IN APRIL 2019, the comedian John Oliver devoted a segment of his satirical newscast on HBO to the Sacklers, owners of the company that makes the powerful painkiller Oxycodone. Public anger toward the family for seeding America’s opioid epidemic was building, and Oliver added to the opprobrium that evening by lampooning statements made by one of its members in court documents that had recently become public. Under the circumstances, you might have expected the Sacklers to feel chastened and lie low. But that would be badly underestimating their callousness.

Jacqueline Sackler, who married into the clan, tried to get Oliver to kill the segment before it aired. When that didn’t work, she sent an angry email to others in the family lamenting that the show was her son’s favorite and complaining that the unwanted media attention was interfering with his high school prospects. “Lives of children are being destroyed,” she railed, apparently unaware how entitled and tone-deaf she sounded.

This is one of many infuriating passages in Patrick Radden Keefe’s “Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty.” Put simply, this book will make your blood boil.

Some 500,000 Americans have died from opioid overdoses since 1999, and the Sacklers have been a central figure in this tragedy. Keefe, a staff writer at The New Yorker, has been covering the opioid crisis for years, and his reporting is masterful. He tells the story of how the Sackler family, led by their patriarch, Raymond, and his sons, turned a small pharmaceutical company into one of the largest and most profitable in the world. The company’s marketing campaign, which emphasized pain management over addiction, played a role in the opioid epidemic.

Kingpins

By John Carreyrou

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TO SUBSCRIBE to the Book Review by mail, visit nytimes.com/getbookreview or call 1-800-631-2580
INDEX OF WOMEN, by Amy Gerstler. (Penguin Poets, paper, $20.) Gerstler’s witty collection channels various characters — the tooth fairy, a lost doll — to celebrate “shrewd, / ingenious, difficult women, prodigal daughters / and wisecracking wives.”

THE PERSEVERANCE, by Raymond Antrobus. (Tin House, paper, $16.95.) Intimate and searching, the poems in this lively debut probe the author’s identity as a deaf Jamaican British man; sign language illustrations appear sporadically, and one poem is a scornful riposte to Ted Hughes’s “Deaf School.”

CLEAVE: POEMS, by Tiana Nobile. (Hub City, paper, $16.) Harry Harlow’s famous study, raising baby monkeys with wire or terrycloth “mothers,” runs as a motif through this collection about the poet’s experience as a Korean-American adoptee. “Call me Rhesus,” she writes, “monkey without a cloth.”

OH YOU ROBOT SAINTS!, by Rebecca Morgan Frank. (Carnegie Mellon University, paper, $15.95.) As the title suggests, Frank’s fourth book centers on the mechanical and the divine, especially on human efforts to bridge the gap, to create “a hawk from a handsaw.”

SKIN: POEMS, by Robert VanderMolen. (Milkweed, paper, $16.) “How difficult to piece one observation / Into the next without hyperbole or minor lie,” VanderMolen writes early in this book, his 12th, a testament to watchfulness.

WHAT WE’RE READING

I’d never heard of Myriam Gurba before she went viral last year for a series of sulfurous tweets about “American Dirt,” a problematic thriller about a Mexican migrant to the United States written by a white woman, Jeanine Cummins. The tweets (along with Gurba’s excellent negative review of the book, on Tropics of Meta) renewed a debate about cultural appropriation. What I noticed most, though, was Gurba’s voice, both swaggeringly jestful and pain-soaked. A year later, I read Gurba’s coming-of-age memoir, MEAN. It was as wrathful and hilarious as her Twitter account. But I was surprised by its simultaneous tenderness — for instance, in this gorgeous passage about Gurba’s childhood best friend: “We met in kindergarten, and I loved her when I was 5, I loved her when I was 6, I loved her when I was 7, I loved her when I was 8, I loved her when I was 9, I loved her when I was 10, I loved her when I was 11, I loved her when I was 12, and I loved her when I was 13. I have loved her up till now, and I have loved her in the future.”

—VAUHINI VARA, MAGAZINE STORY EDITOR
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROBERT DUGONI
IN HER TRACKS
TWO FAMILIES WITH PASTS SO DARK
ONLY TRACY CROSSWHITE
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“Tracy Crosswhite is one of the best protagonists in the realm of crime fiction today.”
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– ALEC BALDWIN, from the introduction

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His Life as a Man

TO THE EDITOR:
I have been a reader of the Book Review for more than 50 years, but I have never written in. Cynthia Ozick’s review of “Philip Roth: The Biography” (April 11) changed my mind. Simply put: This is the single best written book review I have ever read in my entire life.

I have been a loyal reader of all of Philip Roth’s books, and now Blake Bailey’s astonishing biography. Ozick, who is a gifted writer, absolutely brings to life, in her peerless prose and perceptiveness, the character of both Roth and the biography itself. Roth was one of the deans of American literature in the 20th century. Full stop. Whatever his critics may have said — and are saying — his 31 books are a testament to a life well written.

Ozick’s review is so beautifully written, so eloquent, so challenging, that I wish she too had written the Roth biography. Blake Bailey’s gift as a biographer — so evident with his book on John Cheever — is astonishing, and Ozick’s appreciation of that writing is remarkably generous. Her final sentence is worthy of Tolstoy and should be taught in every English class in this country.

What remains on the page is one writer’s life as it was lived, and — almost — as it was felt.

Bravo Cynthia Ozick, bravo Blake Bailey and bravo Philip Roth.

EVAN CHARKES
DOBBS FERRY, N.Y.

TO THE EDITOR:
Next time you assign a review for a new biography, try not to choose a partisan for the job. Ozick only wished it a different book.

If only she had considered those incisions before taking the scalpel to a colleague’s work by producing a partisan for the job. Ozick is particularly harsh on the legion of women Roth dumped, dismissively stressing they were all “ardently consensual.”

She rather coarsely describes how when Roth’s first wife was killed in a car crash, “Roth is suddenly liberated.” Roth’s second wife, Claire Bloom, wrote a surprisingly evenhanded account of her marriage, but Ozick characterizes it as “vindictive,” even though the word more accurately describes Roth’s largely worthless “I Married a Communist,” which was meant to even the score. The reviewer even denigrates Bloom’s love of her daughter as a “bizarre and consuming fixation.”

A review is meant to convey enough of a book to assist potential buyers in making up their minds. If Ozick’s hagiographic review accurately conveys Bailey’s hagiographic biography, we can all safely put it on our “Must Miss” list.

GEORGE BENT
BROOKLYN

Hand to Mouth

TO THE EDITOR:
Congratulations on the amazing piece of art you commissioned from Ian Wright. It is a perfect foil for the review.

JESSICA WEBER
NEW YORK

Unhistoric Acts

TO THE EDITOR:
Elizabeth McCracken’s damning-with-faint-praise review of Jackie Polzin’s “Brood” (April 4) is a skillful if pointless insult to a fellow novelist — one whose work had the bad fortune to fall into the hands of a reviewer who wished it a different book.

McCracken confesses that bad reviews of her own work by “professional critics” have meant little to her, while “the mildest mixed praise from one of my own, a fiction writer, is incised forever on my heart.”

If only she had considered those incisions before taking the scalpel to a colleague’s work by producing exactly the kind of mixed-praise review that has pained her.

LARRY ROTH
BERKELEY, CALIF.

Letters

TO THE EDITOR:
The close of A. O. Scott’s fine essay on Tillie Olsen (March 28) recalled the famous words that end “Middlemarch”: “But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

PENNY ROSE
TORONTO
Chris Bohjalian

The novelist, whose latest book is 'Hour of the Witch,' can read for hours in the bath: 'I also loved to read in swimming pools, pre-Covid, when vacations were a thing.'

What books are on your night stand?
I'm old school and don't read on a tablet, and so my night stand is a Jenga tower of galleys and manuscripts for books that won't be published for months. It's terrifying. One night, it's going to collapse and kill me in my sleep. There are always at least one or two books that are research for whatever novel I'm writing, which means in this case I have a book about skydiving and a book about the Ottoman massacre of Armenians in Adana, Turkey, in 1909. But three novels were recently published that I'd been looking forward to, and so amid the unstable skyscraper are Carol Edgarian's "Vera"; Kazuo Ishiguro's "Klara and the Sun"; and Viet Thanh Nguyen's "The Committed."

I'm always listening to audiobooks, too. Currently, it's James McBride's "Deacon King Kong."

What's the last great book you read?
Here are two I've read in the last four years that I recommend often: Rebecca Makkai's "The Great Believers" and Amor Towles's "A Gentleman in Moscow."

But I seem to reread "The Great Gatsby" more than any other novel, and the ending never fails to leave me happily melancholic. For a while I collected mass-market paperback editions of the book from the mid-20th century, and the covers are a scream. I have one where Gatsby looks like a 50-something vampire about to welcome Daisy into the world of the undead. She's in a strapless gown — all exposed neck and shoulders — and he looks, well, ravenous. The cover also boasts that it's "complete and unabridged," which always makes me smile because the novel is barely 47,000 words long. Can you imagine someone with a red pen in 1955 thinking to himself, "Hmm, do we really need 'boats against the current'?

Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).
I can read for hours in the bath. In the winter, when the sun sets early, it's pretty close to heaven to read there on a Sunday afternoon and watch the sun disappear over the small mountain west of where I live. I also loved to read in swimming pools, pre-Covid, when vacations were a thing. I'd stand waist-deep in the water, the book open flat on the coraline lip of the pool.

Your new novel anticipates the start of the Salem witch hysteria a few decades later. What other books would you recommend to people interested in the subject?
Begin with poetry by Anne Bradstreet. You won't find witches, but you will find poems that celebrate her love for her husband and the natural world, as well as one that mourns the loss of her library in a fire and another that expressed her desperate pain at the death of a grandchild. You will find spiritual doubt. They're beautiful, and they remind us that the Puritans' internal lives were as complex as ours.

There are plenty of fascinating books about witchcraft in history and about Salem in particular, but the one I like best is "The Devil in the Shape of a Woman," by Carol F. Karlsen. Bonus points for the title alone.

What kind of reader were you as a child? Which childhood books and authors stick with you most?
I was an avid reader. I was also an avid artist with Magic Markers, and I drew the Starship Enterprise in the sky above the Caribbean on the dust jacket of my mother's first edition of Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," and I colored the leaves on her first edition of Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" so the cover resembled a Peter Max poster.

The books that stuck with me are the ones that are heartbreaking: "Flowers for Algernon," by Daniel Keyes; "To Kill a Mockingbird"; and "Johnny Tremain," by Esther Forbes. I can still tell you the last line of all of them.

You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?
Writers have lots of dinners with other writers, and the best conversations are when we share litany of humiliating moments in our careers, or the single worst things we've written. So, I'd want writers who would make me laugh. Here are three who I think would fit the bill: Zadie Smith, Augusten Burroughs and Gary Shteyngart. (If you all say yes, the dinner is on me.)

An expanded version of this interview is available at nytimes.com/books.
You’ll Be a Woman Soon

Essays that tell a collective story of female adolescence, fraught with unwanted attention and abuse.

By BETSY BONNER

NEARLY A DECADE ago Melissa Febos reflected on her decision to publish her debut memoir, “Whip Smart,” under her own name and not a pseudonym: “It didn’t stop people from thinking of me as a former sex worker who also happened to write a book about it, instead of a writer who happened to tell the story of her own experience in sex work.” Nobody disrespects Febos anymore. Her 2017 autobiographical collection, “Abandon Me,” about a toxic love affair, her birth father and the sea captain who raised her, was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award and on many “best books of the year” lists. The former professional dominatrix now teaches nonfiction at Iowa.

GIRLHOOD
Essays
By Melissa Febos
Illustrated. 320 pp. Bloomsbury. 27.

Febos’s ambitious new collection, “Girlhood,” comprises eight essays about growing up in a female body that reached sexual development at the age of 11. “It was a race that I had won without trying,” she writes, “and to win it was the greatest loss of all.” The book is a feminist testament to survival: years of dehumanizing sex with boys and men, being stalked, drug addiction and what she describes as “a growing certainty about the ways in which I have collaborated in the mistreatment of my own body.” The story she tells is not just her own: Febos interviewed many other women about their sex lives and incorporated these testimonies into a far-reaching narrative.

Febos revisits her own girlhood in the style of a collage, interweaving her memories with snippets from her omnivorous reading. She includes six pages of source notes, and draws from Lacan, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Samuel Johnson. Lily Bart’s “ruin” in Edith Wharton’s novel “The House of Mirth” reminds Febos of how her classmates hated her for having what they wanted — a woman’s body. As a believer in animal rights, she identifies with a caged orangutan named Jenny; and she’s obsessed with cruel psychological experiments on nonhumans, such as Harry Harlow’s rhesus monkeys, deprived of touch for a year.

Yet Febos isn’t relentlessly grim. In “The Mirror Test,” she riffs ingeniously on the expression “loose as a goose,” which other kids used to slut-shame her. The geese in their town left droppings everywhere, she recalls. “Sometimes they flew in a V formation, their muscular wings beating in unison, their bodies’ improbable masses gliding over us in an arrow, honking as they sliced into the sky.” Then, after she masturbates, these literal geese are transformed into a portrait of the writer as a young woman: “I felt loose as a goose alone in my bedroom, my magnificent wings beating the air, flapping the pages of all my books.”

