BEACH-WORTHY READS
from Gallery Books!

“Emotional, sweet, and surprising.”
—Shondaland

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—Alma Katsu, author of The Deep

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—J. Courtney Sullivan, bestselling author of Friends and Strangers

“This season’s must-read!”
—Nancy Thayer, New York Times bestselling author of Surfside Sisters

“Ingenious twists...a triumph.”
—The New York Times Book Review
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- **PROJECT MARY**
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  Reviewed by: Alex Kavalos-Lee

- **THE KINGDOMS**
  By: Natasha Pulley
  Reviewed by: Dexter Palmer

- **HEAVEN**
  By: Miclo Kawakami
  Reviewed by: Nadja Spiegelman

- **THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING**
  By: Nancy Tucker
  Reviewed by: Abigail Dean

- **GREAT CIRCLE**
  By: Maggie Shipstead
  Reviewed by: Lynn Steger Strong

- **LIGHT PERPETUAL**
  By: Francis Spufford
  Reviewed by: Christopher Benfey

- **ANIMAL**
  By: Liza Taddeo
  Reviewed by: Jennifer Haigh

- **REVIVAL SEASON**
  By: Monica West
  Reviewed by: Hamilton Cain

- **The ShortList**
  Beach Reads
  Reviewed by: Emily Henry

- **THE CONFIDENCE MEN**
  How Two Prisoners of War Engineered the Most Remarkable Escape in History
  By: Margus Pux
  Reviewed by: Chris Jennings

- **THE BOOKSELLER OF FLORENCE**
  The Story of the Manuscripts That Illuminated the Renaissance
  By: Ross King
  Reviewed by: Simon Schama

- **THE THIRD POLE**
  Mystery, Obsession, and Death on Mount Everest
  By: Mark Synnott
  Reviewed by: Edward Dobin

- **NINE NASTY WORDS**
  English in the Cutters — Then, Now, and Forever
  By: John McWhorter
  Reviewed by: Cecelia Watson

- **FREEDOM**
  By: Sebastian Junger
  Reviewed by: William Finnegan

- **THE HAUNTING OF ALMA FIELDING**
  A True Ghost Story
  By: Kate Summerscale
  Reviewed by: Marilyn Stasio

- **LETTERS TO CAMONDO**
  By: Edmond de Waal
  Reviewed by: Maurice Samuels

- **WHY PEACOCKS?**
  An Unlikely Search for Meaning in the World’s Most Magnificent Bird
  By: Sean Flynn
  Reviewed by: Sp Montgomery

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 4**
Having and Being Had
By Eula Biss
Riverhead Books

“Partly economic education, partly moral question-raisers, this examination of capitalism, money, possessions, and class ... is original and beautifully written.”

— Chautauqua Prize reader

Congratulations to our finalists:

The Night Watchman
By Louise Erdrich
(Harper Collins)

Memorial Drive
A Daughter’s Memoir
By Natasha Trethewey
(Ecco)

The Office of Historical Corrections: A Novella and Stories
By Danielle Evans
(Riverhead Books)

Deep Delta Justice: A Black Teen, His Lawyer, and Their Groundbreaking Battle for Civil Rights in the South
By Matthew Van Meter
(Little, Brown)

Transcendent Kingdom
By Yaa Gyasi
(Alfred A. Knopf)

How Much of These Hills is Gold
By C. Pam Zhang
(Riverhead Books)

The Bear
By Andrew Krivak
(Scribner Library Press)

PLUNDER
Napoleon’s Theft of Vermeer’s Feast
By Cynthia Saltman
Reviewed by Hugh Eakin

SPOOKED
The Trump Devotion, Black Cuba, and the Rise of Private Spies
By Barry Meier
Reviewed by William D. Cohen

OUT OF THE SHADOWS
Six Visionary Victorian Women in Search of a Public Voice
By Emily Miskielikawa
Reviewed by Christine Leigh Heyman

HOW ICELAND CHANGED THE WORLD
The Big History of a Small Island
By Egil Hjartarson
Reviewed by Michael Pye

THE WILD SILENCE
By Raynor Winn
Reviewed by Kathleen Norris

MOM GENES
Inside the New Science of Our Ancient Maternal Instinct
By Abigail Tacher
Reviewed by Julie Lythcott-Haims

BEESWING
By Richard Thompson with Scott Timberg
Reviewed by Paul Elie

HOLLYWOOD EDEN
Electric Guitars, Fast Cars, and the Myth of the California Paradise
By Joel Selvin
Reviewed by James Gavin

A LITTLE DEVIL IN AMERICA
Notions in Praise of Black Performance
By Hamid Abdurraqib
Reviewed by Laurentia Charlton

PUNCH ME UP TO THE GODS
A Memoir
By Brian Boome
Reviewed by Darrell L. Moore

NOTHING PERSONAL
My Secret Life in the Dating App Infernos
By Nancy Jo Sales
Reviewed by Judith Newman

EVERYBODY
A Book About Freedom
By Olivia Laing
Reviewed by Noor Qasim

PROOF OF LIFE
Twenty Days on the Hunt for a Missing Person in the Middle East
By Daniel Levin
Reviewed by Theo Padnos

PARIS WITHOUT HER
A Memoir
By Gregory Curtis
Reviewed by Francisco Goldman

HOME MADE
A Story of Grief, Groceries, Showing Up—and What We Make When We Make Dinner
By Liz Heuck
Reviewed by Kate Christensen

MADHOUSE AT THE END OF THE EARTH
The Beluga’s Journey Into the Dark Antarctic Night
By Julian Sanction
Reviewed by Nicole Cliffe

FINDING JUNIE KIM
By Ellen Oh
Reviewed by Catherine Hong

TOO BRIGHT TO SEE
By Kyle Lukoff
Reviewed by Patrick Ness

By the Book
Alize Waters
6. New & Noteworthy
Letters
Best-Seller Lists
Editors’ Choice
Inside the List
Paperback Row

SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2021
nytimes#138437
“Williams is writing the best historical fiction out there. It’s lush with period detail but feels immediate.”
—ELIN HILDERBRAND

“I’ve long been a fan.... Our Woman in Moscow may be her best yet. It’s not to be missed!”
—SARAH PENNER, author of The Lost Apothecary

TWO SISTERS.
ONE WAY HOME.

In Cold War 1948, a diplomat vanishes with his family. Four years later, Ruth Macallister is on the trail in Moscow, posing as the wife of a counterintelligence agent. But the truth she discovers will change everything she thought she understood about loyalty.


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**New & Noteworthy**

**FROM THE ASHES: MY STORY OF BEING INDIGENOUS, HOMELESS, AND FINDING MY WAY** by Joseph Thistle. (Atria, paper, $17.95) Originally published in 2018 and reissued here in a newly revised edition, this debut novel by the author of the memoir “Heavy” is a time-traveling melodramatic rump set in Mississippi that probes fame, creativity, and the toll of racism.

**LONG DIVISION** by Kiese Laymon. ( Scribner, paper, $17.99) Originally published in 2017 and reissued here in a newly revised edition, this debut novel by the author of the memoir “Heavy” is a time-traveling melodramatic rump set in Mississippi that probes fame, creativity, and the toll of racism.

**CHASING THE THRILL: OBSESSION, DEATH, AND GLORY IN AMERICA’S MOST EXTRAORDINARY TREASURE HUNT** by Daniel Barbarisi. (Knopf, $29.95) In 2010, after learning he had cancer, a Santa Fe art dealer buried a chest full of jewels and gold, then wrote a poem with clues to its location. Barbarisi tells the unlikely story.

**ALL THAT SHE CARRIED: THE JOURNEY OF ASHLEY’S SACK, A BLACK FAMILY KEEPSAKE** by Tiva Miles. (Random House, $28) Through four generations of women, Miles traces the sack that a slave made for her 9-year-old daughter when the girl was sold to a new owner.

**THE KISSINGBUG: A TRUE STORY OF A FAMILY, AN INSECT, AND A NATION’S NEGLECT OF A DEADLY DISEASE** by Daisy Hernandez. (Tin House, $27.95) A common but overlooked parasite killed the author’s aunt, spurring this exposé.

**WHAT WE’RE READING**

When I recently experienced a nasty case of pandemic gloom, I found myself craving escapes. So I picked up a graphic novel that has been on my shelf for years: *Killing Floor* by Fabien Vehlmann, a 1983-84 sci-fi samurai epic, set in a dark and futuristic New York, it features a 23rd-century samurai who finds himself teleported to this nightmarish metropolis, where he sets upon the task of slaying the demon who killed his master 900 years earlier in feudal Japan, letting him finally reclaim his honor. The story ends with a mind-blowing conclusion that’s hard to see coming. Written and drawn by a 26-year-old Miller, “Killing Floor” isn’t as well known as “Sin City” or “The Dark Knight Returns,” but this formative work showcases Miller’s bold creative ambition operating at full throttle. I picked it up because I needed to get out of my own head, and I can attest that it did just that.

—Alex Vadukul, OBITUARY REPORTER AND CITY CORRESPONDENT
“A story of grit, love, synchronicity, and belief in God set in the tumultuous panorama of life in Europe circa World War II.”
Publishers Weekly

The courageous story of Stefan Revak, from his childhood in Hungary to conscription as a WW II German infantry soldier and prisoner of war. Stefan’s dream to come to the United States and desperate love for his wife kept him alive as he was swept across Europe in a war he did not choose.

“A finely detailed story of grit and survival... there is a balance here of cruelties and kindnesses that make these bromides real—human nature writ large.”
Kirkus Reviews

“Alternating between scenes and events that are in turn intimate, poignant, powerful, and chilling... a fast-paced, gripping tale that pits two forces—that of evil and that of love—against each other.”
*****
Foreword Clarion

“Inspiring, this story reminds us that the human spirit is stronger than the evil that others do.”
Eleanor Sullivan
Author of The Singular Village Mystery Series

Distributed by INGRAM. Published by Legacy, an imprint of Wyatt-MacKenzie
He was about to be tried for treason, ...his gay lover had been ordered to kill him, ...he was trying to evade a clever inspector, ...and had hired a bumbling actor named Shakespeare to front for his writings. It was obviously time for Christopher Marlowe to fake his own murder.

A contemplative Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1995.

“Hearing Homer’s Song: The Brief Life and Big Idea of Milman Parry” may be exciting. Milman Parry did not show that the Homeric epics were orally composed or that there was no “Homer,” but that a long and rich oral tradition lay behind them, and that the practice of composition-performance explains much that was previously puzzling. Many followers of Parry believe that the great epics were oral compositions, but others call them “oral-derived.” Not all our questions have been answered.

RUTH SCODEL
ANN ARBOR, MICH.

No Easy Answers

TO THE EDITOR:

Joe Klein’s essay about Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (May 23) will have done the country a great deal of good if Klein manages to ignite a renewed interest in this most visionary thinker of the mid- and late 20th century.

The essay appeared just as I am in the middle of “Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary,” edited by Steven R. Weinman and first published in 2010. Moynihan saw deeply into the currents of the day-to-day scrum of politics in his day and was able to articulate the largest themes. His typewritten memos to the presidents he served read like elaborate essays of the highest intellectual caliber. His largest theme was the collapsing moral authority of government, not by the increasingly authoritarian and anti-American character of the far liberal left and (no less) by the reactionary extremism of the right. He saw where it was headed and where it was headed is where we are today.

MARK ROBAN
WASHINGTON

TO THE EDITOR:

In his essay, Joe Klein pays tribute to the complexity and preoccupations of Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s thought. However, in “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” often referred to as the Moynihan Report, the future senator drew this sweeping, undocumented conclusion: “Unless this damage [to the Negro family] is repaired, all the efforts to end discrimination and poverty and injustice will come to naught.” Without serious, sustained efforts to end those ill, how could one possibly know?

According to Klein, the research of William Julius Wilson in “The Truly Disadvantaged” resurrected Moynihan’s pronouncements regarding the Black family. Actually, Wilson and his colleagues attributed high and rising rates of Black single parenthood to declining Black male “marriageability” defined as employed and between the ages of 15 and 44. In short, the injustice of Black male unemployment — consistently double the rate of White unemployment since the mid-1950s — was a cause of the family structure that Moynihan saw as the barrier to Black advancement.

A government guarantee of living-wage work — the first of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal of Rights — is one way to reduce discrimination, poverty, injustice and the devastating effects of unemployment on Black families.

Finding Homer

TO THE EDITOR:

The review of Robert Kanigel’s

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THE STORY OF THE GREATEST LITERARY CONSPIRACY OF ALL TIME
BASED ON THE HISTORICAL MURDER OF SHAKESPEARE

THE STAGE VERSION OF THE CONSPIRACY DECEIVED MILLIONS OF ALL TIME

FOR READERS WHO LOVE... OR HATE... SHAKESPEARE

PREMIERE SCREENING AT THE BROADWAY"
A TIRELESS QUEST TO FIND THE TRUTH

DISCOVER THE CONNECTION
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— JOHN ROBBINS
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"The information outlined in this book will supercharge your passion to make healthy choices and to live well without sacrificing lifestyle."

— DANA G COHEN, MD
Functional Medicine Physician and Co-Author of Quench

"Despite its wealth of knowledge, The Calcium Connection is an easy read, and if you want to do everything you can to maintain good health it’s one you won’t want to miss."

— LINDA BONVIE
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— STEFANIE SACKS, MS, CNS, CDN
Culinary Nutritionist and Author of What The Fork Are You Eating

My goal is to share my discovery and knowledge with you, so you can make educated decisions regarding your health, lifestyle, and of course, Calcium ATPase.

— Brunde Broady

Visit BrundeBroady.com to learn more.
Alice Waters

The chef and restaurateur, whose new book is ‘We Are What We Eat,’ was heavily influenced by Elizabeth David’s book ‘French Country Cooking’: ‘All I wanted to do was live like the French.’

What books are on your nightstand?

Next to my bed right now I have “Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart,” by Andrea O’Reilly; “All the Little Live Things,” by Wallace Stegner; “Sea, Economy, Freedom & Community,” by Wendell Berry; a book of quotes from Gandhi; “Self-Reliance,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson; “Devotions,” by Patti Smith; and a Lapham’s Quarterly on memory. There’s also Douglas Brinkley’s “The Wilderness Warrior: ‘Eating Animals,’” by Jonathan Safran Foer, and a copy of “My Old Home,” by Orville Schell. And Christopher Hitchens’s Thomas Jefferson biography. And Mary Oliver’s “Upstream.” And “Beloved,” by Toni Morrison, which I’m trying to read right now. Oh! And “From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death,” by Caitlin Doughty. That last one is another one I’m reading now, and it’s really fascinating. That’s a lot of books! There are stacks here waiting to be read, it’s really bad.

What book, if any, most influenced your approach to food?

It’s really hard to pin it down to just one book. It might be a tessellation between Richard Olney and Elizabeth David — but I think it’s probably Elizabeth David’s “French Country Cooking.” I got it in my early 20s, shortly after I came back from studying in France in 1963. When I returned home to Berkeley I all wanted to do was live like the French. Elizabeth David had also gone to France, and also fallen in love with the markets and the way that the French lived to eat. It’s a big cultural picture that Elizabeth David presents in her books; it’s not simply about food. Food is culture, and she revealed that. She also influenced me aesthetically — I loved the gracefulness and simplicity of her recipes and her cooking.

Who writes especially well about farming or restaurants, or both?

Wendell Berry writes beautifully about farming, for sure. And Ruth Reichl always writes so evocatively about restaurants and cooking. And while this isn’t strictly restaurants or farming, I love Michael Pollan’s edition of “Food Rules” that’s illustrated by Maira Kalman — two of my all-time favorites, collaborating together.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

Education, without any question. Public education. Jonathan Kozol is one of the few people who have really exposed the desperate state of our education system. But no one that I know has written a true present-day manifesto about the industrialization of our schools. Maybe there’s something out there I should read, but it hasn’t come to me yet. And I’m really waiting for it. Just in the way we’ve been indoctrinated by fast-food culture, we’ve been indoctrinated by the United States’ industrial education model. Education is entirely out of perspective now — what’s important, and what’s not. I want Jonathan Kozol to republish “The Shame of the Nation.” What a great title. And it is a shame on the nation. I can’t stop thinking about the schools he described.

How do you organize your books?

That’s an interesting one. I order my cookbooks by country, and then within that I try to keep them together by author. I’m not so successful at that, but that’s what I try to do. For other books, I organize them by subject, so I have all my education books together, all my gardening together, all my art books together. But the ones that I love the most I stack horizontally, because I’m grabbing them so much. I am always referring to “The Book of Symbols,” published by Taschen, it has symbols in it from around the world, from all different civilizations. I’m always trying to think of classic ways we can design a menu or a poster, and I sometimes steal ideas from there. Another book I use all the time and keep on my table is “Sacred Food,” by Elizabeth Laird. I have so many little Post-its tagged throughout its pages. Whenever I’m trying to figure out how to throw an event, I’ll flip through it, try to reach back in history to figure out how best to think about rituals and beauty and celebrations. That book I always keep handy.

