacking townspeople. Everyone, in one way or another, is affected by the turn of events: Berenice, a “left-behind,” who is searching for her disappeared mother; Vik, a refugee from the Caribbean island of Coloma, who discovers a cultist squatting in his closet; and Beryl, whose own experiments in the 1960s have left her slightly gun-crazy and out of whack (“one more passenger in the greatest shipwreck any era, any country, any generation has known”). Her solution: Organize a vigilante group of seniors to hunt down the wild deer.

It may all seem a lot to keep track of, but González manages to merge the stories of Berenice, Vik and Beryl — gradually revealed in alternating sections — into one dizzying vortex, combining colonial history, generational delusions and psychedelic drug trips. Fluidly translated by Cleary, the novel offers an eerily familiar vision of American madness and decay — from an Argentine writer, no less.

ANTONIO
By Beatriz Bracher
Translated by Adam Morris

Several forms of delirium — desire, idealism, grief — infect the privileged family of “Antonio,” a novel by the Brazilian writer Bracher.

Benjamim turns to three main witnesses for answers, and they don’t always agree. His grandmother, Isabel, proud matriarch of the Kremz family, has one version. “We’re not literature, my dear,” she warns him. “It’s much more complicated than a love story.” Raul, Teodoro’s closest friend from his youth, has his own take. And Haroldo, a former colleague of Benjamim’s grandfather Xavier, is still clouded by his feelings for Isabel and resentment of Raul.

What Benjamim discovers, however, is enough to mess with anyone’s head. Teodoro and Xavier, his father and grandfather, both fell madly in love — and had children — with the same woman, Elenir. Xavier married her when she was just a teenager in 1950, but had a mental breakdown when their infant child died.

Unaware of his father’s past, Teodoro encounters Elenir years later while roaming the sertão, or backlands, in the late 1970s. But, again, tragedy strikes, and Teodoro’s collapse is complete. “Sleeping with your father’s woman: Can anyone stand it without gouging his eyes out and being condemned to wander?” Raul asks. As in her novel “I Didn’t Talk” (also elaborately translated by Morris), Bracher brilliantly picks away at the web of secrets and lies plaguing a family and country.

IF YOU KEPT A RECORD OF SINS
By Andrea Bajani
Translated by Elizabeth Harris

Bajani’s “If You Kept a Record of Sins,” gracefully translated from the Italian by Harris, is a more muted tale of a son’s pain and loss, and the viewpoint is wholly his own. Lorenzo arrives in Bucharest for his mother’s funeral, flooded with feelings of abandonment that go way back. “You started leaving when I was young,” he tells her, beginning an inner conversation that courses through this slim, astonishing book.

As a child in Italy, Lorenzo grew accustomed to being left at home with his stepfather, as his mother, Lula, traveled the world hawking a newfangled weight-loss machine. He recalls the emptiness of their house when she was gone, and the exotic souvenirs that piled up when she returned: “They were from every country, every corner on earth, my room, trip after trip, becoming the world map of your absence.” Eventually, though, the gifts stopped coming. Lula, along with her business partner, Anselmi, permanently settled in Romania, a country crawling in the 1990s with “entrepreneurs, pioneers, hunters.”

Over a week, Lorenzo wanders the streets of Bucharest, killing time at the former palace of the dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer with Anselmi and other workers. At night, he watches the city light up from his mother’s apartment, unable to sleep. Who was she, he thinks, this woman he hardly knew? And what was her life like here after leaving him behind? Bajani etches an impressionistic portrait of a young man — like the foreign city outside his window — trapped in a shadow land between past and present.

*The Shortlist / Global Literature / By Anderson Tepper*
“OUR PORTRAIT OF Edith Wharton, whose serial novel in Scribner’s, ‘The House of Mirth,’ is so eagerly discussed this summer . . . is the first portrait printed in The New York Times Book Review in eight years or more,” the editors wrote in the Aug. 12, 1905 issue. It was also the first time an author photo appeared like this on the cover: “The departure from custom is surely justified by the widespread interest in the subject.” The photograph — as exquisitely composed as a scene in “The House of Mirth” — features Wharton in a lace tea dress at her desk.

When this issue appeared, “The House of Mirth” was captivating — and dividing — New York with its less-than-flattering depiction of high society. This was at a time when many novels were first published in serial form. Initially, the Book Review wasn’t a fan, writing in April 1905 that “it develops in a rather grim fashion,” but allowing that “we must be grateful for these glimpses of the inner social circle, given by one who has the magic password.” By June 1905, the Book Review was raving about the novel, and by August, literary New York could talk of little else.

“The recently printed assertion that ‘The House of Mirth,’ like most ‘society’ novels, promised to reach no logical or dramatic conclusion, seems to be sufficiently disproven in the latest installment,” the Book Review editors noted. “Indeed the novel has a well-wrought plot which cannot fail to develop a striking denouement.”

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