“Thank You for Taking Care of Yourself,” the longest and messiest — Febos might say sluttiest — piece in this collection, is partly set between two cuddle parties, where neither nudity nor touching anyone’s “bikini area” is permitted. (Febos informs us that these gatherings were invented in 2004, and that Cuddle Party was incorporated in 2016.) The essay’s title comes from what rejected people are supposed to say when another person refuses their touch. The cuddle party scenes read like a short story, with memorable characters, especially Febos’s supportive and beloved girlfriend, Donika — “the kind of person who fast-forwards to the end of the porn video after her orgasm to make sure that everybody comes.” At the first party, Febos role-plays saying no, then passively grants permission to those who want to touch her, an experience she finds mortifying and enraged. Then the narrative moves into manifesto territory: Febos recounts interviews she conducted with former strippers, all of whom had “consented on the job to touching that they didn’t want or enjoy.” Their recollections lead Febos to believe that her own experiences are, unfortunately, normal. At Donika’s suggestion, Febos goes to another cuddle party as a “mistress of no” — intending to practice denying anyone who wants something she doesn’t feel like giving — with great success. At the end of this piece, Febos credits her empowerment to “listening to the truths of other women.”

THE FINAL ESSAY, “Les Calanques,” puts a spin on the usual “double perspective” in memoir. Melissa today is sober, and a published writer at an art colony in the south of France, where she hasn’t been in 20 years, nearly half her life ago. The earlier Melissa had fled to France from New York to escape a boyfriend who, like her, was addicted to heroin. She found a new companion in a gay Algerian immigrant who had been subjected to much of the same abuse and shaming Melissa had. They created an idyllic, dope-sharing friendship that transcended gender, sexuality, the demands of patriarchy. Now, in Cassis, Febos spends her mornings doing physical therapy for a back injury she’s suffered after many years of running. The two Melissas, however, aren’t at odds with each other, but dear friends, whose “bodies curl in identical parentheses.” The compassion Febos has discovered for her younger self is inspiring.

I could have done without some of the other voices in this book — Lacan’s, Wharton’s, even those of some of her interview subjects — if only because Febos’s own voice is so irrelevant and original. The aim of this book, though, is not simply to tell about her own life, but to listen to the pulses of many others. In her author’s note, Febos writes that she has “found company in the stories of other women, and the revelation of all our ordinariness has itself been curative.” This solidarity puts “Girlhood” in a feminist canon that includes Febos’s idol, Adrienne Rich, and Maggie Nelson’s theory-minded masterpieces: smart, radical company, and not ordinary at all.
How to Get Away With Murder

THIS COLUMN doesn’t do trend spotting, but the proliferation of crime novels featuring true-crime podcasts as a plot device has not escaped notice. (I write and edit crime nonfiction; listening to such podcasts is an occupational hazard.) In her propulsive debut, GIRL, 11 (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 340 pp., $25), Amy Suter Clarke ventures further in the fusion of real-life and fictional crime storytelling, making the reader privy to excerpts and transcripts from “Justice Delayed,” the podcast hosted by her protagonist, Elle Castillo.

Elle investigates old cases to right wrongs and center the voices of victims of crime. But this new season of her show — focused on an unidentified serial culprit dubbed the Countdown Killer who, decades before, had poisoned his victims with deadly castor beans — threatens to undo her on professional and personal levels: “She had felt pressure to solve cold cases she investigated on earlier seasons of the podcast, but nothing compared to this. It felt like the whole world was watching her.”

Not only is the book difficult to put down, it’s also an adroit exploration of the ethical quandaries of true-crime storytelling, particularly in podcasts. For Elle, whose stake in finding a resolution runs deeper than she’s willing to admit, and for her listeners, these moral dilemmas take on a frightening edge.

JONATHAN AMES has been dancing around the edges of the crime genre for a number of years now, as evidenced by the postmodern HBO comedy series “Bored to Death” and his noirish novella-turned-film “You Were Never Really Here.” He has surrendered fully, and pleasurably, to his fate in A MAN NAMED DOLL (Mulholland, 224 pp., $26), the first in a dark new private detective series that’s a tightly coiled double helix of offbeat humor and unflinching violence.

Things go wrong as soon as Hank accidentally kills a meth-crazed customer at the spa (“I meant to shoot him in the leg to slow him down, but my hand was unsteady and I shot him through the neck and blood geysered out in a spray”), angering powerful people and setting up a cascade of ever more gruesome acts. There will be excised body parts, kidnappings, coerced surgeries, stolen cash, people tossed off balconies, fists rammed into Adam’s apples. Wherever Hank Doll goes, no matter how strange the trip, I’ll definitely follow.

BOOKS SHOULDN’T be judged by their covers, but what about their epigraphs? Cate Holahan draws the title of her newest suspense novel, HER THREE LIVES (Grand Central, 352 pp., paper, $15.99), from a quote by Gabriel García Márquez: “All human beings have three lives: public, private and secret.” It’s a telling quote that also shades the truth, for that tidy division blurs in the face of reality, as one couple is about to discover.

Jade Thompson is a social media influencer, and her fiancé, Greg, is an architect. Their 20-year age difference bothers him more than her, but it really sets off whoever invaded their home, caused Jade to miscarry and left Greg for dead. Maybe it’s an obsessed fan of Jade’s. Maybe the resentments of the family he left not long before meeting Jade have bubbled up to near-fatal levels. Or maybe the break-in is related to financial matters, both obvious and hidden. Trust erodes and tensions rise, even if the conclusion is telegraphed early enough that my interest began to wane.

Still, Holahan’s propensity toward melodrama at high pitch is quite entertaining, even if her ambitions aren’t quite met here.

FOR MEDDELIN CHAN, the wedding photographer protagonist of DIAL A FOR AUNTIES (Berkley, 299 pp., paper, $16), Jesse Q. Sutanto’s screwball adult debut, family loyalty is especially complicated. On the one hand, her lifelong devotion to her mother and aunts persuaded her to walk away from a formative relationship — something she still regrets — and work with them on a full-service wedding business. On the other hand, who else can she turn to when a dead body turns up in her car, something that’s not her fault? On the one wedding weekend that could make or break their business?

What follows is what might transpire from mashing up Nat-suo Kirino’s standout novel “Out” and the madcap film “Muriel’s Wedding,” infected with the hybrid linguistics Meddelin grew up with (“My Mandarin is awful, and my Cantonese nonexistent,” she says). It’s a high-wire act of comic timing, misunderstandings, romantic foibles and possibly foiled heists — not to mention, what’s going to happen to that dead body?

The glue is Meddelin, endearing, capable and in full thrall to her elders, who are all absolute hoots to keep company with.

SARAH WEINMAN writes the Crime column for the Book Review.
Four’s a Crowd
A novel about two couples, two coasts and one big secret.

By MEGHAN DAUM

IT HAS BECOME a truism that serialized television, notably the kind found on premium cable or streaming networks, has replaced the novel. When dramas like “The Wire” and “The Sopranos” took over the culture in the early aughts, the cliffhangers and capacious story arcs drew comparisons to Dickens and Thackeray, with audiences gripped in collective suspense as the story teases itself out in their living rooms.

In the days before the stream and binge era, when audiences were forced to wait a week between meals, the peristaltic process had a healthy rhythm. But today’s era of full-season dumps and limited series that can be wrapped up in a small handful of airtight episodes has created something of a prepared foods market for television executives. Instead of original scripts and ideas, it’s all about “I.P.”: pre-existing, easily adaptable intellectual property, often in the form of novels.

Writers of novels know this. Moreover, they know that the vicissitudes and changing business model of publishing mean that a novel’s success may depend just as much (and sometimes quite a bit more) on its potential for dramatic adaptation as it does on its ability to reach readers. As such, the contemporary novel has become a kind of television treatment, a story bible doing double duty as a literary experience.

“Good Company,” the second novel by Cynthia D’Aprix Sweeney, whose 2016 debut, “The Nest,” was a walloping best seller, is rich with such biblical qualities. A novel about two couples, two coasts and one big secret.

MEGHAN DAUM’S most recent book is “The Problem With Everything.” She is the creator and host of The Unspoken Podcast.
Flight Path

The splendor of birds that can travel whole continents, and all the ways they are threatened.

By CHRISTIAN COOPER

“GIVEN THE STATE of migratory birds around the world, I needed a little good news.”

Coming near the end of “A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds” — Scott Weidensaul’s gripping journey alongside the world’s feathered wanderers and the people who study them — these words are necessarily grim. Any longtime birder offers the same lament: Migration just isn’t what it used to be.

The plummeting numbers of songbirds and shorebirds, raptors and waterfowl, have become painfully apparent; a recent study collating decades of data revealed that nearly a third of all birds — three billion creatures — have vanished from North America in just the last 30 years. Weidensaul tasks himself with communicating to both the knowing birder and the layman the epic scale of what’s happening in our skies every year, the whys and hows, while offering rays of hope through the gloomy storm clouds. The success of “A World on the Wing” in navigating that challenge rivals the astonishing feats of the birds he chronicles.

Those feats and the jaw-dropping science behind them form the heart of the book. A tiny ruby-throated hummingbird crosses the entirety of the Gulf of Mexico in a single nonstop flight; inconceivable, until Weidensaul describes certain whirlbrels — a shorebird somewhat bigger than a pigeon — that leave the Canadian Arctic, travel east the width of the continent, and hurl themselves over the North Atlantic, directly into raging seasonal storms whose winds, it turns out, give them a boost for a nonstop transoceanic flight from the Canadian Maritime Provinces to Brazil. Suddenly the hummingbird seems like a slacker.

“A World on the Wing” is littered with such wonders: birds who can pack on fat without obesity’s downsides, add muscle when and where it’s needed, and burn fuel with extraordinary efficiency, qualities that would make endocrinologists, bodybuilders and weight loss gurus salivate. Migrants can even “see” the Earth’s magnetic field via the quantum entanglement of the electrons in their eyes, an evolutionary trick that is the stuff of science fiction.

Like the Swainson’s hawks he studied in California, Weidensaul is returning to familiar territory. His 1999 book, “Living on the Wind,” also explored bird migration; the difference this go-round is time and skin in the game. Since the days when he first wrote about the subject, Weidensaul by his own account has steadily been drawn from the role of observer to participant in the hands-on science of migration. This allows him to give us portraits of the scientists and concerned community members alongside whom he has manned the barricades, trying to understand the scientific and conservation challenges rivals the astonishment behind the wild.

World on the Wing” in navigating that challenge rivals the astonishing feats of the birds he chronicles.

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Weidensaul writes. “They darted across the narrows created from the contributions of everyday birding enthusiasts. From those data, conservationists were able to determine when migrating wetland birds would be arriving in the region, and they paid farmers to flood their rice fields to coincide with those periods. These pop-up wetlands resulted in lower costs for conservationists compared with outright land acquisition; ing the clouds or ruffled by the breeze.”

Weidensaul is describing the Yellow Sea, a barren, seemingly lifeless expanse on China’s coast that is a banquet hall for millions of migrating shorebirds for whom this is the one and only possible rest stop: “The flocks came from the south, dense layers of small bodies that undulated and folded into themselves, creating sheets, splitting into tendrils, forming separate tributaries that reunited into great rivers of wings, all moving with tremendous speed.”

At its best, “A World on the Wing” brims with spectacle: the silhouettes of a hundred thousand Amur falcons flying past the moon, ten thousand Swainson’s hawks soaring against the setting sun before roosting together in eucalyptus trees, waves of colorful warblers moving along the St. Lawrence River in Quebec in one of the greatest shows on Earth — shows that were once the norm, and now are increasingly rare.

THE PASSION Weidensaul brings to these scenes is personal. “A World on the Wing” finds some of its most moving moments early on, when he charts the development of his own interest in birds. As he describes watching the great movements of raptors over Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania, “fly-fishing in the air” to lure a golden eagle into his bander’s mist net, or the simple pleasure of celebrating the raucous arrival of Canada geese every spring over his childhood home (“Big Goose Day” his family called it; “but it’s not like we baked a coke or anything,” his sister adds), a birder can be forgiven for nodding in recognition. And non-birders can feel enough of the joy that they too might be inspired to partake of the wild.

Spring rushes up the shoots of growing things, and from the towers of New York to the farms of Alabama, from the plains of Manitoba to the wet woods of Cascadia, we know that wings rushing up from the south are not far behind. “As the light grew around me, the woods, I realized, were seething with birds,” Weidensaul writes. “They darted across the narrow trails I followed beneath the oaks, flickers and slashes of motion in my peripheral vision, and flushed before me like a bow wave as I walked — warblers and sparrows, buntings and orioles, catbirds and thrushes, flycatchers and grosbeaks. This was the kind of day for which my colleagues and I came here.” As the birds fly through these pages, with but ever less frequency through our lives, we can only hope that birders and non-birders alike take inspiration and a call to action from “A World on the Wing.” This is the kind of book we’ve been waiting for.

By CHRISTIAN COOPER

“I needed a little good news.”

Chris Cooper is a board member of the NYC Audubon and the author of the forthcoming memoir “Better Living Through Birding.”

EXTRAS

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT TERRELL/SKAGIT VALLEY HERALD, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Trumpeter swans in the skies of Washington State, where they spend the winter.

Nearly a third of all birds — three billion creatures — have vanished from North America.

By CHRISTIAN COOPER

Extra cash in the pockets of farmers; and, most important, five times more birds than in the average Central Valley farm field.

All of this ecological focus, written accessibly without sacrificing an iota of the science, still might have made for some dry reading, if not for Weidensaul’s knack for evocative passages and immersive scenes: “The world was precisely equal halves of gray, divided by the flat line of the horizon — the smoky silver of an overcast sky, unmarked and smooth, and the darker, mottled granite and charcoal of a mud flat that stretched to every side, paper-thin sheets of water lying on its surface reflect-
I was at my local bookstore when I ran into an acquaintance who started regaling me with stories of his own and honest relationship with his 15-year-old son. “I am super lucky,” he said, as I gagged behind my mask and slowly backed into the self-help/parenting section. “There are no secrets in our house.”