And then I do have a little special section of my library that’s for old and rare cookbooks, where I have my copy of Brillat-Savarin’s “The Physiology of Taste” — the first edition of the English translation from 1854, before the M.F.K. Fisher translation in the 1940s. Here is the first line of it: “The universe would be nothing were it not for life, and all that lives must be fed.”

An expanded version of this interview is available at nytimes.com/books.
somebody's daughter

by Ashley C. Ford

212 pp. Trajectory Books. $27.99.

without letting each other go, her grandmother explains, "We don't give up on our people. We don't stop loving them. . . . Not even when we're burning alive."

Ford burned alive emotionally for much of her coming-of-age, trapped in a household where she bore the brunt of her mother's fury, even as she pinned for a father who had been in prison ever since she could remember. She carried these wounds inside, this child who ached deeply for relief, who harbored such intense hope that at age 4 she secretly stayed up all night to witness the sunrise. "somebody's daughter" is the heart-wrenching yet equally witty and wondrous story of how Ford came through the fire and emerged triumphant, as her own unapolgetic, Black-girl self.

The memoir opens with a recent phone call, in which Ford learns that her father is coming home after almost 30 years in prison, for rape; and it ends with his release.

What we learn in the two weeks between these two seismic events is that her father's unconditional but simplistic love has hovered over Ford's life; he calls her his "favorite girl . . . the best daughter anyone could ever hope for." Ford sees her father only a few times during his decades in prison; she writes to him once. While for much of her life she holds onto a child's fantasy of the family they were Before, and the family they'll be After, the memoir chart's Ford's journey toward figuring out who she is amid the phantom presence of an absent father.

Yet at its heart this is the story of Ford as her mother's daughter, for better and often for worse. Ford's brilliance as a writer, her superpower, is a portrayal of her mother — who remains unnamed — that is both damning and sympathetic, one that renders this complicated older Black woman's full humanity. When Ford's mother, in this opening phone call, let's her adult daughter know that she can "always come home" (from Brooklyn, where she is living with her boyfriend), Ford wants to say, "Mom, I love you, but I'll work myself past the white meat, down to the bone, and不管 every stranger I run across on the street before we live under the same roof again!"

Ford powerfully captures the complicated mix of meanness, frustration and obsessive mothering familiar to so many Black daughters. Her mother is ever vigilant, fearing for Ashley out in a world that doesn't value Black women and girls. At the same time, her mother has a short fuse, exacting physical punishment on Ford (slaps, kicks, "whuppings") for any transgression real or imagined. In these moments of maternal rage, "it was not my mother," Ford says, "it was the Mother," one who never offers the apologies her daughter so desperately craves.

But Ford also recognizes the mounting pressures her mother faces: working-poor, raising her children alone, depressed after the stillbirth of her third child, Lonely, she falls into relationships with men whose verbal and physical abuse she believes she must endure because they help pay the bills. When one of these men abuses Ashley emotionally, her mother takes his side, and we feel the author's hurt, her sense of betrayal, as though it were our own. Years later, however, Ford's mother believes her when she recounts a sexual assault she suffered as an adolescent. "I understand why you didn't tell me," her mother says. "I was crazy back then."

Ultimately, the author manages to heed her grandmother's advice, to never give up on either of her parents, to never stop loving them. But she does come to understand that it's equally important to love herself, even if that means setting boundaries with her family in the process. Ford found her voice as a writer, and that helped her see that she's not just somebody's daughter: She's somebody.
Get Out

BY CHRIS JENNINGS

GOING ALL THE WAY back to the strategists of Odyssey, certain war stories draw their fascination from the breathtaking cleverness occasionally sparked by the will to survive. “The Confidence Men,” Margaret Fox’s retelling account of two British officers who sprang themselves from an Ottoman prison camp during World War I using a Osijek board, delight of hand, feigned madness and vast stores of creativity is such a tale. Like the “Odyssey,” Fox’s book is less about war than the winning path home.

Toward the end of 1915, in the midst of an ill-planned campaign to march on Bagh-

The Confidence Men
How Two Prisoners of War Engineered the Most Remarkable Escape in History

BY Margallit Fox

dad, British troops were besieged by Otto-
man forces at Kiral-al-Ameen, a small town on the Tigris. After five months of relentless shelling, dwindling rations and failed rescue operations, the British raised a white flag. Thirty-three thousand Allied troops ultimately perished at Kir, Fox quotes one historian who speculates it was Britain’s worst defeat since Cannawells surrendered at Yorktown. Rather than the high-altitude perspective of much military history, here we get a narrative hovering at eye level. We learn more about Mrs. Milti-

A 1-35 scale model of a German tank on display at the Imperial War Museum in London. (Wide World Photos)

The Lady's Delusion

E.H. Jones, circa 1915.

Chris Jennings is the author of "Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopism.")

Junes Summer Special

Empire, Shell and starve them within an inch of their lives, force-march the surv-

evivors across Asia Minor and before you can sing “Rule, Britannia!” they have orga-
nized a debate society and started dress re-

vivals for some light comic opera (title: "The Fair Maiden of Yozgat"). Of course, somewhere outside the frame of Fox’s tale, there are an awful lot of enlisted men from both armies detained in far less humane conditions. Unlike the chaps at Yozgat, they were probably not procuring local groundhounds for the P.O.W. hunt club.

On a luck, Jones made a Osijek board from polished iron and an inverted jar. The hard-
ships of war and a wave of magical new tech-

The Confidence Men: Guy Alderson

nologies (the phonograph, radio, flight) had renewed public interest in telepathy and the paranormal. It was a “liminal era,” Fox writes, “poised at the nexus of the scientific and the spiritual.” Jones, who studied psy-

chology at university and possessed an as-

 astounding visual memory, discovered that he couldbamboozle his fellow officers, even blindfolded under close scrutiny. He found a perfect accomplice in C. W. Hill, a pilot of the Royal Flying Corps who had been raised on a Queensland ranch. Hill had been captured after his biplane was shot down in Egypt. Like Jones, he had a knack for secret codes and a willingness to risk his life for freedom. He also happened to be an accomplished stage conjurer.

Jones and Hill gradually encor-

celled the camp’s harsh Turkish commandant, plac-
ing him and others under trem-

Cheryl: A Story of Troy in America

boning obedience to a powerful ghost named “the Spook.” Speaking through the two prisoners and their new mentor, the Spook promised to lead the men to a heard of bur-

The Confidence Men: Margaret Fox

oided cattle. (The recent genocide had resulted in a lot of burred wealth.) Jones and Hill planned for the Spook to guide the treausre hunters to the Mediter-

nanean coast, where they could make their escape and possibly even turn over their captors to Allied forces in Cyprus. As it happened, things took a darker turn.

Fox, a former senior obstetrician writer for The New York Times and the author of one of these previous books, unseals Jones and Hill’s delightfully elaborate scheme in nailing episodes that advance like a narra-
tive John Goldberg machine, gradually leading from Yozgat to freedom by way of secret codes, a hidden camera, buried clues, fake suicides and a lot of ingenious manual jumblers. At moments, “The Confi-

dence Men” has the high glass of a story polished through years of telling and re-
telling. Indeed, Hill and Jones each voice the same eerie, lively chronicles of the escape. To make the material even more, Fox inserts a fresh “mystery” into the drama, namely: “How in the world was this preposterous plan actually able to succeed?” Without breaking stride, she answers that question with both horror and control, telepathy, mentalism and the tiki.

Meanwhile, the upwelling war mostly grows more distant. Fox leaves aside the perennial question of whether or not the Great War was modern history’s blood-

der, but her eye for the absurd underscores the senselessness of a conflict that began with a murdered archbishop in Sarajevo yet somehow led to this Osijek-guided treasure hunt in remote Anatolia. There is no short-

age of value here, but it has less to do with

country (let alone British control of

the bravery of two friends helping each other go home. For a while, Jones and Hill were

locked up in a Constantinople madhouse. “We did not attempt to talk,” Jones wrote.

“We were too closely watched for that —

But at night, under cover of darkness, some-

times he and sometimes I would stretch out

an arm, and for a brief moment grip the oth-

er’s hand. The firm strong pressure of my

compass fingers was a protection that I
could be all day to the "confidence"

inert, the "confidence"

"confidence"

after

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of some brilliantly illuminating classics. Robert Darnton’s “The Business of the En- lightenment,” about the buccaneering pub- lisher Charles-Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Pinel and the marketing of the Encyclopédie Méthodique, transformed our understand- ing of how Enlightenment ideas found readers and partisans. Alberto Manguel’s “A History of Reading” and “The Library at Night” are poetic meditations on the needful habit. Edward Wilson-Lee’s recent “The Catalogues of Blueprinted Books” is a plunge into the obsessive quest of Chris- topher Columbus’s son Hernando to com- prise the entire world, not via the thankless ordeal of navigation but rather through a universal library of more than 15,000 works about absolutely everything, every- where.

King is himself a compulsive bib- liophile. His page-turning novel “Ex-Libr- is” had its bookish hero traipsing around 17th-century France in search of replacements for a library destroyed in the English Civil War. But he is best known for a prolific output of popular and well-re- searched nonfiction books, each turning on heroic moments in the history of art, the raising of Brunelleschi’s dome for Flo- rence’s cathedral; Michelangelo’s battle to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Vespasian is an altogether more ob- scure quarry. Starting from modest begin- nings as the son of a worker in the wool trade, he was forced to leave school at 11, owing to his father’s death and family im- poorishment. But an apprenticeship with a bookbinding house launched a career that wound up with him as the go-to man for the libraries of humanist popes and princes, servicing the tranche that the enter- prise of power was conditional on the ab- sorption of knowledge. Five million manus- script books were produced in 15th-cen- tury Europe, and Vespasian was at the hub of that spinning wheel of learning, piety and pleasure.

The working assumptions of King’s book are traditional, but none the worse for that. The hunt- ing down and editing of all-but-lost texts from classical antiquity, and the circulation of the results as bound codices in editions of hun- dreds, allowed the reawakened an- cients—Plato, Cicero and Livy, for example to become, para- doxically, the makers of humanist modernity. The most powerful re- statement of this history is Stephen Greenblatt’s brilliant “The Swerve,” which recounts how Poggio Braccio- dini, a dogged manuscript hunter and prolific author in his own right (including of an anthology of jokes), unearthed in a German monastery a manuscript copy of “De Rerum Natura” (“On the Nature of Things”), by the epicurean writer Lucretius, with its startlingly mod- ern assertions of as-growing-dying di- vinity: a world constructed from at- mos, and earthly bodies as the essential point of life.

King rewrites some of that story and his major characters are largely a round-up of the usual suspects; Guazzo and Lorenzo de’ Medici, Marzolo Piccio, champion of a re- discovered Plato and his Chris- tian persecutors; and the one-eyed condottiere Federico da Montefel- tro of Urbino, a merciless slaug- terer of men while being a sophis- ticated patron of the arts of Piero della Francesca and the young Ra- phael.

Though Vespasian himself was the au- thor of a collection of biographies of illus- trious men, the real pleasure of King’s book is in its detailed evocation of the physi- cal grind of bookmaking. A refined work of philosophy, copied from the ancients, would begin with a bookmaker’s plier to the butcher for the best possible hide for the parchment: “After a week or two the hides would be fished from the [fermenting] vat, bathed in limewater and then attached with pegs to wooden frames and stretched tight as the remaining hair and flesh was scraped away with a crescent-shaped knife. Still taut on the frame, they would be side of the skin could face only a like hairy page, and a flesh-side page the same— cracked the cluster of movable type. But King rightly resists any simplified chronol- ogy of the transition inaugurated by the ar- rival of print from the German north that prompted scribes to lay down their quills. For much of the 15th century, the two forms of bookmaking lived alongside each other, much as electronic and paper books do in our own time. In its early years print was a business gamble; many more copies were made than necessarily found buyers. Different city-states opted for different media. Venice was hot for the presses while for

many years—astonishingly—Florence had no printers at all; a rejection King at- tributes in part to their reputation for speed over exactness. Wise betide the thinking world should print find its way into the hands of the wrong people. Lo- renzo de’ Medici’s librarian Angelo Poliziano thought that print ushered in “the most stupid ideas,” which “can, in a moment, be transformed into a thousand volumes and spread abroad.” Lorenzo him- self was so devoted to the older form that he actually revised expecta- tions by having printed books copied out in manuscript. If the quattrocento was the sunset of manuscript publish- ing, it was, then, gloriously pro- longed. Ultimately, though, a whole new market for writing opened up that was a lot less en- abled their philosophical con- tests pitting Aristotelians against Plato- nists. The produc- tion of satire, fiction, plays and ballads as well as religious and political polemics would ensure the victory of print. In a wonder- ful passage King describes an entrepreneurially minded ferrar, Fra Domenico da Pistoia, who established a commercially suc- cessful printing press at the court of San Jacopo di Ripoli in the mid-15th cen- tury, where maps, many of whom were already scribes, were retinted as type compo- sitors. It was one thing, though, to produce the “Liber de Catarum et Siens,” quite an- other to be let loose on Boccac- cio’s “Decameron.” None of the Ripoli press men, not even the space of the conquest, could be allowed to set eyes on the day in which Those of Christ merely fornicate with the common gardener.

“The Bookseller of Florence” doesn’t pretend to wade into deba- tes in the society of cul- ture; if you’re looking for McLu- hamel considerations on whether form conditions content you won’t find it in King’s pages, although I was struck by the fact that print in its early his- torical stave to emulate manuscript in both the style of its characters and the basic shape of a codex of bound pages. What you will find is a detailed account of a celebration of the Greek humanist Cardi- nal Bessarion’s belief that books “live, they converse and speak with us, they teach us, educate us, console us.” Painfully deprived as we have been of the immediate joys of friendly chatter and animated argument, we have ever valued the company of books more deeply.

A page from Vespasianus da Bistrita’s collection of biographies of illustrious men.
LONG BEFORE HE BECAME the celebrated filmmaker of "Sunset Boulevard," "Some Like It Hot" and "The Apartment," a young Billy Wilder worked briefly as a dancer for hire in the ballroom of a fashionable Berlin hotel. As he described the endeavor—one that called for a certain amount of imagination and role-playing in its own right—for a German newspaper in 1927, "This is no easy way to earn your daily bread, nor is it the kind that sentimental, soft-hearted types can stomach. But others can live from it."

Wilder's observations on his experience—from one of his many delightfully acerbic pieces of journalism anthologized in BILLY WILDER ON ASSIGNMENT: Dispatches From Wimper Berlin and Interwar Vienna (Princeton University, 312 pp., $24.95)—a new collection edited by Noah Isenberg and translated by Shelby Frisch—get to the heart of our enduring obsession with show business and the performing arts. For those on the inside of its gilded cages, what drives them to pursue careers that can be so fulfilling and yet so destructive and soul-deading, and what pleasures, if any, do they take from it? And for those of us watching on the outside, why do we remain fascinated with these people— their private lives, talents and appetites—and what do we find when we scratch beneath their well-known surfaces?

As a new crop of books demonstrates, these questions are perennially worth asking, about artists and works that we thought we knew intimately and those that have gone unexamined.

GLENN FRANKEL is a master of the movie-biography genre—books that take a single film and explore their making from conception to release, with all the humanity and cultural history that passes in between—and he has matched himself with an extremely worthy subject in SHOOTING "MIDNIGHT COWBOY": Art, Sex, Loneliness, Liberation, and the Making of a Dark Classic (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 415 pp., $30). In previous books, Frankel, a Pulitzer Prize winner, has written about the creation of conventional westerns like "The Searchers" and "High Noon," but "Midnight Cowboy" is a horse of a different color: This 1969 movie, based on James Leo Herlihy's novel of the same name, tells the story of Joe Buck (Jon Voight), a naive Texan who arrives in Manhattan with dreams of becoming a prosperous gigolo but ends up hustling men in Times Square while he shares a squad apartment with a streetwise vagabond named Enrico "Ratso" Rizzo ( Dustin Hoffman). Despite subject matter that was considered transgressive for its time and the fact that it was initially released with an X rating, "Midnight Cowboy" won Oscars for best picture and for its director, John Schlesinger, and its screenwriter, Waldo Salt.