For the better part of a year, I’ve been cooped up with three teenagers who constantly remind me how little I know — not just about their areas of expertise (politics, foreign affairs, public health, education, music, the environment, real estate and parenthood, to name a few), but also about some details of their lives. I am the mother of these teenagers and we share a not-very-big house, but their doors are frequently closed, in every sense of the word. I try to provide decent snacks and respect their privacy — to an extent.

JoAnne Tompkins’s nail-biting wallop of a debut novel, WHAT COMES AFTER (Riverhead, 432 pp., $28), presents a nightmare scenario where adolescent secrets mushroom out of control, with devastating consequences. It’s a cautionary tale, one that prompted me to ask a series of probing, un-welcome questions at the dinner table. But it’s also a powerful and inspiring reminder of how a close-knit community will rally around people in trouble, no matter their age.

The story begins with the deaths of two high school students — Daniel Balch and Jonah Geiger, who grew up as neighbors in Port Furlong, Wash., a woody fictional town perched on the banks of Puget Sound. A week into his senior year, Daniel disappears after football practice; eight days later, Jonah dies by suicide, leaving behind a note confessing to his friend’s murder.

“These are the facts,” observes Daniel’s father, Isaac, who is a high school biology teacher, a conflicted Quaker and the most assured of Tompkins’s narrators. “All they reveal is that the greatest mysteries lie in what we believe we already know.”

Then we meet Evangeline McKensey, a red-haired, pregnant 16-year-old with a connection to the dead boys.

Abandoned by her drug-addicted mother, she makes her way to Isaac’s massive, half-renovated Victorian, knowing he’s rattleing around in there by himself. (The Balches are divorced; aside from her appearance at his funeral, Daniel’s mother only appears in flashbacks.) Isaac welcomes Evangeline, offering her a plate of lasagna, a bed with a blue quilt and a box of his ex-wife’s clothes. He doesn’t ask a lot of questions, which might seem odd but . . . that’s Isaac.

“His core was fixed, like a steel stake that was driven through him, a rigidity that both anchored and pained him,” writes Tompkins, a former lawyer who displays an evenhandedness befitting her background. Just as we think we’re going to ally ourselves with Isaac, we pivot to the other side of the fence, to the Geigers’ house. Jonah pipes up from beyond the grave, giving us a tour of the last day of his life and the difficult years leading up to it. We follow his mother, Lorrie, a quiet, long-suffering hero, as she works at a nursing home, ferries her daughter to school and finds time to drop off healthy salads for Evangeline (who says she is “practicing eating disgusting things for the baby”).

Slowly, the adults in “What Comes After” piece together the painful events that brought Evangeline into their lives. They lean into their blind spots as neighbors and as parents, facing an ugly truth about someone they trusted. And, of course, all the while Isaac and Lorrie wonder who is the father of Evangeline’s baby. They join forces to support her through a difficult pregnancy, but they rarely work in tandem. Will a child bring peace or divide them further? Will Evangeline be able to accept their help when she needs it the most?

Tompkins delivers a thoughtful, unexpectedly optimistic tale of people doing their best. The ending of “What Comes After” may not be 100 percent happy — how could it be? — but it has the feel of a beginning, which is exactly where most of us want to be right now.

To join the conversation about “What Comes Next,” go to our Facebook page, @nybooks, or our Instagram, @NYTBooks.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
What did you make of Isaac’s clearness committee? Did you find yourself searching “How can I become a Quaker?” or were you put off by the idea?

+ How realistic was Tompkins’s portrait of Evangeline’s experience of impending motherhood? What made her willing to accept such a major responsibility?

SUGGESTED READING
MY ABSOLUTE DARLING, by Gabriel Tallent. This novel about a near-feral child surviving abuse shares Tompkins’s approach of calibrating a treacherous story with flashes of natural beauty and human decency.

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN, by Lionel Shriver. Looking for a dark plot with zero silver lining? Start here. Through a series of (fictional) letters from a killer’s mother to her absent husband, Shriver shows a family unraveling and the slow, unrelenting march to the event that will tear them apart.

ELISABETH EGAN is an editor at the Book Review and the author of “A Window Opens.”
Life Hands You Lemons
This novel's hero drinks a magical elixir to pursue success.

By LAUREN CHRISTENSEN

IN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOLS, IT IS NOT UNCOMMON to see stressed-out teenagers pop an Adderall or Ritalin. Maybe they have A.D.H.D., or got the pill from a friend, a dealer, a parent. The goal often being to chase not a high, but the illusion of perfection. To live up to a parent’s expectations. To perform.

In Sanjena Sathian’s debut novel, “Gold Diggers,” the teenage protagonist’s drug of choice is not quite F.D.A. approved: It is literal gold, treasures lifted from neighbors and vendors, smelted at home, mixed with sugar and lemons and imbied as “lemonade.” The elixir instills the kind of manic focus — not just on a math test or school debate, but on an entire future — that is needed to “make it” as the child of immigrants in America.

Neeraj, who goes by Neil, lives in the suburb of Hammond Creek, Ga., across the street from his classmate Anita Duyal. Ani-ta’s mother, Anjali, is the one person in town who knows how to mix the golden drink, a legacy of her upbringing in Bombay. The year is roughly 2005, and Kanye’s “Gold Digger” is playing on repeat. In this world populated mostly by “desis” (South Asians and their American-born kids), the way to succeed looks, not coincidentally, a lot like the way to succeed in the white world: Go to Harvard.

Some kids play the game dutifully. “My sister telephraged her ambitions in the Duke poster on her wall,” Neil says. But for him, there is no poster. He fears a future limited by his “absorbed averagness” — which, for a brown person, means no future at all. That is, until his first sip of lemonade bonds him to generations of Indian ancestry.

Of the novel’s many plotlines, all are secondary to the wrenching, will-they-or-won’t-they love story between Neil and Anita. Part 1 bonds them in a verboten drug operation, though Anita’s eyes are too set on college, the Miss Teen India winner story. At each end of America, where everyone was always going somewhere, and fast.

But is this always somewhere we want to be? In Silicon Valley, the Teslas and smart fridges and apps that peddle the promise of immortality are merely the latest iterations of the pure gold that once lured 300,000 men out west, the latest tools this country has used to capitalize on the outsiders’ fears that we are not, will never be, enough. Touring yuppy houses in Redwood City; Neil has a panic attack, crouching on the carpeted floor in a pose that’s almost prayerlike. “Everyone’s ease was galactically distant,” Sathian writes, her often exquisite prose humming with contagious anxiety. “I wanted to disdain this prescribed life and yet I could not help it. . . . I wanted what it gave everyone else.”

Of course, a book can be its own manifestation of the American dream. Neil’s imagined Bombay at one point joins a local newspaper, “for who would suspect a professional writer of English to be an outsider?”

“Make use of all you took,” Neil urges his gold digger, as Sathian urges Neil. “Write yourself into America.”

GOLD Diggers
By Sanjena Sathian
344 pp. Penguin Press. $27.

The tension Sathian builds is one of teenage insecurity swelling into adulthood, until disillusion overthrows the tyranny of American perfectionism. By Part 2, Neil is a Ph.D. candidate at Berkeley who cares less about his history dissertation than about the semificctional “Bombay gold digger,” a man he conjures, obsessively, as one of the few Hindu émigrés to the California coastline during the gold rush in the mid-1800s.

This intimate glimpse of millennials who are second-generation Americans (“conceptual orphans,” as Neil calls them) shows how history repeats. It is a story of immigrants reaping their futures from property they have found, which is not

Pick Your Poison
A thorny collection of personal essays on the plant kingdom.

By ALEX BEGGS

I’VE BEEN THINKING about how to murder a man with cherry pits. Pie, definitely. I’d get a few yards of cherries, then smash the pits and mix with vodka into an am bulletike, but poisonous, extract. The chemical compounds in the pits would react with his stomach acid to create bootleg cyanide. It’d take, I estimate, three whole pies for me to pull this off, but still. As Kate Lebo explores in “The Book of Difficult Fruit,” within the plant kingdom, there lurk so many potential killers.

My cherry obsession aside, this darkly funny and clever essay-collection is not a witch’s guide to killing your man. Each chapter takes on a different prickly, stinky, tricky, troublesome fruit — its history and usage in herbalism, its flavor and appeal, its dangers — and ends with recipes. “In this book, fruit is not the nuggets, skinned, bright-hued, waxed and edible ovary of the grocery store,” Lebo writes (waxed ovary!). “What nurtures and what harms are entangled.” I turned the page so fast I got a paper cut.

“Deeply researched” doesn’t begin to describe how far into ancient texts and their subtext, obscure cookbooks and corners of the internet Lebo excavated to tell us the stories of these fruits. What she digs up for each is often fascinating, sometimes juicy, rarely dry. She interviews experts, including LaRae Wiley, a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes, on picking huckleberries, and Dale from Poison Control (for obvious reasons). In the standout juniper chapter, Lebo searches for evidence that women drank juniper tonics to terminate pregnancies and finds it in an herbalist’s guide from 1597 (“Gerard’s Herbal”) claimed the plant’s “leaves, when ‘boyled in Wine and drunke,’ can . . . ‘expel the dead childle, and kill the quicke’”).

The back stories ease into essays on femininity and Bath & Body Works (vanilla!), grandmothers holding onto family secrets (elderberry), Kara Walker’s “Sugar Baby” sculpture (sugar cane) and beautiful pointlessness (sorry, Osage oranges). Along the way, we get morsels of memoir like carefully plucked trail berries. These glossy reveals of cherries, the woman who shaped her reverence for the plant world; the romances that brought out Lebo’s own best and worst food habits — the kind of truth you can’t find in a library.

Every fruit is ripe for metaphor for Lebo, who is both a poet and a baker. She resists giving symbolism too much power, but it’s hard when you realize that the needy ex-boyfriend is like an Italian plum tree, a novelty to care for who soon becomes an intolerable burden.

Sometimes ideas are poison, too. At the turn of the 20th century, the Darwinian botanist Luther Burbank bred blackberries to be thornless and nonthreatening. Turns out Burbank had similar ideas about breeding the human race. In Burbank’s “The Training of the Human Plant,” Lebo notes, “we see how it can be dangerous to compare people to plants. How, taken to their extreme logical conclusions, such metaphors become — as they always half were — inhuman.”

This was the moment you, er, I, person who took one Derrida class in college, realized maybe this book isn’t about fruit at all, but about language. That maybe encyclopedias, so neatly alphabetized, are presented as complete knowledge of the world, yet end up being as useful as a metaphor. You get halfway to truth, but the more you read about thimbleberries, the more you just want to taste their “rich, raspberry-like flavor that’s more intense than one would expect, as if it’s been concentrated by gentle heat.” I’d love to smell durian, which Lebo describes as “strawberries and old garlic,” and “sweet and trashy, like a cantaloupe that’s been left in the car.”

“The Book of Difficult Fruit” is brimming with obscure knowledge that’s going to loom over every gin martini I drink for the next decade. Blackberry shrub, red wine vinegar, yuzu marmalade, huckleberry pie and maraschino cherries are now on my to-cook list. These recipes include some of the book’s funniest moments, like the ones for “hiker’s toilet paper” (thimbleberry leaves are giant and fuzzy) and dinary lip balm (“Some people will say this lip balm stinks. No kisses for them.”)

This is where the fruit we used as a stand-in for depression, motherhood or a bad ex is transformed back into its original, edible self. The ingredients, like words, get thoughtfully measured and weighed and mixed into something delicious and meaningful. Or maybe it’s just a pie.

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Eight Ways of Looking at Haruki Murakami

A new story collection prompts questions on music, fiction and the weight of the past.

By DAVID MEANS

Magic

All fiction is magic. That’s the thought that occurred to me often as I read “First Person Singular,” the brilliant new book of stories by Haruki Murakami, author of international best sellers.

The freezing man in Kafka’s “Bucket Rider” floats above icy streets in a bucket, asks a couple for coal and then flies away when he is refused. In Langston Hughes’s neglected “On the Road,” a homeless Black man who is denied help by a white pastor grabs the stone pillars of a church and pulls it down — and we accept it. As long as we’ve been properly grounded by a careful set of instructions, we readers will have visions.

Whatever you want to call Murakami’s work — magic realism, supernatural realism — he writes like a mystery tramp, exposing his global readership to the essential and cosmic (yes, cosmic!) questions that only art can provoke: What does it mean to carry the baggage of identity? Who is this inside my head in relation to the external, so-called real world? Is the person I was years ago the person I am now? Can a name be stolen by a monkey?

The Bridge

Murakami is wildly popular around the world, which makes him somewhat suspect in literary circles. Because his style has supposedly drawn too much from the West, some Japanese critics have labeled it batakusai, which translates roughly to “stinking of butter.” His reputation, by his own admission, is better internationally than it is in Japan.

His novels — the astonishing “Wind-Up Bird Chronicle,” the sprawling “IQ84” — spiral like galaxies from central cores, but his stories are quasars, exploding with light as they reveal his themes. I’ve begun to think of Murakami’s works as teaching stories, like “Tales of the Dervishes,” by Idries Shah, or even the Parables. His great subject is ultimately the enigma of time as it relates to the inner self, to the musical mystery underneath everything.

In what feels like a classic example of the anxiety of influence, Murakami has long pushed back against the weight of Kenzaburo Oe, whose 1964 book “A Personal Matter” exemplified the Japanese I-novel, a form of autofiction before autofiction was even a word, and took the literary world by storm. But recently, in an introduction to “The Penguin Book of Japanese Short Stories,” he admitted that his I-novel allegory had become less intense. One can feel him easing up in the eight stories collected in “First Person Singular,” allowing his own voice — or what sounds like his own voice, wonderfully translated by Philip Gabriel — to enter the narratives, creating a confessional tone that reminded me of Alice Munro’s late work.

Murakami is not popular throughout the world because he consciously integrates Western ideas and language into his fiction, but because his work — fueled by a tension with his forebears — fuses cultures, or perhaps leaps over them, defying time, beating like pop songs, touching universal nerves.

Charlie Parker

Tom Waits once said that “if you want to catch songs you gotta start thinking like one,” and you could imagine Murakami’s process as an extension of this, catching stories via musical thinking, whether it’s jazz in “Charlie Parker Plays Bossa Nova,” pop in “With the Beatles” or classical in “Carnaval,” all included in this collection. There’s a constant interplay in the book between the way music works and the way narrative unfolds. (If you want to get a sense of Murakami’s physical relationship to music, read his wonderful, intimate discussions with the conductor Seiji Ozawa, in “Absolutely on Music.”)

In a recent radio interview he claimed that music was his writing teacher — just as he has said that his writing is informed by his distance running. (But that’s too simple. All writers attempt to find some hook to explain the unexplainable.)

“Charlie Parker Plays Bossa Nova” is a fanfic love song, powered by a compassionate desire to resurrect. It starts with a review of an imaginary Parker album, written as a lighthearted prank by the narrator when he was a college student. But years later, to his bewilderment, he spots this nonexistent record in a store on East 14th Street.

Murakami gives himself a chance to talk to Parker, through a dream his narrator has at the end of the piece. Bird speaks to us; he’s real. The story becomes a tender resurrection and love, powered by a beautiful truth: that the artists we love are constantly resurrected by our experience of their work.

(Reading it, I got the same feeling I got watching the late Chadwick Boseman in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” and when I searched Spotify later, it made sense that someone had already created a playlist, an imagined album from the story, which made me think about the destabilizing forces that feed our visions: the shaky world of postwar Japan, perhaps, for Murakami, who was born in 1949 amid wreckage and a sudden infusion of new cultures, or a larger contemporary world in which cultures now destabilize one another, collapsing time and distance, creating wonderful new art — a Bad Bunny song, sung in Spanish, pulsing on a trap beat crafted in Los Angeles, drifting atop a roar of digital current.)

Reality

Sometimes I think we forget, or refuse to admit, that as soon as a story exists in print and is read, it becomes real. Maybe it’s time we simply retire the term “magic realism,” because all fictions are both realistic and magical.

There are two opposite tendencies in literature, according to Italo Calvino: “One tries to make language into a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud . . . . The other tries to give language the weight, density and concreteness of things, bodies and sensations.” Murakami has found his own path — as light as a runner between strides, floating for a few seconds in the zero gravity of movement, and as heavy as the footfalls on the soles of his Mizuno running shoes. Like Raymond Carver’s work, Murakami’s stories — his early ones in particular — are guided by clear, strong voices that are deceptively easy to read, digestible but always leading to a precise pivot, from that seemingly smooth gloss of realism, toward a deeper musical wisdom.

The Beatles

“With the Beatles” opens with a young woman walking down a school hallway, clutching a Beatles album, and becoming an image the narrator will never forget (he never sees her again). The narrator — as observed by his older self — then remembers his first girlfriend and an autumn day in 1965, when he went to her house for a date, found her gone and instead spent
time with her brother, who suffered from acute memory loss.

To kill time, waiting for the young woman to arrive, he read aloud the final section of the 1927 story “Spinning Gears,” by Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Later, when we leap forward several years to a chance encounter with the brother; up in the mountains of Kobe, and learn of a tragedy that recalls the fate of Akutagawa, who killed himself shortly after writing his astonishingly contemporary story, we see Murakami bowing to one of his literary ancestors. An indelible imprint, the narrative power of the past.

(Describing how these stories succeed is like trying to describe exactly why, more than 50 years later, a Beatles song still sounds fresh — the songwriting energies from the psychodelic John Lennon combined with the hard-core realism of Paul McCartney forming a singular vision. I’m tempted to say here that Murakami’s vast popularity comes from the fact that he’s a fusion of Lennon and McCartney [and perhaps Glenn Gould].)

Cream

Murakami forces us into our past, when we were young enough to believe in the old, hippie word “cosmic,” when we could all get high just by trying to imagine a circle with no circumference.

A teenager ends up on a mountaintop in Kobe, sitting in a garden, listening to an old man talk. “Your brain is made to think about difficult things,” the man explains. “To help you get to a point where you understand something that you didn’t understand at first. You can’t be lazy or neglectful. Right now is a critical time. Because this is the period when your brain and your heart form and solidify.”

As a short story writer myself, I feel my own acute inability to urge the reader to spend time with this collection, to purchase a sequence of brief experiences that will not, as a novel might, immerse them in the hours of a steadily unfurling narrative. But these are flickering, quick times, and what a story can do that a novel can’t is pull us into the intricate motions of a single instant, expansive on both ends — the before of everything before the narrative begins, and the infinite future beyond the terminal sentences — and, like a song, or a poem, leave us wanting to reread, to rehear the voice, to relocate the pinpoint in the map of our lives.

The Stone Pillow

Let’s turn now to a one-time hookup (the translator’s word) and explore the nature of erotic bliss — the distance between touch and memory. The tone, as in all of the stories in this book, is autumnal, and fancies of memory are openly admitted. A young woman writes tanka poems, and when she and her lover end up naked in each other’s arms, she warns him that when she orgasms, she will yell the name of someone else. He’s fine with this but he asks her to bite a towel because the walls are thin.

“Loving someone is like having a mental illness that’s not covered by health insurance,” she explains. (Again, we’re back to some place we’ve forgotten, young enough to seek, to feel the wildness of reality, just as we might feel listening to Patti Smith — perhaps Murakami’s most devoted fan — singing “Dancing Barefoot.”)

The story, “The Stone Pillow,” flows to a moment years later, when the narrator finds a tattered book, the young woman’s, and reads a few of the poems, opening up one of Murakami’s profoundly beautiful arias:

“If we’re blessed, though, a few words might remain by our side. They climb to the top of the hill during the night, crawl into small holes dug to fit the shape of their bodies, stay quiet still, and let the stormy winds of time blow past. The dawn finally breaks, the wild wind subsides, and the surviving words quietly peek out from the surface. For the most part they have small voices — they are shy and only have ambiguous ways of expressing themselves. Even so, they are ready to serve as witnesses. As honest, fair witnesses. But in order to create those enduring, long-suffering words, or else to find them and leave them behind, you must sacrifice, unconditionally, your own body, your very own heart. You have to lay down your neck on a cold stone pillow illuminated by the winter moon.”

The Monkey

Perhaps the most revelatory story in the book is a sequel to an earlier, widely anthologized piece, “A Shinagawa Monkey,” first published in The New Yorker in 2006. In it, a monkey sneaks around Tokyo stealing names — literally stealing them, so that the victims can’t remember their own names. “It’s a sickness I suffer from,” the monkey says, when he’s finally captured and interrogated. “Once I fix on a name, I can’t help myself. Not just any name, mind you. I’ll see a name that attracts me, and then I have to have it. I know it’s wrong, but I can’t control myself.”

All of the victims are young women whom the monkey finds desirable, and giving the criticism sometimes leveled at the male gaze in Murakami’s work, it can be tempting to read the follow-up, “Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey,” as an overearnest attempt at atonement, an assurance that the impulse was driven by sincere admiration — love — not lechery.

“I make the name of the woman I love a part of me,” the monkey tells the narrator, over cold beers in a hotel in Gunma Prefecture. It is “a completely pure, platonic act. I simply possess a great love for that name inside of me, secretly. Like a gentle breeze wafting over a meadow.” Still, he says, he has made up his mind to stop.

One senses a greater task for the author: probing earlier creative impulses, examining the relationship between his own life and the act of conjuring lives out of nothing. This is the current that runs through all fiction — the musical frisson between the real and the imagined. What better way to remake, without wholly rejecting, your past self than to re-evaluate your creations, your fictive ghosts?

This story isn’t an excusing of the past but a kind of reconciliation, and when, at the end, we realize that it’s highly possible that the monkey is still out there stealing names, unable to control himself, we feel that Murakami — older, wiser, faults acknowledged — is also out there, making up stories, imagining the other, making that leap over the chasm between real and unreal, thickening, with each tale he creates, the perplexity of his own art.

What does it mean to carry the name of a beloved inside you, the narrator wonders, after his encounter with the monkey. Indeed, what does it mean to carry my beloved wife’s name, Genève, inside me? The question amplifies the glory of life — theloneliness and joy of hauling the baggage of my own identity, which I’m able to escape only when I’m bearing someone else’s story, dreaming my way in.
Seize the Day

In this novel, characters approach the world with hubris and humor.

By CONNIE SCHULTZ

JANE LOVES DUNCAN. But should she?

Duncan is a handsome and friendly woodworker who moonlights as a locksmith in small-town Boyne City, Mich. He’s the guy everybody knows, wink-wink.

Jane is new in town. She’s a second-grade teacher who operates according to the rhythm of a child’s world. She understands that her students return to school in fall on a “summer rock-star schedule and arrive at school still half-asleep.” She’s sympathetic to a little girl whose father, at the fall on a “summer rock-star schedule and arrive at school still half-asleep.” She’s sympathetic to a little girl whose father, at a parent conference, exclaims, “Wow, Crystal’s in second already?” On a wintry day, she surrenders to her students’ collective longing and gives them a two-minute break to stare out the windows as fat snowflakes tumble from the sky.

Early in “Early Morning Riser,” Jane falls hard for Duncan, and it doesn’t take long for her to observe that he is “good with women the way other people are good with cars or numbers.” Everyone woman of reproductive age, it seems, knows him by name. After they start dating, he gives Jane a necklace for Christmas, and she recognizes it as identical to the one worn by one of his former girlfriends, a waitress at a local restaurant. Does he buy them in bulk? she wonders.

Does it matter? She’s not sure.

Years into their relationship, after their friend Jimmy moves in with them (you’ll agree that he should), she buys a new mattress for Duncan’s old bed. How ironic, she notes silently, that “a bed that had launched a thousand women’s orgasms — possibly tens of thousands — had come to rest in the room of a man who’d never had a girlfriend.”

Fortunately, Duncan is more complicated than that, as is everyone else in Katherine Heiny’s quiet whirlwind of a novel, which covers a single decade in Jane’s life. Just as things start to settle down, a tragic accident upends the community and Jane begins the hard work of figuring out what it really means to love another person. Is there a limit to how much the heart can hold?

Heiny writes about small-town life without ridicule or slapstick, and never resorts to idyllic depictions of a long-ago day that never existed. Gossip can be the trigger for neighbors’ concern, but kindness will get them to your front door.

Jane is self-deprecating, but generous in her assessment of most everyone else, including the girl at the video store who “carried her breasts in front of her as though they were a couple of large cupcakes.” She will not be jealous of this girl, who is yet another ex of Duncan’s.

Jane picks up on things quickly. She senses old grudges that make the air “electric with jealousy.” A man’s stiff stride reminds her of “how some of her shyer students crossed the room to use the pencil sharpener.” The first time she meets Duncan’s ex-wife, Aggie, their conversation makes her feel “like a dog drinking from a water bowl while her owners talked over her head.”

At its heart, this is a serious story full of lightness. When Jane is sitting in her doctor’s waiting room, she notices a man whose dental-floss-thin mustache meets in narrow lines at his chin. “It looked like someone had circled an area on his face with a marker and said, ‘This here is where your mustache and beard should go.’” If only all of us women could distract ourselves this way before a pelvic exam.

And then there’s Jimmy, a kind man in his late 30s whom many describe as “slow learning” — but is he? Jimmy is as full a human being as anyone claiming residency in Boyne City. He is also the one person who can help Jane discover who she is meant to be.

By ALANNA BENNETT

CRAFTSMAN AND SMALL clapboard houses still dot the streets of Portland, Ore., as they have for over a century, but next to them now you will find walls of steel and glass stretching up into the city’s gray skies. If you’re familiar with the area, the sight may be chilling. These condos stand in the place of old churches and Boys & Girls Clubs, on lots purchased by developers and sold by families who often had little choice. You may get a sense, looking at half-built 12-unit condominiums with rents twice as high as those families’ mortgages, that they’re not just replacing the old ways of Portland. They may be replacing everything.

ALANNA BENNETT is a screenwriter for “Roswell, New Mexico.” Her culture writing has appeared in BuzzFeed, Teen Vogue, Eater and more.

Down and Out in Portland

A young protagonist is determined to hold her impoverished family together.

By WILLY VLAUTIN

THE NIGHT ALWAYS COMES


Girls Clubs, on lots purchased by developers and sold by families who often had little choice. You may get a sense, looking at half-built 12-unit condominiums with rents twice as high as those families’ mortgages, that they’re not just replacing the old ways of Portland. They may be replacing everything.

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every day. She works two jobs while attending community college and caring for a brother with developmental disabilities (Vlautin never specifies his condition). She does all this with a single goal in mind: to raise enough money to put a down payment on the house her family has lived in for Lynette’s whole life. That down payment, in combination with a loan to be taken out by her mother, is the only way for the three to stay together. After years of depression and rage she’s worked hard to control, Lynette is bent on controlling this as well. Her dream is simply to chart a future for her family that would allow them to live without the looming specter of displacement.

But when Lynette’s mother reneges on the deal, that dream disappears in an instant. Lynette spirals, and most of the novel takes place over a single night as she tears feverishly through Portland, chasing down any lead that might result in some extra cash that could right the situation. Most of the people Lynette meets on this tragic, desperate night do not react kindly, and as the evening turns violent the exhaustion and isolation of her poverty ring clear as day.

The novel, Vlautin’s sixth, stalls out during its many long monologues spelling out exactly what each character is thinking in clunky detail. Vlautin’s etchings of the city’s poor, white population are at times overwrought, especially around the topic of weight, as are the inner lives of anyone who’s not the main character. That tendency is extra egregious when it comes to Lynette’s mother, a dreary antagonist whose motives no number of monologues manage to three-dimensionalize.