Frankel, of course, provides a wealth of detail on the day-to-day production of the movie and the trajectories of Voight and Hoffman that led them to the film. But the people he renders most vividly detail include Schlesinger, the British phonem who pioneered the grime and sleaze of "Midnight Cowboy" after directing a failed adaptation of Hartley's "Far From the Madding Crowd"; and Herlihy, a disciple of Anais Nin and a one-time U.S. Navy enlistee. Both were gay men who frequently found themselves modulating their lives in response to the world's fluctuating tolerance of their sexuality. In collaboration, they yielded a movie that cobbled together taboos about what movies could say and show, and it precipitated a revolution of gay liberation in culture and society. While his affection for "Midnight Cowboy" is abundant, Frankel is also effective at puncturing the mythology surrounding it: "Though Hoffman has suggested his enduring line "I'm walkin' here!" was ad-libbed when an errant taxi drove into a shot, its driver was actually a member of the crew and Salt's screenplay had called for Ratso "to slam the floor of the taxi, pretending to be struck and falling back into Joe's arms. And the film's original X rating, Frankel reveals, was not imposed by the Motion Picture Association of America but by timid executives at United Artists, the studio that released "Midnight Cowboy," who feared that the film might somehow turn viewers gay.

A LESS HERALDED ENTRY from the pantheon of the performing arts gets its well-deserved canonization in FOOTNOTES: The Black Actors Who Broke the Rules of the Great White Way (Sourcebooks, 438 pp., $26.96), by the journalist Caesia Gaines. The project at the heart of Gaines's exuberant and thoroughly captivating book is the stage musical "Shuffle Along," which became a Broadway hit in 1921 and was among the few shows of its time to feature a Black cast and creative team. In telling the tale behind "Shuffle Along," Gaines unpacks the stories of two different creative partnerships: one between the actor and book writers F. Lawton Miller and Aubrey Lyles, and another between the composers and lyricists Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. In an era when white and Black performers alike appeared regularly in blackface and a show ran the risk of instigating race riots in its audience if it depicted romantic love between two Black characters, the foursome strove to create a musical that would satisfy the tastes of Black audiences yearning for greater representation and less negative portrayals on stage while it flew under the radar of Jim Crow. The production that they devised—a loose revue with vaudeville routines about two Black business partners who conspire against each other in a mayoral election—ran what was then a record-setting 504 performances over 60 weeks while helping to make popular standards out of songs like "I'm Just Wild About Harry." Gaines is as masterfully committed to the material he has factually researched and assembled, and there is a lot of it here—even players like Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson, who both got early career breaks in "Shuffle Along," have to settle for smaller supporting roles in his narrative.

Still, by the conclusion of the book, I found myself wishing to hear even a little bit more about George C. Wolfe's underappreciated 2001 Broadway revival of "Shuffle Along," which dramatized the making of the original show; despite a starry cast and creative team, including the actors Billy Porter, Joshua Henry and Audra McDonald and choreography by Savion Glover, it played only 100 performances and won none of the 10 Tonys for which it was nominated. (The awards that year were dominated by another show called "Hamilton").

ELIZABETH TAYLOR and Montgomery Clift are hardly unknown quantities and still they benefit from a fresh re-animations in Charles Casillo's tandem biography ELIZABETH AND MONTY: The Untold Story of Their Intimate Friendship (Kensington, 389 pp., $22.95). The book takes an unconventional but effective approach by chronicling the side-by-side lives of these larger-than-life movie stars who shared a close attachment and appeared together in movies like "A Place in the Sun" and "Suddenly, Last Summer." They were also inextricably linked by a gruesome accident in 1956 during the making of their film "Battleground." After Clift left a dinner party at Taylor's Beverly Hills home and his car struck a telephone pole. As Casillo indelibly describes the scene that awaited Taylor as she rushed to...
the crash site and helped Cliff extract two broken teeth lodged in his throat. "She could smell the blood and feel the warmth of it as it flowed from his wounds and pooled in her dress — she was momentarily able to push her revulsion about blood aside, although she would remember it for the rest of her life.

Castillo weaves an engaging story about the interwoven lives of its subjects — the parallel worlds of privilege that they came from, the personal misfortunes that each suffered and the seemingly inextricable path that led to that fateful night. Cliff was the sensitive, swoon-inducing lead man for whom the phrase "confirmed harelquin" was practically invented — a closeted gay man consumed by the very palpable anxiety that his sexuality would be exposed and lead to his ruin. Taylor, meanwhile, was a gossip-column fixture as early as the age of 8, unable to have anything more than a platonic relationship with Cliff and steered by social convention into marriages that were clouded by tragedy (her third husband, Mike Todd, died in a plane crash in 1958). Castillo, who has written books about Marilyn Monroe and the novelist John Rechy, doesn't treat Cliff and Taylor as pristine people and he can be quite dour at times — I'll leave it to the reader to discover how the phrase "Princess Tiny Meat" is deployed in the book. Even so, the author approaches them both with sympathy and comes away with a melodrama as good as any that they ever starred in. I mean it as the highest possible compliment when I say that it would all make excellent source material for a future Ryan Murphy TV series.

When her play "A Raisin in the Sun" brought her to national prominence in 1959, Lorraine Hansberry was 28 years old, and to viewers who were just discovering her, it seemed clear who she was. As Mike Wallace summed her up in a television interview from that period, "One night, Lorraine Hansberry, a girl who had dabbled in writing, made a brash announcement to her husband. She was going to sit down and write an honest and accurate drama about Negroes." But an Sotheby's Catalogue scrubulously documents "RADICAL VISION: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry ( Yale University, 273 pp., $30), her subject was no novice. Well before "A Raisin in the Sun" became the first play written by a Black woman to be produced on Broadway, Collier writes, Hansberry had "all of the seriousness of an established artist, having studied art and activism all her life. She didn't doubt.

Collier, a professor of African-American studies and performing arts at Georgetown University and an associate director at the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington, has accomplished the mighty task of resurrecting and reconfiguring the many facets that Hansberry possessed. Growing up, the young Hansberry saw her father, Carl, an entrepreneur, wage a legal battle that went to the Supreme Court so he could buy a home in a restrictive all-white Chicago neighborhood. As an adult, she spent the 1950s prolifically contributing short stories, poems, letters and pieces of journalism for several publications including Freedom, the Black leftist newspaper founded by Paul Robeson and Louis Burnham. And despite her long relationship with the producer and songwriter Robert Nemiroff — whom she met on a picket line, wed in 1951 and divorced in 1954 — she described herself as a "heterosexually married lesbian" and wrote often of her same-sex desires. A devoted and deeply felt account of the development of an artist's mind, "Radical Vision" also benefits from Collier's close analysis of lesser-known Hansberry works like her play "The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window," which closed just as its author died of cancer at the age of 34.

At first glance, David Steinberg might seem like too much of a mashup to really split the beans about his chosen profession in his new book, INSIDE COMEDY: The Soul, Wit, and Bite of Comedy and Comedians of the Last Five Decades (Kneep, 328 pp., $30), to be published in July. Steinberg, the veteran stand-up comic, actor and sitcom director, has impeccable nice-guy credentials: He is the preening-trained son of a rabbi and grocer (he still wore his kippah the first time he saw Lenny Bruce perform) and a Canadian to boot. He is also a relentless dropper of names, from established legends like Bob Newhart to contemporary talents like Jordan Poole — not because Steinberg wants you to know he's famous but because he truly admires his peers and understands what makes them tick. And he proves to be a genius, generous raconteur and reciter of showbiz lore. His stories of speaking Yiddish with Danny Thomas (who was a Roman Catholic of Lebanese descent) are charming, and his account of getting death threats for telling jokes about Richard Nixon is chilling. Then out of nowhere Steinberg will drop a story about attending a party at Lucille Ball's house where he heard

Groucho Marx make an off-color remark about the hostess and Zappa. (Let's just say the actual language Groucho used in Steinberg's account would not have made it into "Duck Soup"). And truly, how can you not adore someone like Steinberg who, when he was kibitzing with Bea Arthur in an after-hours session at "The Golden Girls" and she asked him, "Why do people take such an instant dislike to me?" had the quickness of mind to reply, "It just saves time?" (Not to worry — Arthur is said to have loved the riposte.)

If you already recognize Danny Trope as the stoop-eyed actor who has played intimidating bruisers in films like "Heat," "Machine Kills" and, um, "Muppets Most Wanted," then you also likely know he comes from a back- ground that’s as brutal as any character he’s portrayed. But he unspools that story with compassion and unsparring candor in his memoir, TREVOR: My Life of Crime, Redemption, and Hollywood (Allen, 376 pp., $27), written with Donal Logue and coming out in July. Trope grew up in Los Angeles and by 21 he was abusing alcohol, addicted to heroin and committing armed robberies, eventually serving time at notorious prisons like Chino, Jamesstown, Folsom and San Quentin. (He also claims to have been behind bars with Charles Manson.) His personal history is filled with despair and cruelty — visited upon and inflicted by him — but Trope doesn’t romanticize his past. He will terrify you into a life of perfect rectitude with his descriptions of prison rituals like the intake strip-search: "The guys who stay there covering themselves with their hands or even pause for a second, they’re already telling not only the guards but also the other inmates that they are fish, insecure and scared," he writes. "The guy who argued back or backed at the guards’ barred orders wasn’t the badass." But his book takes on a more hopeful tone when Trope achieves sobriety while in prison in 1988 and, after his release, begins to build a career with small roles in films like "Maniac Cop 2" and "Death Wish 4: The Crackdown." I also recommend the afterward by Logue, Trope’s co-author, friend and fellow actor. Relating a behind-the-scenes story from the thriller "Reindeer Games," where Trope saved him from falling into carefully manicured snow and spilling a shot, Logue writes, "He gently pulled me back in my mark, and the exact moment my feet had been two seconds earlier, and whispered, ‘I told you I got your back?’ It’s all enough to make you believe in the possibility of a Hollywood ending."
ONE APPROACHES a legal thriller rooted in high-stakes Washington politics with a certain trepidation — and a curiosity deepened, in this case, by Stacey Abrams’s chosen setting: the U.S. Supreme Court. 

Questions proliferate: Will there be actual Republicans and Democrats? Will the politics feel authentic — as they did, for example, in Allen Drury’s Pulitzer Prize–winning epic from the 1960s, “Advise and Consent”? 

Will the justices — as in life — be divided by ideology as well as by their disparate and often quirky personalitites? Will the author truly try to represent the hermetic world of the court or, hardest of all, the secretive and often Byzantine process through which it renders its decisions? 

Much depends on her intentions: Does she pitch the book to the small and picky audience that truly knows the world she purports to portray, while trying to bring the less sophisticated along for the ride? Or, seeking to engage a mass audience more interested in entertainment than authenticity, will she use the high-concept

WHILE JUSTICE SLEEPS

By Stacey Abrams


setting for a purpose both less and more ambitious: selling books.

In this case, the interest in such choices is heightened by the identity of the author. Any observer of politics knows that Abrams is a charismatic and talented former state legislator and voting rights activist who is likely to run for governor of Georgia in 2022. One expects a book written by an ambitious practicing politician to be, well, political.

It is therefore small surprise that explicit politics play little part in it and that Abrams stirs on judicial ideology. Still, her enterprise impresses on several counts: that she is willing to risk the jaundiced eye of readers unsympathetic to her public career; that she has the stuff to asay fiction in a new and challenging genre; and that she has the wherewithal to live the life she cares enough about the form to undertake the demanding business of turning an idea into a novel. So the only fair question is not what she might have written, but whether she shouldn’t have written it.

At the outset, the customary conveniences of legal thrillers require quickly immersing the reader in murky but momentous events — this is not, after all, “Madame Bovary.” In page after page of efficient and serviceable prose, Abrams creates an exceedingly convincing but potentially intriguing landscape.

Variously:

Richard North Patterson is a lawyer, novelist and political commentator.

The seemingly misanthropic and possibly paranoid Associate Justice Howard Wynn insults the president of the United States to his face; becomes the ravages of Dionysus’s syndrome, an apparently degenerative brain disease that is sapping his mental acuity; invades against the capacity of humans to deploy scientific breakthroughs for dangerous ends; refers to himself as a threat to national security; harasses a nurse who has been blackmailed into spying on him; designs chess-related clues to his investigation of underhanded matters in a case pending before the court; and suspects them for one of his law clerks to decode — all before lapsing into a coma induced by what may be a suicide attempt. Whereupon the nurse, contrary to instructions from her unknown blackmailer, saves Wynn’s life by calling 911.

The protagonist, Wynn’s African-American law clerk, Avery Keene, is awakened by a call from her crack-addicted mother demanding cash to pay off her supplier. Avery, we perceive, is a self-sufficient loner. Her father is dead, her mother abusive and her credit cards maxed out from covering her month’s latest stint in rehab. Nonetheless, Avery hastens to rescue her ungrateful parent.

In India, the head of a biotech company, Dr. Indira Srivatsan, breeds over her own debilitating degenerative condition and, of more immediate concern, the fact that President Brandon Stokes opposes a bill to the majority leader of the Senate demanding a meeting with him and the speaker of the House. 

All that’s missing, it seems, is a murder. Not to worry. By Page 27 the nurse’s mysterious blackmailer, an ostensible D.C. cop indignant at Wynn’s survival, has got a hit list through her brain. But not before she berates out Avery’s name, putting the robbery-20-something in the cross hairs of a global conspiracy.

All this buzzes breezes a fascination of its own — and yet more questions. Can all these preposterous plotlines possibly be real? How in the world did Abrams propose to bring them all together? Will the narrative cohere, or collapse from sheer exhaustion?

Here Chekhov’s dictum leaps to mind: “One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn’t going to go off.” By that standard, Abrams must deploy a firing squad. But this much is clear: The author means to keep her characters and the reader exquisitely busy — and Avery in serious trouble.

As the story progresses, Abrams’s current deficits as a novelist become apparent. To say the least, “While Justice Sleeps” epitomizes the phrase “plot-driven.” Avery lacks a fully developed persona, and frequently reacts to alarming events in ways that are emotionally and logically implausible. Some of her most striking characteristics — she turns out to be a chess prodigy with an eidetic memory and a talent for breaking and entering — are functional rather than organic. Too often, she and her supporting cast see whatever the story requires them to be.

In consequence, many secondary characters are human signifiers — Justice Wynn’s unloving second wife in a cartoon trophy dragoon, and the vultures of cable news make Tucker Carlson look like the quintessence of journalistic sobriety. Similarly, the dialogue quite frequently seems designed to convey information or personalize attitude rather than approximate speech.

Concurrently, one is struck by Abrams’s considerable powers of invention. Not only does she succeed in keeping the pages turning, but the fullosso she triggers bespeaks a genuine gift for weaving a daunting number of plot threads into her labyrinthine but accelerating design. Her narrative never passes for mere plot, nor does it give the author much opportunity for contemplation.

Neither, it seems, does Avery. Swiftly she plunges into a murderous mailroom of potentially deadly, preposterous machinations; a瑕疵ing scientific breakthrough with an apocalyptic downside; several murders; and a relationship with Justice Wynn’s estranged son — all while striving to save herself and the justice and, in the bargain, the rule of law. Seems like enough. Readers searching for a deeper understanding of characters whose inner lives inform a consistently credible narrative won’t find them in this book; its climactic events, and the behaviors of the principals, require a particularly wide lens to decipher. Nor do Abrams’s caricatures of power entice a sense of real-life verisimilitude — they too, exist to serve her hammering machine. But those desire of peril and surprises will encounter in abundance. On that score, Abrams has realized what surely was her chief ambition — not to enlighten, but to entertain.”
What Goes Up

BY EDWARD DOLNICK

IN 1924, no one had ever set foot atop Mount Everest, the highest peak on Earth. By then, America had reached the North Pole, Norway had won a bitter race to the South Pole. Everest was “the Third Pole,” and the first person who reached the top would win fame for himself and glory for his nation. A century ago, expeditions to the world’s far corners carried all the excitement of a journey to the moon or Mars today. England had always prided itself on its explor- ing heritage, but the early 1900s were dark years for English exploration. An English English Murder

They disappeared into swirling clouds, but for a moment the clouds lifted. One team member, thousands of feet below, saw two tiny figures moving forward and “going strong.” Then the clouds des- cended. Neither man was ever seen again.

George Mallory’s body was found in 1999 not Sandy Irvine’s body was not, nor was the Kodak camera he carried, nor the film inside, which some experts believed might still be salvageable. When many books have been written on a subject, like Everest, we turn to a new one largely in the hope that the author will make a good guide and traveling compan- ion. Mallory measures up nicely. His rock climbing and mountaineering resume in- cludes dozens of international expeditions, and he wrote a book called “The Impossi- ble Climb” about the climbing superstars Alex Honnold.

“Sustained,” he writes, “I wasn’t interested in Mount Everest at all.” Everest, in his view, was a place for novices with too much money and too little skill. Let someone else take selfies at the summit. Mallory’s words, who also had an adventure-driven lifestyle, felt the same disdain: “Everest? Really? That seems so unoriginal and not you. Hasn’t everyone already been there and done that?”

But Mallory persuaded himself that this venture would be different. The summit wasn’t the point; the search was the point. Other expeditions had tried to find Irvine’s body, but Mallory had devised a new strat- egy, with the help of a friend and fellow rock climber who was also an expert drone pilot. Could a drone be modified to cope with Everest’s thin air and high winds so that it could locate Sandy Irvine’s body?