The novel regains its footing, though, in the moments where we get to live in Lynette’s inner world. “The whole city is starting to haunt me,” Lynette says in the novel’s most potent scene. “All the new places, all the big new buildings, just remind me that I’m nothing, that I’m nobody.” The central question of her night resonates beyond this one family: Can one person be built to sink, or is she set up to fail by an entire system designed to keep the poor not just working, but hurting? Anyone who’s wandered within the confines of poverty may relate to Lynette’s quest for agency over her own fate.

With “The Night Always Comes,” Vlautin chronicles the downfall of a city. As Lynette’s story illustrates, it’s an undoing that is deeply personal, too.
Deep Breath

A novel that gives readers the space to wander through, and bask in, life.

By PATRICK NATHAN

IT'S A UNIQUE, if common, cruelty to transplant a child who is just putting down roots. For those pulled and relocated, there's a thirstiness — and a little guarded ring of bark — that those with stable childhoods lack. In “The Recent East,” a wonderful, immersive debut novel from the writer and teacher Thomas Grattan, we're given an intimate look at these wood cuttings, as seen through three generations of one family, each moved across an ocean just before blooming.

THE RECENT EAST
By Thomas Grattan
357 pp. MCD/Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $27.

In 1968, Beate is 12. Germany is divided by the Berlin Wall and she lives in the East with her family, but her parents have acquired fake passports and intend to defect — first to West Germany, then England, then the United States. At the border, they tell the soldiers they are “returning” after visiting an ill cousin. Upset at leaving home, Beate is tempted to tell the truth, just to spite her parents. Yet she stays quiet and becomes a defector — a new kernel of identity her English and American teachers, classmates and friends want her to lean into: “There was nothing like trauma survived to let others remember for a while that their boredom was a luxury.” Having escaped communism makes Beate “interesting” — and lonely.

Jump to 1990. Beate, now in upstate New York, receives a letter: The Berlin Wall has fallen. The childhood home she left behind, the government explains, is now hers. Here is where the novel's heft earns its sale. In what may be this young person's first telescopic image of time, he notices her presence: “She was here, as the great-several-times-over grandfather had once been. Also Oma's parents, whom she talked about sometimes and got sad, though she said she was happy remembering them. Perhaps one day he would think of her in the same way. Perhaps he'd have someone who'd want to hear stories of Oma in this house and in Cologne.”

“The Recent East” is, in so many ways, a novel of life — at least in James Salter's sense: “Life is weather. Life is meals.” As in many great novels, time is perhaps its most magnetic character. Our lives are time spent, and it's a deep, expansive pleasure to spend a little of ours as these characters spend their own.

Most extraordinarily, Grattan gives us not only life, but a good life, the rarity of which in fiction (and increasingly, reality) is a shame. Is happiness really so uninteresting? Is contentment? Both seem to have developed that reputation, but in Grattan's hands, life's joys are magnetic. Michael, enjoying his newfound gay freedom, thinks of his new city as "a shelter dog ready to roll over and follow you forever if you approached with a soft voice and gentle hand." When he meets another gay boy his age, his afternoon feels "like a giant soap bubble. Pop, he thought, but it kept going." Beate, as a teenager, asks her boyfriend "to move into her and stay for a while. He is inside of me, she'd thought, and it felt like they were breaking an impossible barrier." After a great deal of loss, grief, frustration and loneliness dealt to these characters, their joys arrive as they would in real life: like gifts we can scarcely believe are happening.

Even among the absolute, unequivocal horrors of Eastern Europe in the 1990s — neo-Nazis, xenophobic violence, police officers who sit "in their cruisers a block away, waiting for something to happen," displaced refugees, homeless encampments, "the fascist who worked at the grocery store" and hate crimes, all of them mournfully recognizable in 2021 — there is room for life. Room, even, for beauty, which Grattan delivers with graceful economy. Watching Michael's gay vocabulary of gestures is "like seeing a heron swoop to a landing, a spider spin a corner into silver." At a seething, teenage party, "smoke hovered above the crowd like cartoon thinking." An abandoned bathroom has had "toilets pulled from it like rotten teeth." Like all beauties, these are dilations of time. Where our present era of decimated attention demands contraction and diminishment, “The Recent East” offers expansion; it artfully holds open a needed space — to wander, to contemplate, to notice. Even just to breathe. Like the house in the novel, life is so much larger than we remember.

Nervously crossing the border, a young Beate hides her ears under her hair. She imagines them “like the leaves of a houseplant, thin and large and loath to hide from the sun.” Perhaps this is what made me think of roots, of plants asked to bloom without soil they trust. But bloom Beate does, and so do her children, and so do theirs. Grattan's true talent is patience. I think it's only now that I've realized where it is these characters grow. One name for it is family. The other, no matter who offers it, is love. I'm grateful this novel could take me there.
The Weary Titan

Britain in decline may have a lot in common with modern America.

By RICHARD ALDOUS

“What fools we were,” King George V told his prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, in 1930, looking back to the era before World War I. In the context of the wartime catastrophe his generation had delivered, the king may have had a point. That was the time of Rudyard Kipling’s “long recessional” and A. E. Houseman’s “land of lost content.” Arthur Balfour, prime minister from 1902 to 1905, lamented “some process of social degeneration” that “may conveniently be distinguished by the name of ‘decadence.’” Joseph Chamberlain, the most charismatically political of the late-Victorian age, put it more pithily. “The Weary Titan,” he said in 1902, “staggers under the too vast orb of its fate.”

For many Americans today, perhaps fearing late-stage decadence and their own Weary Titan, this story may strike close to home. For in Simon Heffer’s telling, the history of Britain from 1880 to 1914 is one in which “a nation so recently not just great, but the greatest power the world had ever known, sustained in its greatness by a rule of law and parliamentary democracy, had begun its decay.”

The Age of Decadence is a successor volume to the same author’s well-regarded “High Minds: The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain” (2013), which charted Britain’s rise to “greatness” in the earlier part of the 19th century. Heffer picks up here with Gladstone taking over the premiership from his great rival, Disraeli, in 1880, then guides us through the high-Victorian era into the 20th century with the accession of King Edward VII in 1901. He ends in 1914 with Britain facing an unhappy choice between a European war with Germany and a civil war in Ireland. He wisely does not include the origins of the world war substantively in this volume (his book on this topic has just been published in Britain). In such a way he avoids the teleological danger of making everything in Britain about the war as the country hurtles toward some kind of inevitable catastrophe his generation had delivered, which he well might have had a point. That was the time of Rudyard Kipling’s “long recessional” and A. E. Houseman’s “land of lost content.” Arthur Balfour, prime minister from 1902 to 1905, lamented “some process of social degeneration” that “may conveniently be distinguished by the name of ‘decadence.’” Joseph Chamberlain, the most charismatically political of the late-Victorian age, put it more pithily. “The Weary Titan,” he said in 1902, “staggers under the too vast orb of its fate.”

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There are, many things to be had in this fine book, not the least of which is the vivacity of Heffer’s prose. A columnist for The Sunday Telegraph as well as a historian, he writes elegantly but punchily, combining seriousness with welcome flashes of waspishness that stop things from getting stuffy. Pointing, for example, to the socially entitled Virginia Woolf’s sneering at “that perfidiousiate” the shopkeeper’s son Arnold Bennett, Heffer notes that her put-downs “had him written off for much of the 20th century by generations of university lecturers and critics, who confused snobbery with literary criticism.” That, as they say, is a twfer.

Heffer has little interest in debates among historians on the period, but unlike many general surveys of this kind, he does not rely just on secondary literature and make excellent use of wide-ranging archival research. That approach gives the book a fresh perspective, although not necessarily a new one. What is striking about The Age of Decadence is that it brings us full circle to the view the late Victorians and Edwardians so often had of themselves and it echoes George Dangerfield’s seminal 1935 book “The Strange Death of Liberal England,” which evocatively depicted how “by the end of 1913 Liberal England was reduced to ashes.” In Heffer’s telling it is perhaps less ashes to ashes than an overripe piece of fruit rotting and putrefying in front of our eyes.

“The Age of Decadence” is a masterpiece of pacing. After an amiable perambulation with the last of the Victorians, we build to a frantic cliff-top scramble as the Edwardians lose their grip on events and themselves. The book culminates in three powerful chapters on the suffragists, industrial unrest and the threat of civil war in Ireland. By the final pages, Heffer has skillfully conjured a country in chaos and heading over the edge. The prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, had “rarely felt more hopeless” and by July 1914 believed the United Kingdom had reached “an impasse, with unspeakable consequences.” The Lord Mayor of Liverpool told the Earl of Derby he feared “a revolution is in progress.” In the circumstances, a war with Germany looked to many like the easy option.

Heffer has no hesitation in pointing the finger of blame at the complacent, “swagging” late-Victorian and Edwardian elites who ran the show in these four decades. From 1880 “until the apocalypse came in 1914,” he writes reprovingly, “there was among the upper and upper-middle classes a resting on laurels; a decision, literal and metaphorical, to live off dividends rather than work that little bit harder and improve more.” The end result: “Britain was diminished” and “British power was in decline.”

Heffer warns us against “the pornography of nostalgia,” but still, there are other ways to see the Edwardians. Perhaps this period was not one of Thomas Hardy’s times “when all went well,” but the Edwardians certainly meet Arnold Bennett’s criterion of being “identified with the great cause of cheering us all up.” Everything was brighter, faster, more fashionable. With the growth of cinemas, gramophones, telephones and the first 100-miles-per-hour trains for trips to the seaside, Edwardians for the most part had more fun than those stern Victorians. Thanks to advances in medicine and nutrition, people in Britain lived longer (unless they found themselves in the wartime trenches). And everyday life also improved. If this was an era of revolt, it was also one of radical reform, with a long reach into all areas of society from cradle to grave. The daily existence of the working classes on whose backs much of the wealth of the previous century had been built was enhanced immeasurably by a battery of social, industrial and educational legislation. Liberal reform culminated in the comprehensive 1911 National Insurance Act — one of the most important pieces of legislation of the 20th century and one that remains a foundation of the British welfare state and National Health Service.

Regarding decline as a world power, everything is relative. Twentieth-century Britain overcame rival empires, fought and won two cataclysmic wars and twice reconstructed the world order in its own image. The British retreated from empire once its corrupting decadence became manifest. Historians of other empires might ask whether the Edwardians were any more degenerate than the French of the Third Republic, or imperial Germans, Russians, Ottomans, Iranians and Chinese. Certainly Britain was eclipsed by the United States but arguably there was not much the Edwardians could have done about the rise of a vast, resource-rich continental power that unlike its other rivals was reasonably well governed. Today Britain remains one of the half-dozen richest countries in the world with a cultural and political impact that far exceeds its size. Much of its good fortune is rooted in the legacy of those Edwardians who, as H. G. Wells put it, saw “The Shape of Things to Come.”

So perhaps in the end the dutiful King George V only had it half right. For while they were often foolish, the Edwardians were no fools.
Endangered
A history of the men and women who fought over the past century to save animals from extinction.

By ERNEST FREEBERG

A RECENT STUDY warns that 500 species of land animals face extinction over the next two decades, while another predicts that climate change may wipe out a third of the world’s variety of freshwater fish. As Michelle Nijhuis writes in “Beloved Beasts,” news of this existential threat reaches most of us as “a jumble of tragedies and emergencies.” Through a series of richly drawn biographical portraits, she introduces us to the men and women who have been working for more than a century to rescue endangered species from extinction. They are a sometimes flawed but fascinating group — sportsmen, bird lovers, zoologists and activists. Without their efforts, our bad situation would be so much worse.

While some early naturalists found evidence in the fossil record of animals becoming extinct, until the 19th century most ob-

servers considered extinction a physical and even theological impossibility. Overhunting and extermination campaigns had clearly caused micro-extinctions, and there were animal populations that scattered before the advance of human settlement. But the de-
struction of an entire species was unthinkable, a smashed window in the mansion of God’s perfect design.

By the mid-19th century, however, humanity’s power to vandalize creation could no longer be denied, nowhere more clearly than in the decimation of America’s vast bison herds. In 1874, Congress tried to curb this slaughter, but President Grant vetoed the bill, supporting the military strategy of paci-
ifying the Plains tribes by destroying this foundation of their economy and culture. A decade later, when the Smithsonian zoologist and chief taxidermist William Temple Hornaday surveyed the museum’s collection he found no good examples of the American bison. While he was planning an expedition to harvest specimens, his Western correspondents informed him there were only a few hundred left, and they were disappearing fast. After weeks of searching in the Montana Territory, Hor-

naday found and shot 20 of them. “I am really ashamed to confess it,” he later admitted. By his estimation, he had just killed a tenth of all the bison remaining from the herds that had once numbered from 20 mil-
tion to 30 million.

Hornaday’s skill as a taxidermist meant he spent “much of his professional life up to his elbows in animal innards.” Back in Washington, he mounted these sacrificial victims in a diorama that evoked the bison’s life on the prairies. The display fas-
cinated the public and rallied support for his fresh determination to save what re-
mained of the wild herds. Thanks to a suc-
cessful breeding program he created at the Bronx Zoo, a small herd of bison produced enough offspring to repopulate Western reserves, a saving remnant that would ex-
pand over time and is still thriving today.

Hornaday’s success gave hope that ex-

ridiculed all conservationists as effemi-

nate sentimentalists.

That charge was hard to sustain against Rosalie Edge, the conservation move-
ment’s “hellcat.” Edge came to the cause in middle age, an affluent and well-connected amateur bird-watcher who had developed political skills fighting for woman’s suf-
frage. Though a loyal Audubon member, she ambushed the society’s annual board meeting in 1928, denouncing its leading men for failing to protest the open season against eagles, owls and other raptors. To many sportsmen and poultry farmers, ea-

gles were undesirable vermin, and Alaska

was the wildlife biologist Rachel Carson. There she found evidence of a precipitous decline in the annual eagle migration, one clue in a puzzle she assembled in her groundbreaking 1962 book, “Silent Spring.” Carson showed that pesticides were not only driving many species of hunters, not only driving eagles toward ex-
tinction but poisoning creatures up and
down the food chain, humans included.

Her work inspired Stewart Udall, interior secretary in the Johnson administration, to push for legal protections that culmi-
nated in the landmark 1973 Endangered Species Act, an imperfect but “indispens-
able bulwark against extinction.”

Tracing key turning points in the develop-
ment of conservation biology, Nijhuis shows that the growing threat of extinction provoked an intellectual revolution in the way scientists think about the very mean-
ing of species. Each animal came to be un-
derstood as an essential piece of a dynam-
ic, interconnected web. While public symp-
athy is easily stirred to rescue “char-
ismatic” animals, conservationists came to focus as much on the preservation of hab-
itat. No longer just protecting animals from bullets, they expanded their mission to save “shrubbery and wetlands from bulldozers.” As the conservation pioneer Aldo Leopold put it, the only way to stop extinction is to first save the organism he called “land.”

Leopold preached the essential value that apex predators play in keeping ecosystems healthy, while others joined his pioneering efforts to preserve wilder-
ness. In the 1980s, E. O. Wilson captured the evolving insights of ecological science by framing extinction as an assault on “biodiversity,” a loss of genetic possibility that threatens all life, humans included. Others worked to overcome the conserva-
tion movement’s origin in white supremac-
y and European colonialism. Africa’s first game-protection measures were imposed by colonial masters determined to protect their sport of trophy hunting. More re-
cently, transnational organizations have defended wildlife by supporting African communities as stewards of their own en-
vironmental inheritance, a strategy both more just and more successful.

Nijhuis is an engaging storyteller as well as a self-described “lapsed biologist,” weaving this history with firsthand ac-
counts of those on the front lines of species preservation today — from the Blackfeet tribe’s restoration of a bison herd in the Northern Rockies (descendants of Horna-
day’s rescue operation), to park rangers in Namibia who defend rhinos and elephants from poachers. She acknowledges that her story ends on an upbeat note, yet the optimism concerning the fate of so many species now facing extinction, but she reminds us of the

very real accomplishments of these “pas-
sonate experts and passionate amateurs” who devoted their lives, and too often gave their lives, to protecting our fellow species from ourselves.
iod-related overdoses since 1999, and millions more have become hopelessly addicted. Not all of this wreckage can be laid at the feet of the Sacklers, but a lot of it can. By aggressively promoting OxyContin, their company, Purdue Pharma, ushered in a new paradigm under which doctors began routinely prescribing the potent and dangerously addictive narcotics. In the process, the Sacklers became fabulously rich, reaping, according to one expert’s court testimony, some $13 billion.

The broad contours of this story are well known. Hundreds of news articles and several books have been written about it, most notably “Pain Killer” by the former New York Times reporter Barry Meier. Keefe comes late to the party and he’s careful to credit Meier and others for their trailblaz-

ing journalism (Meier even appears as a character in several chapters). But what would normally be a weakness becomes a strength because Keefe, a New Yorker staff writer and the author of, among other books, the prizewinning “Say Nothing” (2019), a history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, is blessed with great timing. In the past few years, numerous lawsuits filed against Purdue by state attorneys general, cities and counties have finally cracked open the Sacklers’ dome of secrecy. Thousands of court documents have become public through discovery, including internal company emails and memos that give new insight into the family’s actions and thinking. Keefe combines this wealth of new material with his own extensions and thinking. Keefe combines this wealth of new material with his own extensions and thinking. Keefe combines this wealth of new material with his own extensions and thinking. Keefe combines this wealth of new material with his own extensions and thinking.

The first part of the book chronicles the life of the family’s patriarch, Arthur Sackler, the eldest of three brothers born in the early 1900s to Jewish immigrant parents in working-class Brooklyn. Arthur has little, if any, connection to the modern-day Purdue Pharma other than the fact that he owned a third of the company’s first incarnation, Purdue Frederick, until his death in 1987. But Keefe makes the case, mostly convincingly, that Arthur invented the drug-promotion playbook. Purdue later took a page from when it started selling OxyContin. In an eerie parallel, we learn that Arthur made much of his nine-figure fortune as the adman who marketed the tranquilizer Valium and turned it into the pharmaceutical industry’s first blockbuster. Of course, Valium too was addictive and, in 1973, after its maker, Roche, had sold hundreds of millions of dollars of the drug, it became a controlled substance. While Arthur’s life makes for fascinating reading — he had three wives and became an avid collector of Asian art, negotiating a secret deal with the Met to store his coveted collection in one of the museum’s wings free of charge — he played no role in the OxyContin saga, which made me question Keefe’s decision to devote fully one-third of the book to him. Arthur’s heirs, who after his death sold their stake in Purdue to his brothers, Raymond and Mortimer, will surely bemoan this choice. They blame the other two branches of the family for soiling the Sackler name, one heir referring to them as the “OxySacklers.”

It’s hard not to agree with them. Arthur may have been the first to blur the lines between medicine and commerce, and he pioneered modern drug marketing, but his sins pale compared with those of the OxySacklers. Especially with those of his nephew Richard Sackler, who was president of Purdue Pharma from 1999 to 2003 and continued to exert a strong influence on the business for years afterward from his perch on the board. It was Richard who pushed to develop OxyContin in the 1990s and who led the charge to market it for routine pain when the F.D.A. approved it in 1995, urging Purdue’s army of sales reps to unleash a “blizzard of prescriptions.”

For a long time, Richard’s and his cousins’ involvement was obscured by the family’s secrecy and by loyal employees’ willingness to fall on their swords, such as when three Purdue executives pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor count of misbranding in a 2006 settlement with the Justice Department. But the trove of documents that has since come to light through the multidistrict litigation, which Keefe weaves into a highly readable and disturbing narrative, shatters any illusion that the Sacklers were in the dark about what was going on at the company. The fingerprints of the Raymond and Mortimer branches are all over Purdue’s misdeeds. OxyContin was their cash cow and they milked every last dollar from it despite knowing what it was doing to the country.

Keefe came to his subject in a roundabout way: He’d been reporting on Mexican drug cartels when he noticed their increasing reliance on heroin sales — a development closely linked to the exponential rise in prescription opioid use. When addicts couldn’t get their hands on OxyContin, or when a new formulation made it harder to crush the pills and extract their payload, they graduated to heroin.

THE NARCO TRAFFICKING analogy, it turns out, is apt. There are some obvious parallels between El Chapo and the Sinaloa cartel and the Sacklers and Purdue. Like the Mexican drug lord, the Sacklers used their money to persuade people to do their bidding — from the F.D.A. reviewer who landed a $400,000-a-year job at Purdue barely a year after approving OxyContin to the former U.S. attorney who went from being one of the first to raise alarm bells about the drug to becoming a company consultant after he left office. And like El Chapo, the Sacklers threatened and intimidated those they couldn’t put on the payroll. That may have included Keefe himself, who noticed a man watching his house from a parked S.U.V. last summer, in all likelihood, he thought, a private investigator hired by one of the law or crisis management firms advising the family. (When Keefe asked the Sacklers about the surveillance, a representative of the family declined to comment.)

If there’s one difference between El Chapo and the Sacklers, it’s that El Chapo is paying for his crimes with a life sentence in a supermax prison in Colorado while the Sacklers get to hold onto their freedom and most of their money. But with the help of this damming book, there’s one thing they’ll never recover despite their penchant for putting their name on museums: their reputation.
Safeguards of Freedom

How constitutions came to be written — and why they sometimes fail.

By SHERI BERMAN

OVER THE LAST several years, citizens of the West have learned that they can no longer take democracy for granted, and the result has been an explosion of studies re-examining democracy’s foundations. Linda Colley’s new book, “The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen,” is a helpful contribution to this growing field. An eminent historian of Britain, Colley focuses on one critical component of democracy — constitutions.

Democracy, Colley points out, requires defining and demarcating the rules and principles of governing authority. As Thomas Paine put it, “A Constitution is not the act of a Government, but of a people constituting a government, and a government without a constitution is a power without right.”

THE GUN, THE SHIP, AND THE PEN

Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World
By Linda Colley
Illustrated. 512 pp. Liveright. $35.

Throughout most of history, the idea that rulers’ power should be defined and demarcated did not exist. Yet by the 20th century, constitutions had come to be regarded, Colley writes, “as a trademark of a modern state and of the state of being modern.” The question she sets out to answer is how and why this shift occurred.

One way to do this is by examining the constitution-makers themselves, and much of “The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen” is devoted to analyzing the ideas, motivations and activities of the pioneering men (and few women) involved in designing and championing constitutions. The book discusses not only well-known figures from Western history like James Madison and Jeremy Bentham, but also constitutional champions from places as varied as Japan, Tunisia, Pitcairn Island, Tahiti, Russia and India.

Of course, individuals cannot make history as they please. They must work within the circumstances given to them. Therefore, understanding the emergence of constitutions requires examining the circumstances in which the constitutional champions found themselves. More precisely, it requires investigating the forces that undermined existing authorities, creating opportunities for constitutional champions to define and demarcate new ones.

SHERRI BERMAN is a professor of political science at Barnard College, Columbia University, and the author of “Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day.”

The first force Colley points to is war (the gun). Modern constitutions, she says, began emerging in Europe in the 18th century — a time when wars were expanding in frequency, scale and geographical scope. Although Colley’s discussion of precisely how warfare precipitated constitutional development is somewhat unsystematic, she does lay out some important connections between warfare and constitutional development.

Wars sometimes led to the breakdown of political regimes, creating opportunities for innovators to reshape governance and authority. This effect was particularly pronounced when wars caused empires to collapse, triggering the formation of new ideas with one another and with mass audiences. As Colley puts it, the growing ease of communication “made it possible for men and women — and not just in the West — to become better and more regularly informed about political personalities and projects in different parts of the world. It became easier for people to compare and contrast conditions, including political conditions, in different countries and continents.”

Interestingly, Colley shows that early constitutions were not simply the result of demands from below. Rather, increasingly aware of and influenced by Enlightenment ideas, rulers like Catherine II of Russia, Frederick of Prussia and Gustaf III of Sweden wrote constitutions in order to signal their “modern” status to their people and to one another. And in another reflection of the influence of the new communication technologies, these rulers often customize their proclamations for print reproduction and had them translated into different languages so they could be easily disseminated at home and abroad.

Which brings us to the final, interlocking force identified by Colley: globalization (the ship). Accompanying new communication technologies was the growing ease of travel. As is the case today, these forces combined to facilitate the spread of new ideas. And since, as Colley notes, it is easier to borrow than invent, the ability of political elites and intellectuals in South America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East to learn about constitutions in Europe, the United States and elsewhere as well as to travel to these places contributed to a “contagion” of constitution-making beginning in the mid-19th century.

“The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen” stresses that constitution-makers in non-Western places did not merely copy existing constitutions but rather adapted them to their own regions’ needs and resources. As Colley says, the growing ease of communication and travel meant that constitution-makers across the globe “could study and select between ideas, institutions and laws set out in an expanding print array of different countries’ constitutions. They could then meld and combine the borrowings of their choice with their own ideas, aspirations and legal and political conventions.” Unfortunately, despite the geographical breadth of “The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen,” Colley fails to explain how constitutions changed across time and space. At one point, for example, she states that between 1776 and 1850 the most oft-mentioned constitutional rights were freedom of the press and religion. Was this still the case in the late 19th and 20th centuries? Did countries or regions differ systematically in the type of rights included in their constitutions? Such questions are left unanswered.

NONE THE LESS, “The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen” has important lessons for anyone interested in political development today. One is the value of taking a long-term perspective when trying to understand contemporary events. Colley demonstrates that even failed attempts at implanting constitutions often had important consequences. For instance, she shows how many cases of successful constitution-making, reformers built upon previous efforts and learned from the mistakes their predecessors made.

Colley also reminds us of how revolutionary and inspirational constitutions were — and still are. Constitutions let people define and delineate power, to shape the way governance occurs and authority is exercised in their countries. At a time when many are questioning the future of democracy, it is worth remembering how important and precious these things are. At the end of “The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen” Colley recounts some words of Thomas Jefferson’s that are particularly apt today: “Tho’ written constitutions may be violated in moments of passion or delusion, yet they furnish a text to which those who are watchful may again rally & recall the people.”
Poof!

What if a prize in a pack of bubble gum could make everything you hate disappear?

By MAX BRALLIER

RAPHAEL SIMON IS best known as Pseudonymous Bosch, the author of the popular, and wonderful, Secret Series. “The Anti-Book” is his first book under his real name. Its protagonist is the very angry 12-year-old Mickey. He’s angry at his sister.

THE ANTI-BOOK

By Raphael Simon

(Ages 8 to 12)

He’s angry at his sister’s boyfriend. He’s angry at his just-divorced parents. He’s angry at his new stepmoms (both named Charlie). He’s angry at the world. It’s an anger that is real and hard.

But there’s “at least one thing” Mickey likes: Bubble Gum King bubble gum. There’s a little prize in every pack.

MAX BRALLIER is the author, most recently, of “The Last Kids on Earth: Thrilling Tales From the Tree House,” the first graphic novel in the best-selling series.

I read “The Anti-Book” with a pit-in-my-stomach feeling. I mean, the kid wished away his life and his world, and the wish came true. Worse, he seems to have doomed his sister, parents, dog, everything.