Though Mallory has no patience for what he calls “dilettante mountaineers,” high peaks are so dangerous that even experts can run into trouble, and in “The Third Pole,” Mallory recounts what hap- pens when climbers get into trouble. He describes horror stories about frostbite and strokes (blood clots are more likely at high altitudes) and oxygen tanks that hit empty at the worst possible moment. One mountaineer in Pakistan was caught in an avalanche and “buried up to his neck in snow that had instantly set firm like frost- acting concrete.”

Reading about all of this is great fun for those of us who live in what Mallory calls “the horizontal world.” Safe at home, we settle in contentedly to hear about some- one else’s calamity. George Orwell cap- tured a similar mood in “The Decline of the

This file photo dated 1990 shows the British mountain climber George Mallory, who died while scaling Mount Everest in 1924, on the Mote ridge of the Aiguille Verte mountain in France.
Familiar Doom

BY MARCEL THEROUX

THE PUBLICATION OF "Phase Six" is one of those moments of synchronicity that make you wonder if an author is capable of pre-cognition. It brought to my mind Chris Cleaves’ novel about a terror attack in London, "Incendiary," which was published on July 7, 2005 — the day of a terror attack in London. It also recalls Morgan Robertson’s 1889 book "The Wreck of the Titan," which describes a passenger liner sinking after colliding with an iceberg in the North Atlantic — 14 years before the disaster of the Titanic.

Jim Shepard’s new novel describes the genesis and spread of a deadly pandemic that arises in one of the world’s remote corners and goes on to upend life everywhere, exposing inadequacies in governments and health care systems, and reviving the heroism of ordinary people. Vivid and carefully researched, it’s clearly the prod-

uct of long and conscientious work. It lands uncannily now, since at some point during its gestation, real life caught up with the book’s speculative world.

Of course, it’s right to point out that spooky-sounding coincidences are easily explained: Terrorists carry out attacks and boats sink with depressing frequency. Once in a while, their timing will make a book seem eerily prescient. And one of the things that "Phase Six" insists on is that no gift of prophecy was required to foresee a global pandemic. Shepard reminds us that back in 2006, 90 percent of epidemiologists were predicting a major pandemic within two generations. The inevitability of an outbreak is a recurring and vivid theme in the book. Pathogens are older, more resilient and more adaptable than we are. "Who would you put your money on?" asks one of Shepard’s scientists, chillingly. "Humanity has been around for what, 200,000 years? And bacteria for like three and a half billion."

The pathogens that wreak havoc in this novel originate in the icy landscape of Greenland, just outside the tiny Inuit settlement of Ilulissat. Their mineral reserves have drawn the interest of foreign mining concerns. Two young Inuit boys sneak onto a mining camp and disable something from a pile of excavated petroleum; one of the trespassers, Aqeq, becomes the conduit for a new and deadly disease. With terrifying speed, the pathogen moves from Ilu-

liassat and into the wider world, spread by a handful of interactions between strangers.

As the disaster unfolds, two researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Danice and Jean-
nine, arrive in Greenland to investigate the causes of the pandemic. It becomes clear that Aqeq, the unwitting first carrier of the disease, also holds the key to untangling its origins. A fourth character, Valerie Landry, a doctor at Rochester General, bears wit-
ness to the ongoing calamity as victims pile up in her hospital.

This is a book full of work. It’s one of Shepard’s many appealing qualities as a writer that he notices the significance of between places as seemingly distant as Kenya, Manaus and Wuhan.

In the best parts of "Phase Six," as in "The Book of Aron," Shepard shows his gift for making art from the lives of people liv-
ing in extremis. He does this with a patient, naturalistic eye for detail and a style in which exactitude and plainness bring bracing poetry. He also experiments with a different idiom, a knowing inside’s style that occasionally strikes a jarring note: "It turned out that the president had au-
thorized with a special directive the form-

Pathogens are older, more resilient and more adaptable than we are.

what people devote their lives to. He is in-

terested in the minutiae of employment, whether it’s a black marker selling turnips in the Warsaw Ghetto in his previ-

ous novel, "The Book of Aron," or, in "Phase Six," a scientist carefully suiting up to enter a Level 4 biosafety facility.

"Phase Six" Works Across a Big Canvas: from vividly drawn Greenland to looming I.C.U.s in the United States, to the high-
tech detective work involved in tracking down the pathogen. Shepard writes persua-
sively about the disparate places and lives connected by the disaster. The breadth of the book is necessary and com-
mendable. The coronavirus has shown us how a pandemic draws unexpected links with its abbreviations, mixed metaphors and simplistic message, is intended as a parody of government speak. It’s so differ-
ent from the best of Shepard’s writing that I’m apt to think it’s a joke. If so, it’s a very laborious one, and it made me miss the vivid and restrained prose that gives Aqeq’s in-
ternal world such poignancy.

Although Shepard’s publisher says that he finished the novel before Covid-19 erupted, the book has clearly been revised in light of the past year’s events. The char-
acters refer to the coronavirus pandemic as something from the recent past. That’s cold comfort, given the book’s bleak insistence on the cyclical inevitability of plague: "Our companions have been reliably caus-
ing cataclysmic epidemics not only for cen-
turies, but for eons," he writes. The notion that there will be a sequel to the current pandemic is not a heartening one.

What makes the book engaging and ulti-

mately uplifting is the emotionally com-

plex lives of its central characters. There’s the torment of Valerie, juggling family obli-
gations with caring for doomed patients in her hospital. Shepard painlessly evokes the heroism and strangeness of the doctor’s work: "Someone died and the relatives went off by themselves and collapsed, but you still had the rest of your shift to get through." Another dynamic is the growing friendship between Jeaninne and Danice, both isolated by their fixation on their work, as they risk death to undo great harm.

Shepard showed in "The Book of Aron" that he is particularly attuned to the voice and sensibility of a child caught up in life-

savoring events. Aqeq’s loneliness, re-
sourcesfulness and powers of observation make him a distant spiritual relation of Aron Ruzyczki. Afflicted to the United States for observation, Aqeq becomes the focus of the story as Jeaninne and her ex-
boyfriend Branislav, who works with trou-
bled children, try to win his trust in order to get to the secret of the pathogen. Shepard’s ultimate sympathies lie with children, and his characters can be roughly divided into those who are responsive to the plight of young people and those who are indifferent to it. Jeaninne is an investigator who is devoted to her task, but lacks an aptitude for caring. From her, the book demands an emotional shift: to see Aqeq as a person rather than as merely the object of study. These sections of the book, inevitably filled with all kinds of loss, build up to its haunt-
ing climax.

For the foreseeable future, we remain in the era of hot takes about Covid-19 and our governments’ responses to it. And yet, somehow, working to a deeper rhythm, Shepard has managed to make art out of our crisis with a thought-provoking work of fiction that sustains our emotions, and also shames our policymakers.
Curses!

BY CECELIA WATSON

DROP AN E-BOMB into conversation, and its detonation lights up the right hemisphere of your brain. That right-brained roguishness, the linguist John McWhorter tells us, sets profanities apart from ordinary words, which are mediated by the comparatively sober left brain. Yet each of the explosive utterances that we now consider profane started life as a neutral let-brain word before hopping hemispheres. Over time, some once-offensive profanities like

NINE NASTY WORDS

English in the Gutta — Then, Now, and Forever

By John McWhorter

288 pp. Avery, $24.94.

“hell” have even seemed to jump back, liv- ing out their twilight years as harmless words again. Can we map the movements of these restless bits of language? More broadly, what do they tell us about English, and about ourselves?

In “Nine Nasty Words,” McWhorter describes the evolution of some of the most notorious profanities in English, applying the tools of linguistics to find “structure in what seems the chaos, mess or triviality.” Thankfully, his aim is not to Big-Bang the chaos into perfect order, map up the mess or roundbracket the trivial. Instead, McWhorter deftly models a way for us to think deeply and systematically about language while culturing its wildness, its slipperiness and its sordidness. Those nasty words are really “nine nasty ways of being human.”

McWhorter’s literary style does justice to the reality that language is a living thing, and to the reality that it “hasn’t acquired any real estate in the pro- nounced neighborhood,” unlike its English counterpart asx. His anecdotes about his own run-ins with profanities encouraged me to reflect, with amusement and new in- terest, on how often those words have starred in my own life’s dramas and comed- ies. And throughout the book, McWhorter gives a master class in the com- modic value of taking swearing seriously. Sometimes these moments are wittily puerile: “In future English, ass could spread its sexual meaning,” McWhorter speculates cheekily. On other occasions, the wordplay is less nakedly obvious, as when an ostensibly innocent paragraph on idealization and generalization in lan- guage gives way to a punning encomium to ass and to ass.

The book’s winking style doesn’t stop McWhorter from taking his subject seri- ously, whether he is reconfiguring our un- derstanding of pronouns, explaining “ex- clusive indulgence” or scrutinizing sexist and racist slurs. Shush, McWhorter con- tends, are today’s true obscenities; to make sense of profanities, then, we must account for words like the N-word.

In his chapter on this ugliest of words, McWhorter gives a beautiful account of what it means to engage seriously with language as an individual with multiple personal and professional identities: acade- mic linguist, public intellectual, com- mentator on race, black man, paren, New Yorker and a dozen other McWhorters. The chapter is a replayable motion picture of a deeply thoughtful person wrestling with a live problem, resisting oversimplifi- cation and acknowledging that even provi- sional answers will always need revising as language and culture shift over time. The N-word is particularly potent profan- ity, he acknowledges, but it is also “marvel- ous,” because its past and present invest it with “menace, filth, scorn, teasing, warmth, love and interracial outreach.” McWhorter’s take on this may not match the reader’s, he admits; but he sets an ex- ample for those who want to wrestle their way to a conclusion of their own.

Personal perspective, however, is not without pitfalls, and at several moments in the book I wondered if McWhorter’s opin- ion was masquerading as fact. “But coll,” he tells us, stems from the human back- side’s maintaining a lower temperature than the top back side. We might all have verified if we’d laid hands on someone else’s “naked posterior.” “This is why no one says, ‘I’m butt hot,’” he con- cludes. Skeptical of this reasoning and in search of a supporting citation, I flipped to the book’s back end, where I found a hole: In lieu of a complete list of works con- sulted, McWhorter gives only a bare-bones selected bibliography in his notes. Deter- mined to get to the bottom of the matter, I probed the relevant scientific literature:

The gist is that butt temperature varies in- versely with the quantity of fat covering the gluteal muscles; fat insulates the body and keeps it hot in. Because human fe- males typically distribute a greater pro- portion of their fat in their buttocks than males do, it stands to reason that female buttocks would feel colder relative to the rest of their bodies.

If you’ve more often put your hands on a male’s naked posterior, your experience may be entirely different. And it we accept that not all butts are relatively cold, McWhorter’s etymology could be (1) false, because it’s based on an assumption drawn from personal experience, which he’s ex- trapolated to the universal; or (2) true, but worthy of a linguist’s careful analysis, be- cause isn’t it interesting how and why uni- lateral perspectives accrete in the unlikeli- est of places, not just in ourie grammar tumes, but in slang like “butt cold” too?

Moments like these in which evidence is AWOL are not the only reason I’m门诊- ing for a bibliography. A fully sourced book would make it easier to identify (and praise) the places where McWhorter’s analysis of language is as original as his writing style. And it would showcase the omnivore’s feast of reference material he serves up in the book, where Thomas Hobbes, N.W.A., and the Elle Woods charac- ter in “Legally Blonde” comfortably share space in a chapter on “bitch.”

Whether an author has leaned too heavily on one type of source or ably run the gamut like McWhorter, a bibliography renders that choice visible. Perhaps it’s time for readers who want to buy books that incor- porate a diversity of perspectives to insist that nonfiction authors always ante up their sources in full.

I’m hammering hard on the lack of cita- tions because I thought so highly of the book over all: It deserves to be taught in classrooms, and deserves to be quoted — not merely because it’s butt hot butts butts will be a hit at cocktail parties. “Nine Nasty Words” is a deeply intelligent celebration of language that teaches us how to see English in high definition and love it as it really is, right now and in its myriad inca- rna- tions to come. —

Diana Secker Strumpf, a government employee for tax- ing on the Second Amendment, has been commis- sioned to keep a lengthy list of works consulted, McWhorter gives only a bare-bones selected bibliography in his notes. Deter- mined to get to the bottom of the matter, I probed the relevant scientific literature:

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Diana Secker Strumpf, a government employee for tax-
Thrillers BY SARAH LYALL

WHAT BETTER WAY to relax during the coming months than with a stack of juicy thrillers? How will you find murders, ghosts, psychological intrigue, legal disputes and domestic dramas—a book for every mood.

There's something singularly creepy about a baby doll at a crime scene, particularly when glued to the cold dead hands of a feminist scholar known for her vise never to have children. To add to the macabre nature of the opening tableau in THE OTHERS (Mulholland, 322 pp., $28), by the Israeli author Sarah Bual, the word “mother” is scrawled in blood-red lipstick on the corpse's forehead: “There you have it, Dina, you’re finally a mother,” thinks Sheila, an old freemasonry of the victim.

Sheila, a 41-year-old museum tour guide specializing in the childless women of the Bible, is the book's snarky, unreliable narrator. Two decades earlier, she, Dina and two other glamorous university friends in Tel Aviv formed a group with a radical founding principle: They would never become mothers. They called themselves The Others.

Life has not turned out so well for them, given that one woman committed suicide many years ago and a second has now been murdered. Will Sheila be the next victim? Or is she the killer? Her account, translated from the Hebrew by Danielle Zamir, is full of bravado, self-doubt and self-justification, particularly when it comes to Sheila's feelings for the unprofessionally flirtatious 20-something detective assigned to the case. “I had a relationship with an older woman too,” he announces.

Blas, an award-winning playwright in Israel, wades bravely and sometimes heavily-handedly into issues of sex, religion and aging. The mystery is absorbing, but so is the passionate debate over how the world views women who decide not to have children—and how they view themselves.

AS AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER for the Sovereign, a National Geographic-like magazine in Washington, D.C., Tom Klay swashbuckles across continents exposing malfeasance, eluding romantic commitment and spending eye-watering amounts of money courtesy of his seemingly bottomless expense account. He is also a spy for the C.I.A. reporting to his handler, Vance Eady, who is also the magazine's top editor. (Note: Here at the Book Review, we are not allowed to discuss our covert jobs with the intelligence services.)

IN THE COMPANY OF KILLERS (Putnam, 306 pp., $27), by the immensely talented Bryan Christy, who in his previous life was an investigative reporter for National Geographic, finds Klay traveling to South Africa on his most dangerous assignment yet. It involves shadowy alliances, corrupt politicians, white-backed meerkats, ruthless billionaires whose reach extends to every industry and people who might say to an admiral in the U.S. Navy, “So, starting today, this little sex ring of yours is over.” Christy's muscular, vivid writing and John le Carre-esque talent for thrusting us deep into unfamiliar territory ensure that what could lapse into cliché instead sounds fresh and exciting.

The book is almost too complicated; I had a hard time keeping track of who was being betrayed, and by whom, and what the final stakes were (other than world domination). But Klay is a great, flawed hero, in the vein of the classic hard-drinking, hard-living, hard-loving loner. As his erstwhile boss says to him, over a Scotch on a Sunday morning, “We're survivors, you and me.”

THERE ARE NO GUN-FUELED BLOOD BATHS, global conspiracies or triple-crossing operatives in THE SECRET TALKER (HarperVie, 199 pp., $23.99), by the well-known Chinese author Geiling Yan, just the turbulent mysteries of the heart. How well do we know those we are closest to? Why is intimacy—with other people, and even with ourselves—so brutally painful?

As the book begins, Hongmei, a Chinese transplant living in California, is reading an email from a stranger who claims to have observed her eating dinner with her husband, a distinguished professor named Chen, at a restaurant. The stranger is uncannily perceptive, noting that Hongmei is holding back in her marriage and boldly asserting that Chen doesn't understand her at all. “As far as her husband was concerned, she was a secret talker, every breath, bite and laugh part of the enigma,” Yan writes.

Hongmei resists, then plunges headlong into an ever more personal email correspondence with her mysterious interlocutor. He (or is it a she?) is the real secret talker, Hongmei observes, “messages her from the shadows and keeping his identity hidden while he judged her, exposed her.”

The anonymity of the correspondence allows her to share distressing secrets—details of her early life in China, including her interrogation and imprisonment, her move to America, the disappointments of her marriage. Her correspondent has an exquisite sensitivity to her feelings and seems to be harboring personal secrets, too. Who is this tantalizing person?

Just 100 pages long, beautifully translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang, “The Secret Talker” is a profound meditation on love, the difficulties of communication and the agonizing joy and brutality of commitment. “She didn't know if she was more afraid of the secret talker,” Yan writes, speaking of Hongmei, “or of the self that these prying eyes would see through.”