Can this situation be reversed or corrected? Has Mickey’s anger taken him far beyond anything he ever intended?

Mickey is an unexpected and refreshing protagonist — truly angry, truly grouchy, truly sour. Simon doesn’t pull his punches with Mickey, which is why the character works. Because Mickey’s anger and confusion come from a real place — the mystery and frustration around family and self — they speak to the ignored and overwhelmed and just so furious at the world kid in all of us.

And as it becomes clear that the thing Mickey dislikes and fears most is himself, we feel guilty and complicit for not being more sympathetic from the start.

“The Anti-Book” is filled with clever wordplay and puns come-to-life. Its world crackles with imagination. Talking cookies, disappearing bridges, reverse gravity, a housefly turned flying house, a car with arms, a nightmarish screaming mime.

Chapters are short and fast. Sentences are punchy. The writing is packed with dialogue. To read “The Anti-Book” is to jump on — and hold on.

There’s discovery around relationships with siblings, parents, stepparents and boy/girlfriends. There’s insight into despair and denial and confusion.

“The Anti-Book” is a surprisingly powerful, formula-breaking coming-of-age story. It’s captivating to watch Mickey gain a sense of self and awareness as he moves beyond anger and develops an appreciation for and understanding of increasingly mature emotions.

When Harry Met Harry

A boy named Harry who lives in Houdini’s old house is getting text messages from the long-dead magician’s ghost.

By GREGORY COWLES

THE BEST MAGICIANS are a little like the best priests, or novelists. They may be skeptical about the trade they ply — nothing tests your faith quite like knowing how the tricks are done — but they’re never cynical. At some level, some piece of them is a little like the nonfiction, it seems. Like Mary Pope Osborne and her Magic Tree House series, he uses the rudiments of plot to introduce children to the wonders of the past.

Here’s where I cop to being a total magic geek. When I was Harry’s age I subscribed to Hocus Pocus magazine and attended a sleepaway magic camp on Long Island, and one of my last pre-pandemic cultural outings was a trip to the Houdini Museum in Midtown Manhattan. Gutman clearly isn’t writing for people like me: Readers who already know a lot about Houdini won’t be surprised by anything in “Houdini and Me.” But those who know the name and not much else will get a good sense of the basic biography (including the fact that his name wasn’t really Houdini).

Gutman writes with a strong sense of place, and includes pictures of Morning-side Heights along with the Houdini photos, so even non-New Yorkers will come away with a feel for the neighborhood and its charms: Riverside Park, Morningside Park, the peacocks at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. He also slips in some motivational patter (“You cannot get past fear unless you confront it,” Houdini texts Harry. “If you can do that, you can accomplish what appears to be impossible”) and muses interestingly on the changing nature of fame: “In the 21st century, it occurred to me, people can become famous overnight by simply putting on some silly costume or by posting an outrageous tweet that goes viral. In Houdini’s day, you had to actually do something amazing to get famous. And after you did it, there was no internet to spread the word.”

The novel ends with a cheap trick, such that some may feel Gutman has crossed the line to cynicism. Oh, well. The story is diverting enough — and if a book about Houdini can’t be escaplist, what can?
COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF APRIL 4-10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THIS WEEK</th>
<th>LAST WEEK</th>
<th>Fiction</th>
<th>Nonfiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td>THE HILL WE CLIMB, by Amanda Gorman. (Viking) The poem read on President Joe Biden's Inauguration Day, by the youngest poet to write and perform an inaugural poem.</td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td>THE FOUR WINDS, 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>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td>WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING, by Delia Owens. (Putnam) A young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.</td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td>THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY, 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>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>GOOD COMPANY, by Cynthia D’Aprix Sweeney. (Ecco) The foundation of a marriage between actors is shaken when they reunite with an old friend who is now a TV star.</td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td>WIN, by Harlan Coben, (Grand Central) Windsor Horne Lockwood III might rectify cold cases connected to his family that have eluded the F.B.I. for decades.</td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>NORTHERN SPY, by Flynn Berry. (Viking) The sister of a BBC producer may have joined the Irish Republican Army.</td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td>THE SONG OF ACHILLES, by Madeline Miller. (Ecco) A reimagining of Homer’s “iliad” that is narrated by Achilles’ companion Patroclus.</td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td>LATER, by Stephen King. (Hard Case Crime) An N.Y.P.D. detective asks the son of a struggling single mother to use his unnatural ability to track a killer.</td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For complete lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit nytimes.com/books/best-sellers

Editors’ Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review

**FESTIVAL DAYS,** by Jo Ann Beard. (Little, Brown, $27.) Featuring characters mostly drawn from life confronting illness, loss, violence and death, this exquisite collection of pieces defies classification, blending intuition and observation into something unaccountably yet undeniably real.


**LIBERTIE,** by Kaitlyn Greenidge. (Atria, $26.95.) Based on the lives of Susan Smith McKinney Steward, the first Black female doctor in New York State, and her daughter, Greenidge’s second novel centers its post-Civil War New York story on an enduring quest for freedom. A feat of monumental thematic imagination.

**A WHOLE WORLD: Letters From James Merrill,** edited by Langdon Hammer and Stephen Yense. (Knopf, $45.) The poet’s letters cast light on a generation’s longing for an active social life and a quicksilver wit. Artifice was Merrill’s way of being natural. He lavished his correspondents with parody and aphorism, as well as assessments of his poetic peers.

**DO NOT DISTURB: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad,** by Michela Wong. (PublicAffairs, $32.) In the years since the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has become a favorite of Western donors. Yet in this authoritative account, Wong, an Africa specialist, exposes the country’s long history of corruption and human rights abuses under the leadership of President Paul Kagame.

**PLACES OF MIND: A Life of Edward Said,** by Timothy Brennan. (Farrar, Straus & Groux, $35.) In the first comprehensive biography of Said, Brennan, a former student, highlights the Palestinian scholar’s complexity, delivering a portrait of a thinker, activist and musician endowed with an unusually restless and protean intellect.

**HORIZONTAL VERTIGO:** A City Called Mexico, by Juan Villoro. Translated by Alfred MacAdam. (Pantheon, $35.) Villoro, an accomplished novelist, recounts his remarkable engagement with Mexico City with a mix of irony and empathy. He is exquisitely attuned to the capital’s contradictions, nuances and people.

**THE TWILIGHT ZONE,** by Nona Fernández. Translated by Natasha Wimmer. (Graywolf, paper, $16.) The narrator of this Chilean novel is haunted by a dark episode in her country’s past: In 1984, a torturer for the secret police exposed the sordid workings of the Pinochet regime. Shifting between genres, Fernández imagines the lives both of victims and of perpetrators.

**EVERY DAY IS A GIFT: A Memoir,** by Tammy Duckworth. (Twelve, $30.) Duckworth recalls being her family’s main breadwinner as a teenager, surviving the rocket-propelled grenade that almost killed her and becoming a U.S. senator from Illinois. She spares no detail in recounting her courageous life.

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

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**Mujer Power** Gabriela García dedicated her debut novel, “Of Women and Salt,” to Iraida Rosa López, her 101-year-old grandmother who emigrated to the United States from Cuba in 1968. In a photograph pinned at the top of García’s Twitter feed, López is wearing jazzy sneakers and holding a Black Lives Matter sign; even without a neatly printed Spanish expletive, it would be clear that this is a woman with strong convictions.

“I grew up in a matrilineal family,” said García in a phone interview. “I had all sisters, my mother had all sisters, my grandmother had all sisters. I was raised by a single mother and never felt a lack in that. My grandmother was an important figure for me growing up; she helped raise me my entire life, so I wanted to dedicate the book to her.”

“Of Women and Salt” mines the lives of mothers and daughters across five generations and four countries, from 19th-century Cuba to present-day Miami and Mexico. García worked on the book while earning her M.F.A. at Purdue University, where Roxane Gay was an influential presence. García said, the hardest part was coming up with the structure of the story, which is told from the perspective of a Radcliffe Institute fellowships recipient. “This is the Fire,” to Iraida Rosa López, her 101-year-old grandmother who emigrated to the United States from Cuba in 1968. In a photograph pinned at the top of García’s Twitter feed, López is wearing jazzy sneakers and holding a Black Lives Matter sign; even without a neatly printed Spanish expletive, it would be clear that this is a woman with strong convictions. García said, “I’m always jealous of people who have a specific ritual because I feel like I’m very undisciplined.” She doesn’t write every day; she wrestles with the novel when the spirit moves her, often in the coffee shops where the hubbub of conversation and stoneware became white noise. “Sometimes I would get in the zone and work until 3 o’clock in the morning,” García said. “I think it helped that during that time I didn’t have an early-morning job to go to. I find sometimes when the rest of the world is asleep, there’s a safe quiet. It makes it easier for me to access the writing.”

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**PRINT/HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS**

**NONFICTION**

1. **BROKEN HORSES**, by Brandi Carlile. (Crown) The Grammy Award-winning singer and songwriter recounts difficulties during her formative years and her hard-won successes.

2. **FINDING FREEDOM**, by Erin French. (Celadon) A memoir by the chef and owner of the Lost Kitchen in Freedom, Maine.

3. **BROKEN**, by Jenny Lawson. (Holst) The humorist maps out her mental and physical health journey.

4. **BEAUTIFUL THINGS**, by Hunter Biden. (Gallery) The lawyer and artist, who is the son of the current president, details tragedies within his family and his path to sobriety.

5. **THE LIGHT OF DAYS**, by Judy Batalion. (Morrow) How Jewish women in Poland turned Jewish youth groups into resistance cells to fight the Nazis and helped build systems of underground bunkers.

6. **THE CODE BREAKER**, by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster) How the Nobel Prize winner Jennifer Doudna and her colleagues invented CRISPR, a tool that can edit DNA.

7. **THE GOD EQUATION**, by Michio Kaku. (Doubleday) The theoretical physicist explains the controversy around the synthesis of the theory of relativity and quantum theory.

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


10. **THIS IS THE FIRE**, by Don Lemon. (Little, Brown) The CNN host looks at the impact of racism on his life and prescribes ways to address systemic flaws in America.

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**FICTION**


2. **THE FOUR WINDS**, 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.

3. **THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY**, 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.

4. **GOOD COMPANY**, by Cynthia D’Aprix Sweeney. (Ecco) The foundation of a marriage between actors is shaken when they reunite with an old friend who is now a TV star.


7. **NORTHERN SPY**, by Flynn Berry. (Viking) The sister of a BBC producer may have joined the Irish Republican Army.

8. **THE INVISIBLE LIFE OF ADDIE LARUE**, by V.E. Schwab. (Tor/Forge) A Faustian bargain comes with a curse that affects the adventure Addie LaRue across centuries.

9. **WIN**, by Harlan Coben. (Grand Central) Windsor Horne Lockwood III might rectify cold cases connected to his family that have eluded the F.B.I. for decades.


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

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**Paperback Row** / **BY JENNIFER KRAUSS**

**THE EQUIVALENTS: A Story of Art, Female Friendship, and Liberation in the 1960s**, by Maggie Doherty. (Vintage, 400 pp., $16.95.) The poets Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, the artist Barbara Swan, the sculptor Maripina Pineda and the writer Tillie Olsen “knit themselves together into a friend group” in 1962, when they were all recipients of a Radcliffe Institute fellowship, and called themselves “the Equivalents” (since fellowship applicants were required to have a doctorate or equivalent).

**WHY WE SWIM**, by Bonnie Tsui. (Algonquin, 288 pp., $16.95.) Mixing history, journalism and memoir, Tsui mulls the appeal of this “most commonplace and relaxing way of putting yourself in total peril,” as our reviewer, Mary Pols, phrased it. Tsui’s evocation of swimming’s state of flow made Pols “long to be in the pool or the ocean.”

**THE END OF OCTOBER**, by Lawrence Wright. (Vintage, 400 pp., $17.) The Pulitzer Prize-winning nonfiction author applies “the magisterial force of his reporting skills” to this “chilling novel about an epidemiologist’s ‘Odysseus-like return home’ from a ‘biological battlefront’.” While written before the current pandemic, our reviewer, Douglas Preston, observed, it cuts “exceedingly close to the bone.”

**ON VANISHING: Mortality, Dementia, and What It Means to Disappear**, by Lynn Casteel Harper. (Cataapult, 240 pp., $16.95.) What gives this “poetic inquiry” by a chaplain its “energy,” according to the Times critic Parul Sehgal, is its focus on literary models of compassion. Emerson’s friends referred to him as “dreaming” rather than “deteriorating.” And Lear’s Foul possessed ideal caregiver qualities: “loyalty, steadfastness, wit.”

**THESE WOMEN**, by Iy Pochoda. (Ecco, 352 pp., $16.99.) The most memorable of this “intricate, deeply felt, beautifully written” thriller’s five female narrators, our reviewer, Sarah Lyall, noted, is a “diminutive, damaged, brilliant” detective. Her male colleagues refuse to listen when she says a serial killer is to blame for the deaths of 17 women — sex workers, street people, marginalized citizens of color — in Los Angeles.