THE ALWAYS SURPRISING Ben H. Winters writes books that combine genres, infusing the realistic with the fantastical. “Underground Airlines,” his best-known novel, is a counterfactual historical set in the near future that imagines a world in which Lincoln was assassinated four years earlier, in 1861, and slavery was never entirely abolished. “Golden Age” is about a world of jilted who are wrecked by the loss of their lover and have had surgery routine to relieve the pressure in his brain after hitting his head. The operation has turned him into an empty hulk, compulsively walking in circles, not eating, sleeping or talking.

The book then jumps forward a decade, to 2019, when Shenk is a disappointed, haunted man, crushed by the derailment of the earlier lawsuit. (We won't know what happens until later, when all the threads of the book finally knit together.) He's enlisted to help the Keener family again after Weser's father is accused of the impossible-to-explain murder of a key witness in the earlier case.

The story emerges in expertly paced scenes moving backward and forward between present and past. What's wrong with Weser? Why did one of his friends report that at the moment of his accident, he seemed to glide, as if he were phosphorescent? And who is the unscrupulous man with the bleached-blond hair who keeps turning up to harass Shenk's son, Ruben? Winters is such a fine writer that by
The water in Brandenburg Springs, Vt., grants wishes and heals ailments. It also has a habit of killing people. ‘The springs exact a price equal to what was given,’ one resident says.

Not that Abby is trouble-free herself. Rumored to have pushed the envelope of legality in a notorious trial in which she got a gang member acquitted in connection with the murder of a drug-enforcement agent, she is determined to prove herself with a new case. But she has just had a baby herself and is finding the work-life balance difficult. “She loved Cal beyond all reason and at the same time his existence felt entirely unreal to her,” Burrett writes. “Every minute she was with her baby she was also sitting in the audience watching a play that had been terribly miscast.”

Also, the judge assigned to the case turns out to be the losing prosecutor in the old gang-member case — and a man who believes in holding a grudge. “The fact that I fear an alding personal dislike for you has nothing to do with my ability to be fair to your client,” he declares.

We’ll see about that. Abby is a problematic heroine, brilliant but troubled and often highly poignant. Burrett, a professor at the University of San Francisco School of Law and an advocate for overturning wrongful convictions, sometimes has her characters do things that would in real life get them disbarred on the spot. But the courtroom scenes are sharp and suspenseful, the twists in the plot are unexpected, and the tension rattles up so that we are truly eager to find out what happens.

I enjoy being discomfited by a book as much as anyone. But these are tenacious times, and sometimes the last thing you want is to feel emotionally terrorized right before bedtime. The Disappearing Act (Ballantine, 399 pp., $28), by the British actress and novelist Catherine Steadman (“Something in the Water,” “Mr. Nobody”), has the virtue of being engaging and suspenseful, but not nerve-shredding.

“Acting is a strange job and L.A. is an even stranger place,” Steadman, who played the witty Mabel Lane Fox in the late, lamented “Downton Abbey,” writes in the acknowledgments, and she is absolutely right. Sometimes it takes the unimpressed eye of a Brit to expose the absurdities and excesses of Hollywood: the meat-market casting calls with studio executives who forget your name, the “right suits” in which undervaluing rich celebrity is somehow associated.

On the opposite side, however, is Hollywood, where the pressures are everywhere.

Fresh from a rough breakup with a faultless boyfriend in London, Jane Eyre in the British film “Eye,” Mija Elliot has arrived in Los Angeles to break into the big leagues. At an audition for a drama that is set in Mars, she meets an actress named Emily, who thrusts her purse into Mija’s arms and suggests it could be in for a parking meter. When Mija returns, Emily is nowhere to be found. What’s worse, no one remembers seeing her at all.

Hollywood can be a cold place for outsiders, and Mija resolves to hunt down the mysterious Emily while continuing to try out for parts. There’s a MeToo subplot and a dread audition with a Method-actor who is not identified, but appears to be Daniel Day-Lewis. Complicating matters is the intriguing presence of Nick, a handsome, rich stranger Mija meets in a parking lot, who is suspiciously eager to spend time with her. (He seems too good to be true. Is he a psychopath maniac?)

Mia is the type of resourceful heroine who would have once been called “plucky” and her common sense helps her navigate even the dichest of developments. (“What would Jane do?” she keeps asking herself). Like Chloë Grace Moretz, she is a determined, intense young actress. But as the story unfolds, her character begins to soften, and the ending is satisfying, but not too pat. The Hollywood sign is mentioned early, leading to a great, extended scene far above the city — and to a genuinely Hollywood ending.

The Water in Brandenburg Springs, Vt., grants wishes and heals ailments. It also has a habit of killing people. ‘The springs exact a price equal to what was given,’ one resident says.

Fred, a young, stalker-ish graduate student; and, of course, Forca, whose students are dying one by one.

Mariana is sure Forca is the killer. Then again, she’s not so sure. “Perhaps I’m crazy,” she thinks. “Perhaps that’s it.” When she stages a group-therapy session with the surviving Maidsen, we begin to question her therapeutic skills. “I suppose Professor Forca is your father?” she tells the women, who glare with open disdain. “Is he a good father?”

Author readers will thrill to some neat cross-references to Michaelciedie’s earlier book, “The Silent Patient,” a difficultly hard-to-guess twist; the one “in the Maidens” could have flown down in a spaceship from another planet. I guarantee that you won’t see it coming.

L.A. BAZELON’S A GOOD MOTHER (Harper Square, 348 pp., paper, $16.99) starts with the murder of a U.S. Air Force staff sergeant, Travis Hollis, stabbed with a kitchen knife by his wife, Luz. Among her motives: He was an abusive alcoholic, he had just fathered another woman’s baby, and he had recently made Luz and their 2-month-old daughter the beneficiaries of his $400,000 life insurance policy.

It’s not exactly a slam-dunk case for Abbé Babcock, the federal public defender assigned to represent Luz at her murder trial. Luz, just 23, is an unhelpful defense, alternatively bored, defiant and manipulative. She also repeatedly violates the rule where she are meant to be honest with your defense attorney.

FANS OF ALEX MICHAELIDES’ best-selling debut, “The Silent Patient”, about a therapist determined to unlock the secrets of a woman who inexplicably killed her husband and then refused to utter a word, have been waiting impatiently for a follow-up. It has now arrived, and it is called THE MAIDENS (Citadel, 360 pp., $27.99).

An offshoot of the Maidsen, a world-renowned at a world-famous British university; a clique of haughty, white-dress-wear- ing female students in his thrill; the application of Greek mythology to real-life murders — the premise is enticing and the elements interwoven. Also, “The Maidens” is not an English version of “The Secret History,” but an over-stuffed melodrama marred by clunky dialogues, breathless one-sentence paragraphs, pseudo-suspense and chapter endings and a plot that will try the patience even of readers with a high tolerance for improbability.

Mariana Andres, a therapist in London recovering from the traumatic death of her husband, travels to Cambridge to help investigate a shocking murder. A student, one of a coterie of young women known as The Maidsen who study with Edward Forca, a creepily charming professor with a man-bun and a love of Empires, has been found dead, her body concealed in a marsh. A few hundred pages in, and the body counts up to three.

Suspects wander in and out of the story, announcing them- selves with the subtlest of members of Hells Angels scrunching down Main Street. There’s Henry, an unstable pa- tient in Mariana’s care; Julian Adcroft, a self-satisfied celeb- rity psychotherapist; Morris, a creepy college employee;
Roam If You Want To

SEBASTIAN JUNGER EMBRACED with a U.S. Army platoon in eastern Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008, and to judge from his work, he has been trying to find his way home ever since. He made two documentaries about the deployment, the terrific “Re- 
stream” and its sequel, “Korengal,” and wrote a book, “War” (2010). Then he turned his focus to the weirdness of returning to the United States, both for soldiers and for war reporters, in a third documentary, “The Last Patrol,” and laid out his passion-
ate, counterintuitive ideas about post-trau-

matic stress disorder in a small but wide-
ranging book, “Thieves” (2016). The problem, he argued, wasn’t the mental scars of war, but existential—lack of purpose. The broth-

erhood of combat forged a deep emotional connection that an atomized, uncom-
prehending America could not sustain.

“Freedom,” Junger’s latest book, begins in the middle of a mysterious pilgrimage: “The country opened up west of Harris-
burg and suddenly we could drink from streams and build fires without getting caught and sleep pretty much anywhere we wanted. We’d walked the railroad tracks for 15 miles to Baltimore in Philly. Then we turned west at the Main Line and made Amish country by winter.” These lines have a lovely, rolly, the tonic is heroic—
they made Amish country by winter. But that information is withheld, or only ob-
liquely shared much, much later. Who are the members of this westward party? What is their purpose? We are never told. But for those who have seen “The Last Patrol,” which was released in 2010, things are clearer. It’s about the trek. Junger’s companions, at least initially, are two of the soldiers from his time in Afghan-
istan, a Spanish photojournalist and war re-
porter, and a faltering black dog named Daisy. People speak, joke, have names; you see them walking, camping, playing with the dog. They talk to people they meet. Junger makes an effort to frame their project—
“A 300-mile conversation about war” and why it’s so hard to come home—
which is more or less what happens in the film. That’s not what happens in the book. Here, we pass through countryside, nearly all of it in south-central Pennsylvania, and don’t hear a word from anyone till the sec-
ond half. “Freedom” has a different pur-
pose, a frame far less explicit.

After being mentioned, al-
though the bikers, who are walking along

FREEDOM

BY WILLIAM FINNEGAN


WILLIAM FINNEGAN is the author of “Cold New World,” “A Complicated War” and “Barbarian Days,” which won a 2018 Pulitzer Prize.

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the tracks illegally, do seem equally spooky. They’re irritationally afraid of passing trains. They camp in defensive formation. “I kept a knife in my boots, which were loosely laced so I could just drop my feet into them and run,” Junger writes. That never becomes necessary. In fact, virtually nothing happens outside the author’s head. There are lumps to walking itself. There are rich descriptions of landscape, full of “bloodrock” and “quarrystone” and “riverbend” — I felt as if I were camping with Gerard Manley Hopkins. There are also epiphanies: “The things that had to happen out there were so clear and simple — eat, walk, hide, sleep — that just getting through the day felt like scripture: a true and honest accounting of everything that underlies the frantic performance of life.”

But the cleansing march disappears en-
tirely for most of this short book. Junger takes us on long detours through history, anthropology, primatology, boxing, poker. It’s not easy to follow the thread, although the main theme from "Thieves" — extolling the superiority, both moral and psychological, of life in small nomadic groups or small embattled platoons over modernity under capitalism — appears repeatedly. The main thrust here, though, seems to be a ragged pursuit of the meaning of human freedom. The two topics overlap. “For most of human history, freedom had to be at least suffered for; if not died for, and that raised its value to something almost sacred,” Junger writes. “In modern democracies, however, an ethos of public sacrifice is rarely needed because freedom and sur-

vival are more or less guaranteed.”

The nearly sacred version of freedom is often won or preserved, in Junger’s view, through asymmetrical warfare. The nomadic SCythians held of the mighty Persians; the Maori of New Zealand the British; the Mehtabegs outfought the Ottoman Empires. We get a 10-page account of the 1938 Easter Rising in Dublin. Empires, of course, also win wars, and Junger’s medita-
tions on the American colonial frontier in-
clude the destruction of Indigenous civili-

tizations by the conquistadors and the spec-

ted, doomed resistance of the Apaches. The horrors of these conflicts are front and center. In Dublin, we note every last detail of the execution of the rebel leader Michael Mallin, including his heart-wrenching last letter to his wife and children. In this gratu-
tious and invasive or is it illustrating a harsh truth about freedom? I found myself asking this question at many turns. Junger occasionally stumbles onto more humble, personal versions of his leitmotif. Frequently, he says, while he and his friends camped, “we were the only people in the world who knew where we were. There are many myths about the ancient world. We don’t need a map, we just need a friend.”

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Giving Up the Ghost

BY MARILYN STASIO

THERE GOES AN EGG, sailing across the liv-
ing room to smash into a sideboard. And here comes a big churl of coal, hot from the fireplace, hoofed straight for somebody's skull. What do you think — time to call Ghastlyman.

The chief spook hunter in Kate Summerscale's delightful period piece, "The Haunting of Alma Fielding," is Nanfor Fodor, a Hungarian-born investigator at the Inter-
national Psychical Research Institute in London. Fodor had first become interested in the paranormal while working as a jour-
nalist in New York City. But it wasn't until he moved back to England that he immersed himself in the spiritual-
ist movement, joining the Ghost Club, the London Spiritualist Alli-
ance and other organizations of true believers, writing for their publications and attending seances. "A seance room was a

permissive place," according to Summerscale, "mythical, tactile, erotically charged."

Fodor was soon to catch the pol-
tergeist that was creating havoc at Alma Fielding's home, but he wasn't ex-
actly bringing an open mind to the investigation. In fact, he was hop-
ing to find proof of his theory that "repressed traumatic experi-
ences could possess a person physically."

But if Alma's mischievous poltergeist was the invention of her own agitated psy-
che, then what memory was she suppressing?

The psychological perspective Fodor brought to the case made good sense for a professional who knew his era. It was 1930, after all, and he had cer-
tainly read Freud's work, especially "Studies in Hysteria." When Fodor made Freud aware of his own work (his wife, Irene, had delivered the report to his home), the great man actually sent him a handwritten letter, congratulating him on his scientific approach to a supernatural mystery: "Your efforts to study the medium psychologi-
cally" Freud wrote, "seem to me to be the right steps." Fodor was over the moon.

In 1938, Lonrow's didn't really need any psychiatrist to tell them why they felt jumpy; all they had to do was look around. Mussolini was making bellicose threats in

ters of a million friends and family mem-
bers in the Great War, and about 250,000

more in the influenza epidemic that fol-

lowed, the grieving families, friends, and

sweethearts left behind yearned for any

connection, however morbid, with their

lost ones. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was one

of these believers. He had long dabbled in

spiritualism, but he embraced it more fully

when his eldest son, weakened from

war injuries, died of the flu in 1918. Spiritu-

alism, Conan Doyle said, was "a breaking
down of the walls between two worlds ... a

call of hope and of guidance to the human

race at the time of its deepest affliction."

A journalist by profession, Fodor was

no pushover. At seances, he was open to the

voices of the dead emanating from the al-

tertll, still prepared to uncover and du-

bunk fraud. In a seven-part series written

for the weekly newspaper The Leader, he

exposed the phony levitations, table-

rapping and other shabby tricks of a num-

ber of fashionable psychics. (He caught one

charlatan actually wrapped in a white

sheet.) As Summerscale dryly observes of

Fodor's conscientious efforts to play detec-

tive: "He was learning that the golden age of

psychical study was also the heyday of

the supernatural hustle."

Unlike the showy theatrics adopted by

other psychics, Alma's displays of other-

worldly powers were remarkably modest.

Except for the pretty rings that seemed to

fly through the air onto her fin-
gers, the spoils from her "psychic

shuffling" at a round-market shop like Woolworth's were hum-

ble. Local newspapers made note

that, unlike the "honest, upright

ghosts of decaying castles and an-

cient balls," Alma's mischievous

poltergeists were "domestic hood-

lums; destructive, subversive, un-

con- 
third-class society. Even on

the psychic plane, it seems, the

rigid order of England's class sys-

tem remained intact.

As amateur detectives go, Fodor can be

humorous, but he's redeemed by his earnestness. There's something endear-

ingly boyish about his awed wonder

when a glove Alma was wearing on

her right hand suddenly peeled

off and reappeared on her left

hand, or when the same version

slid into her right coat pocket

mysteriously migratory over to her

left coat pocket. But he soon began
to suspect that Alma was a fraud,

becoming so skeptical as to be

what he had drummed out of the Interna-
tional Institute for Psychical Re-

search, which was worried about how

he had conducted himself during the

investigation. It's easy to understand what

Fodor hoped to gain from proving a pol-
tergeist activity was triggered by trauma.

But what about Alma? What was it all about for her, aside from some cheap jewelry?

Well, this is where the Jungians take over from the Freudsians. Always present about the social status of the women she

study, Summerscale notes that Alma was the

very model of a colorless, faceless, pow-

erless housewife. But a housewife with psy-

chic powers could escape those social con-

straints. "A medium could undertake ex-

travagant feats of mobility — astral projec-

tion, transfiguration, time travel, levitation," Summerscale notes, "and in do-

so escape the constraints of her gender and her class."

It wasn't exactly the same as turning herself into an all-powerful male, but it was

close enough. ☺

About the Book

When Hans Old is given the opportu-
nity to take up his dream job, he accepts the offer with enthusiasm. As a tour guide at the historical imperial castle on Lake Constance, Hans delight his guests with stories of the late Habs-
ugian emperor—his critics, his famous

artifacts and the mystery surrounding his

death in 1588. But it turns out that not all the castle's visitors are of pure heart. By

the time Hans is forced down a path of good, theft, and deception with no way out. A nice happy ending seems impossible until a surprising turn at the castle reveals Hans' true nature.

About the Author

Born in Dfflín, Dr. Montique Gilroy, a graduate of the University of West-

tern Australia medical school, has a keen interest in forensic

science and psychology She works as a psychiatrist in Dublin, a
to the UWA School of Psychiatry, where she has had a role as a senior clinical lec-

curer. Her love for teaching has granted her a nomination for an Excellence in Teaching Award in 2016.

"Even of the Deuce is undoubtedly a successful work. Very quickly, the book came to me to know more."

— Hollywood Book Review
in an exclusive hotel where wine and chocolates are served in an underground bunker during air raids, Friedlich claims to be searching for inspiration in “the strength of the Germans.” But very soon his acquaintance with an SS officer named Tristan and his romance with Tristan’s imperative, elusively friend, the Stella of the novel’s title, will inspire a different kind of search. What is the connection between this young woman and Tristan? Why is she so troubled? Can Friedlich believe anything she tells him? “In this country,” another woman informs him, “he’s in way too deep, only the pretty stories are rumors. The ugly ones are all true.”

All the stories the characters tell one another in Clarissa Brockford’s translation of László Levi’s TONIGHT IS ALREADY TOMORROW (Europa, 239 pp., paper, $18) are the kind that could prove fatal. Marc Rimonen is a prosperous jeweler in 1930s Genoa, nominally Jewish but less concerned with religion than with his wife’s annoying insistence that their young son is an intellectual prodigy. Even as the Fascist regime imposes more and more restrictions, the Rimones cling to their domestic concerns, making excuses and trying to adapt. Marc’s wife is particularly persuasive, arguing that “everyone knows they make laws in Italy so they can try to get them out for a bit and then let them die a quiet death.”

Levi eloquently describes the daily tightening of the Fascist noose. Schools close, businesses are shuttered, refugees pour into Genoa fleeing the Reich. There are tension-filled conferences with the Rimones’ extended family. Adjustments are made. There are more adjustments. Then what? “Measures against Jews continued to drop on their heads slowly, at irregular intervals, like the first few heavy drops of rain heralding a storm. They found themselves soaked to the bone without realizing they were getting wet.”

LEVI’S NOVEL was inspired, as her publisher puts it, “by true events.” And so was the American author Victoria Sharp’s “a first-person account” BLOOD CHAINS (Scribner, 352 pp., $26.95). All the action is Connie, a writer exploring the “what-if” of her great-uncle Hermann, who spurned an invitation to join Connie’s grandfather in the United States. “It was his chance to show how beautiful it is.” Hermann had exclaimed, strolling with one of his three daughters in the blossom-filled orchards he owned outside a small town in Czechoslovakia. “Nothing bad could ever happen here, you’ll see.”

What Connie sees is the first scene of the tale she tells us in her testimony made by this same daughter, now an old lady living in Toronto. From this, Connie recreates the dramatic tale of a flight to Hungary that only delays the family’s escape by the Nazis. Separated from her parents, the girls are sent to a slave labor camp “which, despite being, like everywhere else on earth, better than Auschwitz, was not without its own terrors.” There were more tortures to come. And what of their father? Although Hermann never surfaced after the war, there’s a tantalizing suggestion that he might have escaped from Auschwitz. Is it possible to find out what happened to him?

THE BRITISH AUTHOR MICK KLEIN goes back to the 19th century to resurrect some of his own ancestors. And while FEATHERWEIGHT (Camogli, 295 pp., $26) concentrates on the rough-and-tumble life of Bill Perry, a boxer also known as the Tipton Swindler, and his adopted son, who holds-barred portrait of an English town despoiled by the Industrial Revolution, a place where “there was no dawn and no night,” where “no birds sang when the red sun rose each day so bruised and hazy as a flame through muslin.”

The social strife that pits factory workers against industry...
tridentists and landowners forms the backdrop to Bill's efforts to scratch a life in retirement from his pen, fittingly called the Champion of England. Bill's fighting days are over, but his daughter's are just beginning, and feisty Annie winds up supporting them both by touring the country-side as part of a double bill with her fiancé, Jim Mason, a.k.a. the Bilston Bruiser. Darting in and out of the action are a Robin Hood-like brigand, the Black Cock, and a disenchanted aristocrat who pays handsomely for private boats but whose voyeuristic thirst for violence will prove deadly for at least one of the combatants.

DEATH COMES in all shapes and sizes for the characters in the wickedly funny FORTUNE (Acartes, 253 pp., $22.95), by the Australian writer Lesley Bartlett, a Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, gul- lotine and electric eel play a part in surging the fates of what would be an ensemble cast if they weren't so droll-less about who the others are and how their actions affect one another. The novel begins in 1808 with Napoleon's entry into Berlin in a domino-like series of events that will catapult 18-year-old Johanna Meyer into an unwelcome military career, from which he will spend most of the novel trying to escape.

How does one of Napoleon's generals wind up serving a comfortable interment in Rio? Why is a Sinhalese slave being executed in a small German town? What does a thief from a circus cabinet in England have to do with a shipwreck in the South Pacific? And how does any of this connect to a Transylvanian hermit reputed to be 128 years old? Bartlett expertly slices and dices her multiple narrators to create a scathingly amusing commentary on the vagaries of history, culminating, very seriously, in the trenches of World War I.

IT WAS THE SPRING of 1815 when the photographer Dorothea Lange arrived in San Francisco to begin her renowned career. Although Jasmin Darznik narrates THE DARZNIK (Ballantine, 328 pp., $28), in her version of Lange's voice, one can sense this novel's intended character move the action in this portrait of the postwar city's artistic community. Her curiosity piqued by the Chinese-American assistant mentioned only in passing in biographical accounts of Lange's life, Darznik gives the assistant a name (Caroline Lee) and a talent (for fashion) and a back story (plucked from the Occidental Mission Home for Girls). Vivacious and worldly-wise, Caroline introduces Lange to the free-wheeling spirit of the city's Barbary Coast — and to the democracy of escape possessed by racist forces intent on eliminating what they de- nounce as the "yellow peril."

DARZNIK'S NOVEL has walk-on appearances by Imogen

Leonora Carrington

Cunningham and Ansel Adams, and a side-trip New Mexican encounter with D.H. Lawrence, thanks to Lange's painter husband, Maynard Dixon. Twenty years Lange's senior, Dixon proves to be a difficult partner. And so does the German artist Max Ernst, whose travels during World War II as a suspected "enemy alien" in occupied France are intersected with scenes of his much younger partner, Leonora Carrington, and her perewan adventures with the Surrealists in Michaela Carter's LEBRONIA IN THE MORNING LIGHT (Avid Reader Press, 404 pp., $32).

Rebelling against the expectations of her father, a wealthy British industrialist, Carrington is intent on finding her own way as a painter, but she's professionally and romantically enamored by the notoriously philandering Ernst. "Is there any woman in Paris you haven't slept with?" As the Nazis advance, the droll the couple share in the French countryside is shattered, and so is Carrington's confidence in herself. Separated from Ernst, fleeing across the Pyrenees to the supposed safety of Portugal, she finds an agonizing personal reckoning. Inevitably, Carrington realizes, "she's going to have to find out where she ends and she begins."

HAVING WITNESSED the dark side of marriage as a child in rural 19th-century Massachusetts, Lucy Stone was deter- mined to go her own way and be dominated by no man. A staunch activist in the fight for women's rights who got her start among New England's abolitionists, she has been overshadowed in the historical record by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony; formerly her close col- leagues, who cut their ties when Stone insisted on campa- igning for universal suffrage, "regardless of race or sex."

Katherine A. Sherbrooke's LEAVING COTY'S HILL (Pegasus, 340 pp., $22.55) aims to revive interest in Stone by dramatizing her dogged attempts to support herself and her causes on the lecture circuit — and her equally dogged at- tention to recording her personal and professional career with mother- hood and a "marriage of equals" (to the brother of Eliza- beth Blackwell, the first woman in America to obtain a medical degree). "What kind of world were we sculpting," Stone asks, "if family was to be the enemy of work? Was there no way to have both?"

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT, the late-18th-century British feminist, also had an up-from-poverty, convention-defying background. Wrenching herself from a shabby-genteel family "always clinging to the edge of ruin," she found em- ployment as a laundress companion and governess, as an edu- cator and, finally, as a writer keeping company with some of literary London's finest intellectuals and reporting from the dangerous heart of the French Revolution. Two disastrous love affairs and the birth of an illegitimate daughter were followed by the unexpected discovery of a kindred spirit in the philosopher William Godwin. And so she found herself, equally unexpectedly, in a happy mar- rriage.

In LOVE AND FURY (Farrar, 275 pp., $26.00), Samarthi Silva Lele Wollstonecraft tells her own story as a legacy to her second daughter even as a parallel narrative reveals that the room where Wollstonecraft has just given birth will soon be the scene of her death, from "childbed fever.

"Scowr," she tells the infant, "will bring you to your knees, time and again, but so beauty and so love, enough to rise again, to try again, to live as all beings live: free."

THE IMPLICATIONS of the word "free" — and of so many others — come into preoccupy Ennie Nicoll, the heroine of Pip Williams's THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS (Ballantine, 376 pp., $3.99), a captivating and Shyly illuminative fictional ison to the real women whose work on the Oxford English Di- tionary went largely unheard. The daughter of a wid- ow who toils with a team of scholar in a glorified garden shed that members of the project call the Scripture, Ennie begins her story in 1857 when the piles of handwritten, filled cards spilling off desktops and crammed into cubbyholes are mainly playthings to a 5-year-old child. But as she grows up and is given tasks of her own at the Scripture, Ennie comes to question some of the logic behind the activities of her so-called superiors.

As her father explores, certain words "may be com- monly spoken, but if they are not commonly written they will not be included" in the vast dictionary project. Where does that leave the lively conversations Ennie overhears among the women at the hillock called when her going shopping with Lizzie, an illiterate kitchen maid who has become a kind of surrogate mother? So Ennie is amaz- ing her own collection of words, an activity that will have her jutting down contributions, often quite salty, wherever she can find them. "I'm sure there are plenty of wonderful words flying around that have never been written on a slip of paper," she explains to the semi-acclimated Lizzie. "I think sometimes the proper words must be quite right, and to people make new words up, or use old words differently."

"Women's Words and Their Meanings," edited by Ennie Nicoll, may have an exceedingly limited print run, but that's enough to guarantee her efforts won't be in vain. And it allows Williams's readers to be treated to a wealth of delightful banter, including some slyly verbal about a certain bit of female anatomy and a very observant, apro- priate of a profusion of words for the 18th century: "I can't think of many words more versatile."
Great Poets Steal

BY DUSTIN ILLINGWORTH

SAM RIVIERE’S DEBUT NOVEL, “Dead Souls,” depicts a fantastical, alternate-world version of London in which poetry has become the city’s major cultural prod-
uct. (“There were rich poets,” we read in a
credibly) But the capital’s ascendant literary scene is embroiled in scandal. So-
planted detection software created at the behest of publishers—the quantiative analysis and comparative system, or QACS—has confirmed that the poet Solom-
on Wiese, a rising star, is a plagiarist. Parisians envy the commentator. Who else might be bound for the so-called gray list?

Wiese’s cancellation seems to establish a precarous equilibrium. But when the un-
both maric and thrillingly musical. The novel pans out from Wiese’s “crimes against originality” to suggest plagia-
rism’s unspoken prevalence within the cul-
ture—and, more broadly, within modern life itself. Whether it’s the “simulated fun-
dom” of a media entity-cum-poetry influ-
encer or the studied sophistication of an alienated rural class, Riviere leaves a trail of fraudulence throughout the novel. In “Dead Souls,” the preconditions to make or experience art is the desire to be someone else. Wiese’s claim to innocence is in some sense predicated on our collective guilt.

Riviere lovingly presents a range of sub-
cultures in “Dead Souls.” There are poets, of course, but also recitation artists, book-
sellers, engineers with literary pretensi-
sions and esoteric cliques. Their charac-
teristics are cataloged with the care of a
naturalist: the “unrelenting crispness and
dryness” of the scholar-poets, opera or the “sweaty ethereal nervousness” of a poet-pro-
grammer. What mockery exists is genre. There is a sense that these ridicules, Bo-
ly-esque figures would like for literature if
given the chance. “Dead Souls” shares its title with Niko1 Gogol’s classic novel of fraudulent accu-
mulation. These sinister harvests repre-
sent a yearning for easy mobility, whether in terms of class or cultural status. But
Wiese, like Gogol’s Chichikov, ultimately
fails in his grifting. The squalor of his self-sabotaging behavior implies some un-
conscious reprimand. He cannot finally af-
ford to succeed. In a London of ca-
reerists, impostors and butt-kissers, it is
this that makes him original.

Riviere, himself an accomplished poet, writes like one accustomed to the threat of
obsoleteness. “Dead Souls” buzzes with
networks and media platforms that are as likely to manipulate as they are to empower.

In this ambitious fantasy of margin-
zations, you either die unerected or live long enough to see your work in someone else’s portfolios.

DEAD SOULS
By Sam Riviere
209 pp., Granta, $26.

Starman

BY ALEC NEVALA-LEE

IN THE YEARS before World War II, a new
kind of hero appeared in American science
fiction. Like his counterparts in adventure
and western pulp, he was generally white,
male and good with his hands, but he was
defined by his ability to solve problems with science and technology. In real life, of

course, not every conflict in a case study in
engineering, but many readers still enjoy
spending time with the character once
widely—and chaotically—described as “the competent man.”

Andy Weir’s debut novel, “The Martian” (2011), found an enormous audience large-
ly because it was a competent-man story that might have captivated fans in the 1930s. Its stranded astronaut, Mark Wat-
ney, survived on Mars using ingenuity, duct
tape and plenty of wisecracks, but the writ-
ing fell apart in the scenes in which people
actually had to have a conversation. Weir’s next effort, “Artemis” (2017), exposed his
limited interest in constructing relationships
or a plausible future society.

His latest novel, “Project Hail Mary,” is a
sensible course correction that superizes the strategies of his most successful book.

The narrator awakens alone in a space-
craft, connected to a medical computer, and

unlike Watney—who at least understood his predicament—he doesn’t even
remember his own name. Readers who were un-

PROJECT HAIL MARY
By Andy Weir

passing revelation toward the end, this isn’t a
story that treats amnesia as a source of
surprise—than a device for parceling out
information. The main character’s isola-
tion, which was so crucial in “The Martian,” is
a similarly convenient excuse for Weir to
downsplay every human nuance in favor of a
cleverly organized series of challenges that
Gracey himself compares to “a video game.”

For readers who can forgive its shortcomings,
the result is an engaging space odyssey.

While Mark Watney confronted a succession of escalating obstacles, Grace tends to re-
solve each setback almost immediately, and
his relentless output read like the output of an
algorithm that was fed nothing but Json Web-
doc scripts; “Artemaghe would be the best thing ever if it weren’t, you know, destroying
the universe.” Weir’s default voice allows for
theainless delivery of facts, but it limits the
emotions available to our hero, whose usual

in fiction, an unambiguous
technological crisis can be oddly
comforting.

Project Hail Mary” demands to be judged
by the standards of hard science fiction, and it honors the laws of physics to an extent that makes comparable novels seem like playing
checkers without a net. At its best, the genre is a
delightful game indeed, and its myriad
virtues can be sacrificed to its potential pleasures, which include awe, strangeness and other effects that Weir never really
achieves. For a sense of wonder, we can wait
for the movie, which may even touch on the
unspoken dread—implicit in the myth of the
competent man—that Watney once ef-
pressed in a rare moment of doubt: “No more getting my hopes up, no more self-deception and no more problem-solving.”


By Dustin Illingworth

In fiction, an unambiguous technological crisis can be oddly comforting.

reaction to astounding events is to need out
briefly at their awesomeness.

Project Hail Mary” demands to be judged
by the standards of hard science fiction, and it honors the laws of physics to an extent that makes comparable novels seem like playing
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Alec Nevala-Lee is the author of “Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A.
Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction.”
Memory Palace

BY MAURICE SAMUELS

THREE UNFRIENDLY BOXES of porcelain collect dust in the basement of my building. Sealed away after my grandmother’s death 30 years ago, they contain rococo lamps, fragile urns and multiple sets of gilt-edged china that can’t go in the dishwasher. I will probably never unpack these impractical relics. But I keep them because they represent a link — a beautiful yet brittle_one to the people I have lost.

Edmund de Waal’s “Letters to Camondo” will fascinate anyone who has projected complicated emotions onto objects. In his award-winning 2010 book, “The Hare With Amber Eyes,” de Waal traced a set of the Japanese miniature carvings known as netsuke as they got passed from one generation of his family to the next, and ingeniously tied the history of Europe to the story of a couturier’s family.