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24 SUNDAY, APRIL 25, 2021
### MONTHLY BEST SELLERS

**SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 28-APRIL 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graphic Books and Manga</th>
<th>MONTHS ON LIST</th>
<th>Mass Market</th>
<th>MONTHS ON LIST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1**  
MOTHERING HEIGHTS, by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic)  
The 10th book in the Dog Man series. Can the power of love overcome the darkness and despair created by new villains? | 1 | **1**  
THE VISCOUNT WHO LOVED ME, by Julia Quinn. (Avon)  
The second book in the Bridgerton series. | 3 |
| **2**  
CAT KID COMIC CLUB, by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic)  
Stories within a story come to life as Li’l Petey, Flippy and Molly show baby frogs how to create comics. | 4 | **2**  
CAMINO WINDS, by John Grisham. (Dell)  
The line between fact and fiction becomes blurred when an author of thrillers is found dead after a hurricane hits Camino Island. | 1 |
| **3**  
GRIME AND PUNISHMENT, by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic)  
The ninth book in the Dog Man series. After turning in his badge, the canine cop is determined not to just roll over. | 2 | **3**  
AN OFFER FROM A GENTLEMAN, by Julia Quinn. (Avon)  
The third book in the Bridgerton series. | 2 |
| **4**  
CLAUDIA AND THE NEW GIRL, by Ann M. Martin. Illustrated by Gabriela Epstein. (Scholastic)  
The ninth book in the Baby-sitters Club series. Claudia must choose between spending time with the very artistic Ashely or the Baby-sitters Club. | 2 | **4**  
THE DUKE AND I, by Julia Quinn. (Avon)  
Daphne Bridgerton’s reputation soars when she collides with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series “Bridgerton.” | 4 |
| **5**  
FOR WHOM THE BALL ROLLS, by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic)  
The seventh book in the Dog Man series. A new villain has a bone to pick with Dog Man while Petey the Cat starts a new life. | 2 | **5**  
THE NUMBERS GAME, by Danielle Steel. (Dell)  
An affair wrecks a marriage and a daughter seeks to get out from her family’s shadow while old dreams and new love are pursued. | 2 |
| **6**  
THE DARK SECRET, by Tui T. Sutherland. Illustrated by Mike Holmes. (Scholastic)  
The fourth book in the Wings of Fire series. Starlight discovers NightWings have imprisoned several innocent RainWings. | 2 | **6**  
HUSH, by James Patterson and Candice Fox. (Grand Central)  
The fourth book in the Detective Harriet Blue series. The man who put her in prison asks Harriet Blue to find missing members of his family. | 1 |
| **7**  
FETCH-22, by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic)  
The eighth book in the Dog Man series. Petey the Cat feels better after getting out of jail but Li’l Petey struggles to find good in the world. | 2 | **7**  
JOURNEY OF THE PHARAONS, by Clive Cussler and Graham Brown. (Putnam)  
The 17th book of the NUMA Files series. The NUMA squad teams with British MI5 to stop arms dealers from stealing ancient relics. | 1 |
| **8**  
CHAINSAW MAN, VOL. 1, by Tatsuki Fujimoto. (VIZ Media)  
A poor young man who was betrayed by someone he once trusted discovers he has the power of a devil inside him. | 1 | **8**  
ROMANCING MISTER BRIDGERTON, by Julia Quinn. (Avon)  
The fourth book in the Bridgerton series. | 2 |
| **9**  
THE TWISTED ONES, by Scott Cawthon and Kira Breed-Wrisley. (Scholastic)  
The second book in the Five Nights at Freddy’s series. When bodies are found near her school, Charlie is drawn back into the world of her father’s creations. | 2 | **9**  
WHEN HE WAS WICKED, by Julia Quinn. (Avon)  
The sixth book in the Bridgerton series. Will things between Francesca Bridgerton and Michael Stirling grow into something more or will she marry his cousin? | 2 |
| **10**  
BRITTLE OF THE WILD, by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic)  
The sixth book in the Dog Man series. | 2 | **10**  
TO SIR PHILIP WITH LOVE, by Julia Quinn. (Avon)  
The fifth book in the Bridgerton series. Eloise Bridgerton confounds a brushy gentleman’s expectations. | 2 |
| **11**  
DEMON SLAYER: KIMETSU NO YAIBA, VOL. 1, by Koyoharu Gotouge. (VIZ Media)  
A young charcoal seller must avenge his family by destroying the demon that slaughtered them. | 1 | **11**  
IT’S IN HIS KISS, by Julia Quinn. (Avon)  
The seventh book in the Bridgerton series. Huachinth Bridgerton offers to translate a diary written in Italian that was bequested to Gareth St. Clair. | 1 |
| **12**  
MY HERO ACADEMIA, VOL. 1, by Kohei Horikoshi. (VIZ Media)  
Ataku Midorya’s chance encounter with a superhero change his fate? Most likely! | 15 | **12**  
BY THE NECK, by William W. Johnstone and J.A. Johnstone. (Pinnacle)  
Stoneface Finnegan, a former Pinkerton agent who takes over a boomtown saloon, dispenses his own brand of justice. | 1 |
| **13**  
NEW KID, by Jerry Craft. (HarperCollins)  
Jordan Banks, an artistically inclined seventh grader from Washington Heights, has a tough time navigating an upscale private school where diversity is low. | 17 | **13**  
ON THE WAY TO THE WEDDING, by Julia Quinn. (Avon)  
The eighth book in the Bridgerton series. Lady Lucinda Abernathy helps Gregory Bridgerton to win over Miss Hermione Watson until she falls for him herself. | 1 |
| **14**  
MY HERO ACADEMIA, VOL. 2, by Kohei Horikoshi. (VIZ Media)  
Midorya can barely control the All Might’s abilities he inherited. | 7 | **14**  
FAIRY-TALE FOREVER, by Debbie Macomber. (MIRA)  
Two romance stories: “Cindy and the Prince” and “Some Kind of Wonderful.” | 1 |
| **15**  
DOG MAN AND CAT KID, by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic)  
The fourth book in the Dog Man series. | 1 | **15**  
REVENGE, by James Patterson and Andrew Holmes. (Grand Central)  
A former member of the British Special Air Service books into the death of a young woman in London at her parents’ urging. | 1 |

Sales are defined as completed transactions between vendors and individual end users during the period on or after the official publication date of a title. Graphic book rankings include all print and digital formats. Adult, children’s, young adult, fiction and nonfiction graphic books are eligible for inclusion on the graphic books and manga lists. ONLINE: For complete lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.

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Assertions that the modern struggle for civil rights was a “long movement” that commenced well before Brown v. Board of Education (1954) have been a subject of recent and ardent debate. While most of these discussions center on the 20th century, Masur, an associate professor at Northwestern, skilfully establishes that “America’s first civil rights movement” started as far back as the late 18th century. The free states of the North and Midwest, she insightfully argues, constituted a “post-slavery” society where resistance to anti-Black laws formed a foundation for later federal legislation and constitutional reform.

Masur’s careful study begins with free states and localities passing laws that restricted Black mobility, property rights and access to the justice system. Black communities were subjected to white terrorism and violent treatment by white authorities. Black Americans protested, leading an early push for civil rights. What started out as individual and isolated efforts eventually consolidated into organized resistance with the African Methodist Episcopal Church emerging at the forefront. White abolitionists, along with a few white businessmen and politicians, joined in, sometimes working with Black leaders and at other times driving ahead separately. All activists agreed that Black Americans deserved liberty and property. Still, a significant proportion of whites opposed the Black vote and denied Black humanity.

Some may object to such a broad definition of what constitutes a civil rights movement. But Masur deftly demonstrates, was first incubated in the rapidly changing cities of the postwar South. Widespread demographic shifts increased Black resistance to Jim Crow. The growth of integrated military bases brought Black soldiers, many who had fought abroad for democracy, into Southern cities, while the empowerment of Black college and high school students fueled nonviolent protest campaigns throughout the urban South. The early agenda of these actions centered on integrating public transportation and public spaces. Later, it shifted to embrace a push for votes and jobs.

Holt movingly introduces this concise history with the story of his grandmother’s brave refusal to take a seat in the back of a bus in 1944. He acknowledges that such activism had antecedents as far back as the 19th century. However, and importantly, he views the post-World War II freedom movement as a unique departure, defining this “classical” phase of the civil rights struggle as “the mass mobilization of Black communities to challenge their racially subordinated civil status.” Holt rejects, to a degree, the “long movement” narrative and instead focuses on mid-20th-century local activism.

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For those seeking to historically contextualize Black Lives Matter, Holt, a professor at the University of Chicago, provides an essential and readable primer on the mid-20th-century civil rights movement. Holt movingly introduces this concise history with the story of his grandmother’s brave refusal to take a seat in the back of a bus in 1944. He acknowledges that such activism had antecedents as far back as the 19th century. However, and importantly, he views the post-World War II freedom movement as a unique departure, defining this “classical” phase of the civil rights struggle as “the mass mobilization of Black communities to challenge their racially subordinated civil status.” Holt rejects, to a degree, the “long movement” narrative and instead focuses on mid-20th-century local activism.

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Holt adroitly traces the evolution of activism throughout time and across regions. From the cities, the movement spread into rural areas where circumstances were different and, with the intense isolation and grip of white terrorism, more deadly. There, voter registration took priority. Even though the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts were passed in the mid-60s, the escalation of white violence induced some activists to question Gandhian tactics and even integration. As the movement expanded into Northern and Western cities, it adopted separatism and concentrated on education, employment and housing. Its victories over all were limited, but Holt’s study illuminates the movement’s successful legacy.

Few were better situated to teach the history of the mid-20th-century civil rights movement than the late Julian Bond, who, along with John Lewis and others, founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960. This series of inspiring lectures, which Bond delivered in his popular college courses, is an indispensable master class that resonates with the current times. Within a broad synthesis of the freedom movement, Bond reflects stirringly on his own experiences, making this deep dive into civil rights history an engaging memoir as well as a guide for 21st-century crusades for equal rights. The dynamic narrative is made even more so by Danny Lyon’s photographs of the era.

Bond grounds the freedom movement in the nascent activism and longer historical transformations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Bond notes, World War II sped up the struggle, then Brown v. Board of Education set a legal precedent for desegregation and the Montgomery bus boycott became the springboard for protest. Like other recent scholars and writers, Bond agrees that successful campaigns for integration and voting rights were rooted in local leadership, activism and agendas.

Significant progress didn’t come until the 1960s — and Bond, drawing heavily from his own experiences, presents SNCC as the main catalyst. Successful student sit-ins at segregated lunch counters throughout the South were the first genuine deployment of nonviolent direct action. These also “democratized the movement,” which increased the mobilization and empowerment of the masses. In Southern urban and rural areas, people risked their lives to win the rights legislation of the 1960s. SNCC’s turn toward Black nationalism, which Bond views as a tactical mistake (an assertion some will disagree with), combined with Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, marked the end of the civil rights movement. Yet Bond’s message to his students and to us is one of hope: While the quest for equal rights remains unfulfilled, the promise remains.
JUST AS IT DOES TODAY, in its earliest years, the Book Review occasionally commissioned poetry — from John Masefield, Percy MacKaye (who delivered “The Heart in the Jar: A Meditation on the Nobel Prize Award for Medical Research, 1912”) and even Edgar Lee Masters of “Spoon River Anthology” fame, whose verse about Theodore Dreiser, his contemporary in the Chicago Renaissance literary movement, graced the Oct. 31, 1915, issue.

Despite the fact that it ran on Halloween — and was filled with terrifying imagery that compared Dreiser to a jack-o’-lantern, with “eyes [that] burn like a flame at the end of a funnel” and “powerful teeth” — the poem doesn’t seem to have been written as a holiday spoof. Like “Theodore: A Poet,” a homage to Dreiser that appeared in “Spoon River Anthology,” this piece was later reprinted in several books about the “Sister Carrie” novelist.

**THEODORE DREISER—A PORTRAIT**

By Edgar Lee Masters

Author of “Spoon River Anthology”

Written for the New York Times Review of Books

SOUL enrapt demi-urge, Walking the earth, Stalking life.

Jack o’Lantern, tall shouldered, One eye set higher than the other, Mouth cut like a scallop in a pie, Ablaze, showing powerful teeth, Swaying above the heads of others, Jubilant, with fixed eyes scarcely sparkling, Moving about rhythmically, exploding with laughter.

Touching fingers together, back and forth, Or toying with a handkerchief, And the eyes burn like a flame at the end of a funnel, And the ruddy face glows like a pumpkin On Halloween!

Or else a gargoyl of bronze Turning suddenly to life

And slipping suddenly down corners of stone

To eat you:

Full of questions, objections, Distinctions, instances, Contemptuous, ironical, remote, Cloudy, irrelevant, ferocious, Fearless, grim, compassionate yet hateful, Old yet young, wise yet virginal, To whom everything is new and strange, Whence he stirs and wonders, Laughs, mocks, curses —

Disordered, yet with a passion for order And classification—hence the habitual Folding into squares of a handkerchief.

Or else a well cultivated and fruitful valley, But behind it unexplored fastnesses, Gorges, precipices, and heights Over which thunder clouds hang, From which lightning falls, Stirring up terrible shapes of prey That slink about in the blackness. The silence of him is terrifying As if you sat before a sphinx. The look of his eyes makes tubes of the air Through which you are magnified and *analyzed.

He needs nothing of you and wants nothing. He is alone and content, Self-mastered and beyond friendship, You could not hurt him. If he would allow himself to have a friend He could part with that friend forever And in a moment be lost in wonder Staring at a carved rooster on a doorstep, Or at an Italian woman Giving suck to a child On a seat in Washington Square.

Soul enrapt demi-urge, Walking the earth, Stalking life.

It will contain also a chapter on Italia in France on Oct. 11 at the age of 92, after a life spent with the last four years in

**TINA JORDAN** is the deputy editor of the Book Review and co-author of “The New York Times Book Review: 125 Years of Literary History,” which will be published in the fall.
25 Years of

It might seem strange standing in the middle of 100 crying girls that most of them will tell you this is the best day of camp. But it’s the best day of camp.

That was it. precisely because I was like, Wow. it’s 100 girls all You literally just crying together, died and came back, and She knew the first thing you asked it the day is, “Do you need she got home from any money?” the hospital in 1951 that she had the wrong baby.

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