When his son, Nissim, a fighter pil-

let, died for France in World War I, the couturier decided to leave his house and collection to his adopted homeland. The Musée Nissim de Camondo opened its doors in 1936, following Moïse’s death. Just a few years later, dur-

ing the Nazi occupation, the French authorities repudiated his gen-

erosity by deporting his only surviving descendant, his daughter, Béatrice Reinauch, and his grand-

children, Fenya and Bertrand, to their deaths at Auschwitz.

Although de Waal sketches the outline of the tragic story, readers looking for a more scholarly study of the Camondos may be better off turning to “The House of Fragile Things,” a new book by James McAuley on French Jewish cel-

lar.

The siblings Béatrice and Nissim de Camondo, in 1936.

The story of the Camondo family epitomizes both the highs and lows of Jewish experience in France. Born in 1869 in Constantinople to a Sephardic bankers’ dynasty, Moïse moved to Paris as a young age and quickly adopted French culture as his own. After his divorce from the French Jewish heiress Ilona de Camondo, in 1906, he married the beautiful French society woman, Jeanne-Aymée Lévy. The marriage was an unhappy one, and Moïse began to collect netsuke as a form of therapy.

In the early years of their marriage, Moïse and Jeanne-Aymée began to collect netsuke, a form of Japanese miniature sculpture that was often used as a container for personal items such as cigarettes or keys. Moïse was fascinated by the netsuke, which he saw as a way to connect with his Jewish heritage and to express his love for Japan.

Moïse bought his first netsuke in 1885 and began to build a collection that would eventually number more than 7,000 pieces. He was particularly drawn to netsuke that depicted scenes from Chinese history, as well as those that showed Japanese landscapes and landscapes of the Heian period.

In 1936, after Moïse’s death, the Musée Nissim de Camondo opened in Paris. The museum was located in a 19th-century building on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées and was decorated with furniture, paintings and other objects from the Camondo collection. The museum remained open until 1940, when it was closed due to the Nazi occupation.

In 1959, the Musée Nissim de Camondo was reopened and is now owned by the French government. The museum contains over 4,000 netsuke, along with other works of art from the Camondo collection.

MAURICE SAMUELS is a professor of French at Yale and the author, most recently, of “The Betrayal of the Duchess: The Scandal That Undid the Bourbon Monarchy and Made France Modern.”

Available online and Amazon.com
Music

BY ALAN LIGHT

"THERE IS NOTHING I could write in this book or tell you that would help you get to know me," writes Sinéad O'Connor in her new memoir, REMINISCINGS (Hoough M. Harcourt, 304 pp., $20). "It is all in the songs."

Whether she really believes this or not, it's not a bad point — but audiences clearly don't feel the same. As a batch of new books demonstrates, efforts to get closer to the mysteries of musical expression continue to come in many forms — history, criticism, autobiography and various combinations thereof. In the absence of live music during our pandemic year, there's been a flood of music-related stories, especially on screen, with both documentaries (the Bee Gees, Tina Turner) and dramatized narratives ("Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Sound of Metal").

In fact, O'Connor's spectacular rise and fall would make a fine film. To most of the public, her story has forever been defined by one crash-and-burn moment — her 1992 appearance on "Saturday Night Live" when she tore a photograph of the pope into pieces in the book, we learn that the photo was the actual image that hung in her mother's living room — and proclaimed: "Fight the real enemy!"

She was banned, boycotted and vilified in the press, dismissed as a nut case who flashed away her multimillion-dollar success — so much that the world has largely forgotten what a magnificent singer and songwriter she could be, with a voice that soared from mesmerizing murder to a powerful wail (true story: I once walked out of an O'Connor concert so spellbound that I wandered into the street and got hit by a car). Also, one can't help wondering how differently her protest would be received today, after decades of scandal surrounding the Catholic Church. But that isn't how O'Connor sees that infamous incident. "A lot of people say or think that tearing up the pope's photo derailed my career," she writes, "That's not how I feel about it. I feel that having a number-one record derailed my career and my tearing the photo put me back on the right track." In brief, episodic, often arresting chapters, she uses "Reminiscings" to make this case; her 1990 breakthrough album, "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got," gets a few passing mentions, while she goes in depth on later projects focusing on reggae and spirituals. She's also quite funny — recalling herelf feigning illness to get out of school, she says that "I got away with more Golden Globe-worthy performances; they didn't have to be Oscar winning."

Like her recordings, O'Connor's book often veers between defiance and pain. She replaces as she remembers first getting her head shaved. "I loved it. I looked like an alien. Looked like 'Star Trek.' Didn't matter what I wore now." But several longer set pieces recount terrifying encounters in vivid detail: one with Prince at his Los Angeles home that ended with her running away from him on foot onto a highway (apparently Prince was angry at her for signing on with his former manager).

O'Connor's childhood in Ireland was brutal, but she grants her family forgiveness and repeatedly claims responsibility for even her most outlandish actions. "I got in trouble every time I opened my mouth," she writes. "O'Connor concert so spellbound that I wandered into the street and got hit by a car). Also, one can't help wondering how differently her protest would be received today, after decades of scandal surrounding the Catholic Church.

BICKIE JONES IS another completely distinctive singer-songwriter who walked through the fire and lived to tell the tale. If O'Connor's sentences and chapters are short and spiky, the language in LAST CHANCE TEXACO

CHRONICLES OF AN AMERICAN TROUBADOUR (Grove, 334 pp., $28) is winding and leisurely, an rich and colorful as Jones's best lyrics. It's a classically American picaresque tale, a recounting of a life in which she "lived volumes as a young girl long before I was famous."

In 1979, Jones — with jazzy chords, twolie stories and post-beatnik glamour — exploded onto the scene, winning the best new artist Grammy and getting dubbed "The Duchesse of Coolsville" in Time magazine. But the fully realized universe of her self-titled debut album (and its smash single "Chuck E.'s in Love") blossomed out of decades of chaos and despair, inflamed up with excitement and experience.

Jones was born in Chicago; her mother had been raised an orphan, and her father was the son of vaudeville performers. They were certainly ungeugged for parenthood — often absent, sometimes abusive — yet she (like O'Connor) is both forgiving and understanding, aware of all they offered her as well as the ways they felled short. The family moved to Arizona where she was 4 and then remained in perceptual motion, which soon manifestted in her own dangeruous, frequently terrifying youthful adventures — the subject of most of the book. She repeatedly runs away, at one point moving into a commune in the desert in California at age 14, and is constantly getting tossed into juvenile halls and jail cells.

"Last Chance Texaco," named for one of the memorable songs on that album, also offers accounts of her problematic romances with Tom Waits, Lowell George and Dr. John. Musicians are trouble, but it's music's starting with childhood obsessions with "West Side Story" and Laura Nyro that provides her stability. She has a breakthrough writing the stunning ballad "Company" — "a visceral, torturous process... these were pure feelings as airy and unrooted as a color or a tingle."

Here, Jones has a way of commandeering a genuinely odd, fantastical encounter with Van Morrison at an Irish music festival, but she mostly breezes through her last several decades, in which she has continued to make interesting, if less celebrated, new music, and grew out of just being "the young girl in the photo." Still, Jones paints a striking, distinctive self-portrait.

BICKIE JONES AND Sinéad O'Connor would find them selfs kindred either way, in the sense of going through the same kind of challenge. The cases of the two, the two, are not quite the same, but are both filled with the same kind of struggle and the same kind of triumph. The two are both known for their unique talents, their unique voices, and their unique styles. O'Connor is known for her powerful voice and her ability to inspire others with her music. Jones is known for her unique songwriting and her ability to connect with her audience. Both are known for their ability to connect with their audience and to inspire others with their music. The two are both known for their unique talents, their unique voices, and their unique styles. O'Connor is known for her powerful voice and her ability to inspire others with her music. Jones is known for her unique songwriting and her ability to connect with her audience. Both are known for their ability to connect with their audience and to inspire others with their music. The two are both known for their unique talents, their unique voices, and their unique styles. O'Connor is known for her powerful voice and her ability to inspire others with her music. Jones is known for her unique songwriting and her ability to connect with her audience. Both are known for their ability to connect with their audience and to inspire others with their music.
Bush, Shakespeares Sister — resonate far greater in the U.K. than they do stateside. (The subtitle is also an unneces-
sary distraction.) But she consistently delivers observa-
tions that are brazenly smart and original: that Taylor Swift is “as enamored with fashion as Fitzgerald was,” or that “Rihanna doesn’t so much sing as blantly bat at the sound,” that Janet Jackson’s best music is defined by a “fascinating tension between rigor and relaxation.”

“You’re History” displays the importance of these de-
tails, but they’re in service of a greater point, which is to try to grasp music’s mysterious and unknowable essence. “The best pop songs are not ‘universal,’ but unaccountably specific in their details,” she writes, noting elsewhere that to comprehend a song “involves trying to digest the emo-
tional meaning of sounds — something that criticism has historically been reluctant to do.” Chow writes of the wordless elements of singing, missing early in the book that the story of pop could be told as a history of the “vohs” in songs — leading, inevitably and delightfully, to the ap-
pendix: “The Greatest ‘Vohs’ in Modern Music.”

1 FINDING THE RAGA: AN IMPROVISATION ON INDIAN MUSIC (New York Review Books, 258 pp., paper, $17.95), the novelist, poet, essayist, and musician Amul Chaudhuri also explores the power of wordless vocalizing. At one point, he peers into the unlettered bravado of “naha” in John Lennon’s singing, which “punctuates his idea of song and contribute a ‘never-
worked-up laziness: a steetering towards escape from the fatigue of being.’” But Chaudhuri’s book doesn’t focus on pop music; it tells his own story of setting aside his singer-
songwriter ambitions as a teenager to devote himself to the study of Indian classical music — and becomes an in-
quiry into the role and meaning of music in the two cul-
tures, and in his own life.

“The ragas relationship to the world was different from Western music’s,” he explains, right down to the very no-
tion of its creation, “you can’t compose a raga because ra-
gas have no composers in the conventional sense — they are ‘heard’ and not ‘written’. And what you do is transform the forms by the culture.” Chaudhuri’s mother was a promi-
nent singer, and he comes to find that the ubiquity and functionality of Indian music led to it being underappre-
ciated, and that his embrace of this tradition was nothing short of “revolutionary.”

Merging music theory, literary criticism and memoir, “Finding the Raga” can be challenging. The cascade of ref-
ences — Pasolini, Renaissance paintings, the movie “Shane,” Kant, John Cage — draws from a wide range of media; at one point, 12 consecutive pages are empty test for a single line on each, to illustrate the tempo changes in one raga. But even if you can’t follow every nuance, Chaud-
hi will suddenly offer an insight that stops you in your tracks. Listening, he writes, “takes us out of ourselves. We read novels, as Walter Benjamin said, to find ourselves in them; we listen to be elsewhere.”

After hearing nothing but Hindustani classical music for 16 years, Chaudhuri re-engages with Western sounds, and he now composes music that attempts to incorporate both traditions. As “Finding the Raga” reveals, he has made a lifelong exploration of a fundamental question: “What does listening involve?”

THE BEAUTY THAT RESULTS from crashing different styles into each other is a story that runs through Lola Cobos’ DECODING “DESPRECITO”: An Oral History of Latin Music (Vintage, 204 pp., paper, $16.95). One of pop’s biggest developments in recent years is that, especially as streaming has become the dominant mode of consumption, Latin hits have ex-
ploded into global phenomena, and such Spanish-singing artists as Bad Bunny and Ozuna have become mainstream superstars. Cobos, who covers the Latin industry for Bill-
board magazine, makes the case that this shift was nothing sudden, but the “result of a long slow boil that was years in the making.”

Beginning with the surprise success of Jose Feliciano’s “Feliz Navidad” in 1970, the book considers 19 songs across 50 years that changed the game for Latin music. It tracks the change from the first few decades — when the crossover hits were novelties like Los Del Rio’s “Macarena” or Julio Iglesias and Willie Nelson’s duet on “To All the Girls I’ve Loved Before” — to the current pop-
ularity of unapologetically Latin creations.

What emerges, though, is how moments that draw upon multiple musical styles are so often the ones that break the barrier, while some argue in “You’re History” that “an artist may have only the faintest awareness of what their influences really are.” These musicians fre-
quently employ the sounds they’re blending. Gloria Estefan describes the Miami Sound Machine’s 1985 hit “Conga” as a combination of Andrews Sisters har-
monies, a funk foundation, “legit Cuban conga” and a sam-
piled James Brown screen. Carlos Vives’ 1985 “La Tierra del Olvido” fuses “pop and rock with Colombian tropical beats” and was “created on the outskirts of Bogotá by rockers, folk instrumentalists, and even a British production crew.”

As oral history, some of the chapters are pretty thin, with as few as three voices (some of those picked up from other sources), and — as always — accounts of studio sessions can be a bit mundane. But Cobos shows that while the “Lat-
in Music Goes Pop!” moment that landed Ricky Martin on the cover of Time magazine in 1999 may not have sus-
tained, the mania triggered by Lumi Font’s record-break-
ing “Despacito” in 2017 truly seems to have transformed the universe of music. As Erika Ender, one of the writers of the song that gives the book its title, Jolls Cobos, “we’ve at a time when Latin stopped being Latin and began being our.”

Occasionally, one rare artist can embody the sorts of con-
tradictions and collisions that Chaudhuri and Cobo find between different musical cultures. A rapper, actor, activ-
ist, thug, poet, rebel — Tucupi Sharker was a lightning rod, a screen on which millions of people projected their feel-
ings about race, about rap and about the young Black man

Amul Chaudhuri in 2021.

In America today. When his life was snuffed out at age 25 in 1991, his mythology went on to make him the most iconic figure in hip-hop around the world.

1 IN CHANGES: An Oral History of Tupac Shakur (Simon & Schuster, 273 pp., $26.95), the New Yorker writer and editor Sheldon Pearce illuminates the kaleidoscopic aspects of Shakur’s life. The son of a Black Panther, he was a talented student at a performing arts high school in Baltimore before mov-
ing to Oakland and starting a music career. Encounters with the police exacerbated his already radicalized world-
view, and a stint in prison for a sexual abuse charge (one of the jurors on that case offers some revelatory details about his controversial sentencing) both hardened his attitude and left him in debt to the infamous Sage Knight of Death Row Records, who posted his bail money.

Shakur’s baldness in his lyrics, whether screaming for vengeance against his enemies or speaking up for femi-

nism, always defined him — “He’s saying things that most people didn’t have the courage to say,” says the journalist Bob Marriot. “Is this guy crazy, or is he telling the truth?” But what often comes through in “Changes” is his growing sadness and confusion. It’s tempting to speculate on all the things Shakur could have done if he had been allowed to live, but as the record executer Vegil Roberts points out, it’s a fool’s errand. “I don’t know that he would have become more,” he says. “Sometimes when folks die young it’s in part because of the way they live their lives. Maybe they can never be-

come old.”

The oral history format is an appropriate way to convey such a complicated life, but it’s also only as good as its sources, and (as Pearce notes) there are a lot of other Tupac book projects that limited his access. He gamely at-
tempts to turn this into an asset — “I decided to focus par-
ticularly on those who hadn’t spoken as much or could pro-
vide a rarely heard perspective” — and sometimes he scores remarkable details, like Shakur listening to the “Last King” soundtrack on repeat during a photo shoot. But too many important details (album releases, arrests) are handled in footnotes, and there’s too much reliance on other reporters to flesh out the narrative.

The life of a figure as magnetic and incendiary as Tupac Shakur, though, can’t help being gripping. “He was in a hurry to create a body of work that would outlast him,” says one associate. It’s a curious, audacious impulse — the notion that making music can provide a form of immortal-
y — but it drives every artist in every one of these books. And it’s one reason we want to keep reading their stories.


PHOTOGRAPHS FROM LEFT: ALLEGRI/WORKING FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES, MEGAHAND GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES. THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 28
The writing is often witty, sometimes glorious (a peacock’s train “expands as it rises, falling open like a Spanish fan”), and his tales wry and charming. (Though at one point, it seems that Flynn just can’t stop reporting on human barbarity, devoting a chapter to the unsolved torture and murder of peacocks in a suburb of Los Angeles.)

Still, it’s hard for a human to resist a peacock’s allure. When the journalist Sean Flynn was one sitting on a warm roof, he was awe-struck. “His train burst over the gutter like a rooster, crossing speckles of midday sunlight sneaking through the trees,” he writes. The feathers were “sparks of green and gold, copper and turquoise, burgundy and bluish-black, all of them flashing and fading again with the slightest movement. . . . It was the most magnificent creature I had ever seen.”

Soon afterward, and somewhat to his own surprise, Flynn takes three of these birds back to his North Carolina, to what he calls his “undeclared war” across the country over.

His family names them Ethel, Carl — and a contribution from his younger son, Em- manuel. For Flynn, this flight and the journey it begins forms the story line of “Why Peacocks? An Unlikely Search for Meaning in the World’s Most Magnificent Bird.”

One might deem these sublime birds un- likely companions for the author, Flynn, a National Magazine Award-winning corres- pondent for GQ, making a living largely re- porting on crime, war and other miseries. One of the last times he writes, was “born be- tween sex traffickers in Moldova and prostitutes in Costa Rica.” Another son “was hard into his minerals-and-gems phase when he asked me to bring him some rocks from Arizona where 19 fire- fighters had burned to death.”

There’s nothing like senseless violence to prompt a search for meaning, as promised in the subtitle. Through most of the book, though, it doesn’t feel as if Flynn is up to any- thing profound. He builds a coop. Carl falls ill, and Flynn assists with the surgery. Flynn attends a convention of the United Pearl Farm Association. Ethel starts laying eggs.

WHY PEACOCKS?
By Soain Flynn
208 pp. Simon & Schuster. $27.

because Carl and Mr. Pickle are likely to fight over Ethel.

More birds mean Flynn needs to expand the coop, taking up more space in the barn. His wife is not pleased.

“When will the boys fly?” she asks in exasperation. “The fireweed? The wheelbarrow?”

He says to make room for the new birds, he’ll move all that — but she cuts him off.

“All that?” she complains. “You mean, the stuff we actually use?”

His wife gives in, quickly and good-naturedly. But she, like too many of us, misses the point. Peacocks aren’t “stuff.” Unlike firewood, bikes and wheelbarrows, pe- cocks don’t exist for us to “actually use.”

Like your beauty, peacocks — or any ani- mal, for that matter — don’t exist for us; they exist for the same reason we do. They live their lives as we love ours. In living with pea- cocks, Flynn discovers that “his birds have personalities and intelligence and foibles and charms and souls,” he writes, “and it all sounds ridiculous but it’s true.”

No, it doesn’t sound ridiculous. It sounds to me like a fine starting point to finding meaning in a world both cruel and beautiful.

The Heist
BY HUGH EAKIN

ON AUG. 29, 1793, France’s revolutionary gov- ernment brought into being one of the crowning projects of the Enlightenment: the Louvre Museum. Once the province of kings and popes, Europe’s greatest art- works would now belong to the people. In the name of science, the arch-modern state would offer Titian and Rembrandt as in- struments of public learning and republi- can liberty. With such exalted purpose, the interior minister Jean-Marie Roland pre- dicted, the new gallery would be “among the most powerful illustrations of the French Republic.”

But where to get the art? Amid the chaos of revolution, a third of the country’s royal collections had been sold abroad. Even the pilfering of the French Catholic Church could not make up for it. Within a year, as their armies pushed the Austrians out of the Netherlands, France’s new leaders hit upon an answer. Paintings could be “liber- ated” by conquest; Rubenses were carried back to Paris with the artillery. This innova- tion was not lost on the glory-starved young general who was preparing to invade Italy. In “Pandora: Napoleon’s Theft of Ver- onessa’s Feast,” Cynthia Saltzman, the author of two previous books about art, exposes the rich contradictions of the 1796 Italian campaign through the story of a prized Venetian masterpiece. Under orders from the Directory, Napoleon set out to “enrich” the new French museum with the tres- sures of the vanquished city. Rivalry orga- nized, the seizers took place through peace treaties, the art selected by specialists; ships laden with Correggios, Leon- arodes and Raphael’s sailed under military escort to Marsailles.

Still, Venice was different. A proud repub- lic in its own right, the city-state was hardly under the imperial yoke before Napoleon marched in. And some of its most important works were too large, and too fragile, to move. Among them was “The Wedding Feast at Cana” (1637), the astonishing, open- air banquet scene that Pinti Veronese had painted, in situ, for the rectorate of San Giorgio Maggiore. Measuring more than 22 by 32 feet, it transformed the biblical story into a spectacular pageant of Venetian life. It also formed the centerpiece of a building by An- drea Palladio that was itself a work of art. Any attempt to remove the monumentally painting, Venice’s chief restorer warned, risked destroying it and its exquisite setting.

But Napoleon’s men could not be dis- suaded. The artwork was brutally taken down, wrapped in a tuầneto, a Titian and two other Veroneses, and shipped to Paris. So precarious was its condition on arrival, Saltzman writes, that French conservators had to cut the painting in two to order to refine it, a procedure that sounds a bit like open-heart surgery. Even stitched back to- gether, “The Wedding Feast at Cana” raised a larger question: What was Europe to make of the painting’s new home, a vast public museum stocked with war booty? In Saltzman’s scrupulous telling, there was rancor, but also awe. Jacques-Louis David, France’s pre-eminent painter, pro- tested the removal of the “Apollo Belve- dère” and the “Laocoon” from Rome. A Leipzig scholar blessed such pillage to a “crime against humanity.” Yet by 1802, some 10,000 British visitors were flocking to Paris to see “all the treasures of Italy” gathered in one place — anticipating the pervasive allure of Souvenir Western muse- ums today. Hitler would take note.

In the end, Napoleon’s seizure of power quickly plunged the Louvre into lofty crac- kers. The revolution defeated, his later campaigns were aimed as much at match- ing the splendor of Louis XIV as at benefit- ing what was now no more accurately called the “Musée Napoleon.” Yet its downfall, some of the art was repatriated. But not all. Louvre officials said that “The Wedding Feast at Cana” was too fragile to move. To- day it shares the same gallery as the “Mona Lisa.”

PhOTOGRAPH: FROM LEFT: TOM MCNEILL/GETTY IMAGENS; KEN CURRAN.
In “Spooked,” the former New York Times investigative reporter Barry Meier makes clear he has some big and important ambitions: to probe deeply into the murky world of private spies, he writes early on, and the “oversized impact” they were “suddenly having on politics, business and our personal lives.”

In what feels like a curt 278 pages of text — as an investigative reporter, I read a deeper dive — Meier focuses much of his narrative on the now-famous “Steele dossier” the elaborate handiwork of Christopher Steele, a former MI6 spy. Steele had been hired by Fusion GPS — one of these newfangled private spy outfits.

**Spooked:**
The Trump Dossier, Black Cube, and the Rise of Private Spies
By Barry Meier

which was started by former Wall Street Journal reporters, and which was hired by the Democratic Party to dig up homeroom on Donald Trump before the 2016 presidential election. Also making cameos in “Spooked” are the investigative company Black Cube and the nefarious role it played in the revolting tale of Harvey Weinstein, along with Bob Moore, a freelance spy who worked out of the London office of K2 Intelligence, a firm started by Jules Kroll, the industry pioneer, and his son Jeremy. “Everywhere one looked,” Meier writes, “operatives-for-hire seemed to be running amok.”

Meier is at his best telling the tale of Glenn Simpson, a former and sometime celebrated Wall Street Journal reporter. Following 9/11, Simpson wrote about how terrorists got the money they needed to operate; then, after becoming a foreign correspondent based in Brussels, he abandoned journalism because, according to Meier, he saw “a void in the corporate intelligence industry and an opportunity to fill it with a different type of firm — one that embraced the values and ethical standards of journalism while working for private clients.” This ambition led Simpson to start SNS Global, with Joe Schmidt, another Journal reporter. SNS Global’s intent was to take assignments only from “good guys” — nonprofits, public interest groups and companies with “legitimate legal goals.” But SNS Global failed after a year; Meier reports that Simpson and Schmidt had different personalities, different political views and different ambitions.

Fusion GPS was Simpson’s second comeback...
ASK ANY PERSON who writes or works in the cookbook or lifestyle world, and you'll most likely discover a complicated relationship with the concept "inspirational," that magical space where content is both accessible and unique. It's a balancing act: too accessible and no one's learning anything; too unique and you run the risk of alienating people. ("Too much time!" "Too many steps!" "Too hard to find that ingredient!" "Too pricey!") Is this a problem that requires a conference at Davos? No. But it does make the people doing the work shine brightly.

At the top of this list is SIMPLY JULIA: 110 Easy Recipes for Healthy Comfort Food (HarperWave, 272 pp., $29.95), Julia Turshen's fourth, most personal book yet. Unlike more overly styled cookbooks shot in professional but clinical-feeling studios, this one feels like the photographer, Melina Hammer, knocked on Turshen's front door and just started shooting whatever she saw: shopping carts lying on the counter, herbs drying on a dish towel, a container of ripe vegan pulled from the freezer thawing for dinner, a kale and mushroom potpie pulled right from the oven. The overall effect is so if you're in that friend's house you love visiting as a kid, the one where the refrigerator was always stocked and the parents told you to call them by their first names.

The food is comforting (ricotta and potato chip fish cakes with peas, vegan chili, pork tenderloin piccata, French onion macaroni, mustardy cracker-crumb fish) and, thanks to a series of honest personal essays by the host herself (one on body acceptance, another on how cooking helped her anxiety), you can feel like your best self, too. Also helping with the charm: a series of pretty practical lists, including one about the things that are always in her pantry (vinaigre, tahini, hoisin), and another on the things she can always count on for good vibes (No. 3: her grandmother's old china dishes). There are 15 make-ahead meals, 11 chicken recipes, 11 one-pan vegan dishes and more.

Turshen's recipes never feel as though they've been developed in a test kitchen — a good thing! — and each has context, which is instantly obvious if not by the headnotes, then by the sheer number of possessive recipe titles: "Liber's Green Spaghetti," Roger's Jambalaya and Doug's Te-Mex Turkey Meatballs. The Sizzle Burgers, a childhood favorite of her wife, Grace, calls for a dash of Worcestershire sauce and molly, buttery onions. Yes, please.

SIMILARLY, IN WOA ASIA WITH LINDSIES Everyday Asian Recipes and Stories From the Heart (Pomelo, 356 pp., $36), Hetty McKinnon makes it crazy easy to walk right into her life — she photographed the book herself, mostly on 35-millimeter or medium-format film, using her own lenses, pots and pans, plates and tables. ("The more in my kitchen is also cool," she writes.) As a result, there's a special warmth here, made even more appealing by her back story. Born in Australia to Chinese parents from Guangdong Province, McKinnon uses food to reconcile the classic immigrant inner struggle: "I was culturally confused for most of my life," she admits. "I didn't understand who I was until I started to cook.

To that end we have recipes that are "rooted in the East, with hints of the West." Recipes that are "Asian in origin but modern in spirit" and "inspired by tradition, with a global interpretation." There is, however, zero confusion about the allure of those recipes: seasonal dressings filled with beets and ricotta or herby mushrooms; sheet-pan chow mein; celery, mushroom and leek dan dan noodles; and green beans with black bean sauce. The frugal, un-fussy Cantonese cooking that she learned from her mother is the food that dominates, but as the title suggests, she's just as adept at spreading her love around the continent: Singapore-style noodles with corn and cashewflower, Nepalese ricotta and spinach momo dumplings and a dish that riff on Japanese hiyayakko (cold tofu). She sets out to mystify the idea that Asian cooking is somehow inaccessible and unhealthy, and she succeeds. Rarely do you come across an ingredient that isn't available at a Main Street supermarket.

YASMIN KHAN's also on an identity search in RIPE FIGS: Recipes and Stories From Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus (Hurst, 256 pp., $35), but not her own. Traveling through these three countries, Khan, who is Iranian-born but London-based, explores how food and traditions around food have provided a sense of connection and comfort for migrant communities in the eastern Mediterranean. Pulling back to explore their three cuisines, all of them gorgeously heany on grilled meats, herbs, fresh choose, olives and Cezanne-worth fruits and vegetables, she writes, "You can begin to see similarities where political borders insist upon division and difference." Khan, who first fell in love with the region on a family trip as a kid, is a travel writer at heart, and every recipe is rooted in a real sense of place. A sheet pan pomegranate and sumac chicken comes from a Syrian doctor who runs a restaurant on the Greek island of Levros. A halloumi and produce-packed salad takes advantage of Cyprus's magnificent bounty in the late summer: fish kebabs find her "crossing borders" and "using Turkish fish marinade alongside a garlicky Greek potato sauce." And in a year without travel, it's hard not to pour over the photography that breaks up the standard recipes: sumptous bunches of spices, olives, grapes, pomegranates spilling over at markets; streetscenes in Isfahan and Athens; and small towns set against the dramatic Greek Mediterranean.

ON THE SUBJECT of recipes that connect — in the introduction LANDSCAPE (University of North Carolina Press, 100 pp., $20), Michael Twitty, a culinary historian, recalls a favorite childhood dish: his Alabama-bred grandmother's red rice, a spicy tomato-based pilaf, which also serves as a tidy metaphor for the whole book. "If you followed that one dish back through all of the ingredients, you'd come out somewhere," he writes, "you would go overland from Alabama to South Carolina and then across the Atlantic," eventually landing in Sierra Leon, where jollof rice, an antecedent of red rice, is still staple of West African cuisine. Twitty's slim, jam-packed volume is part of favor the South, a series dedicated to recognizing the history of the region's rich food landscape (see also: "Ohrn." "Ham." "Pecans." and "Peaches"). Here, he highlights the various ways "rice marched across the South in the hands of the enslaved and enslavers." Twitty has a gift for presenting the historical in a manner that is both accessible and personal. A recipe for Limpin' Susan, the okra-and-coke "staple from the stores of West Africa to the shores of the American South," reads like just the thing to eat for a Tuesday night family dinner: a recipe for the Afro-Creole dish jambalaya is presented by a yellow chef, Wanda Blaire, in three short paragraphs; and Twitty himself shares his recipe for groundnut (peanut) stew, made all the more tantalizing by the way it recalls his first trip to West Africa.

FAST-FORWARD to the modern-day American South, where fans who line up for the pulled pork on white bread
at Rodney Scott's Whole Hog BBQ, a Charleston restaur-
ante that became iconic practically on the day it opened.
Rodney's world of BBQ: Every Day in a Good Day (Clark-
son Potter, 224 pp., $28.99), written with Lolis Eric Elie. But
whether you've eaten at one of Scott's restaurants or not
(there are now three locations), the book will deliver.
There are, of course, the old-school no-frills classics
with surprisingly short ingredient lists — like potato salad
with Duke's mayo and boiled eggs, fried chicken, wings,
smoked turkey breast, hash puppies and cornbread with
honey butter. What makes this book not the one-note, just
in-time-for-Father's-Day grilling primer is the memoir
section in the front where Scott, a James Beard Award-
winning chef and pitmaster, describes growing up in Hen-
ingway, S.C. Cooking his first whole hog when he was just
11, Scott learned from the hard-driving tutelage of his par-
ents, whose motto was, "When you're old enough to walk,
you're old enough to work."
"You can't boil these years down into a quick conversa-
tion," he writes, and what follows is a drill-down on every
part of the process of barbecuing, from building the pit (a differ-
ent kind of recipe; you'll need to shop for things like 62 cinder
blocks and 7 lengths of rebar) to constructing burn barrels
and choosing the right wood. Only after that will you learn
how to cook the whole hog. For a certain kind of reader, this
is at the very far end of the aspirational spectrum, but even so,
there's value in knowing you won't look at that pulled pork
sandwich the same way ever again.

FOR PEOPLE WHO think nothing of pulling out a biothorch
as they bake, there is no better Mother's Day or Father's
Day gift that ZOE BAKES CAKES: Everything You Need to Know
To Make Your Favorite Layers, Bundles, Loaves, and More (Ten Speed
Press, 272 pp., $39.95), by Zoe François, the Minneapolis-based
pastry chef and teacher whose hypotetically photographed
cooks, have gained her an enormous following on In-
stagram. Even the most novice bake-o-phile will be un-
able to resist flagging every page with a note that says
"This one is for my birthday!" Before handing it off to someone else in the house to tackle. Fans will be happy to get a little how-to on all the Zoe signatures: those dis-
tinctly graphic, cross-sectioned leaves and cupcakes with cloudlike piles of frostings and whipped cream; her spiky
blowtorch (natch) meringues; cakes topped with fresh
flowers or rimmed in fences made of candied carrots.
Most everything in the book is shot against a severe
marble-and-ton color palette (all the better to shine a
spotlight on those cakes, a.k.a. the superstars), and yet
there's no denying the unabashed fun at play in these
pages. François, who was raised on a series of communes
and ashrams, is really just a hippie at heart who wants to
spread the love through cake. It's impossible not to get be-
hind that.

ALSO IMPOSSIBLE? Coming up with a transition to intro-
duce a cookbook that claims it's not a cookbook almost as
soon as you crack its spine. In MAX'S PICNIC BOOK (Mardik
Grant, 250 pp., $24.99), Max Halley — the proprietor of a be-
loved London sandwich shop — and Ben Benton are deter-
mined to have us rethink and reclaim the picnic, which
spoon cake covered in marzipan frosting. (From the reci-
pe note: "If you're even a little baking-phobic or easily an-
noyed, just buy one.") There are helpful sidebars — six
things you never thought to put in a thermos, like slightly
undercooked eggs, and a list of the reasons you should al-
ways pack a Swiss army knife: "You can dispatch and
neatly eviscerate an animal for a real woodland picnic
joking."

It's possible you'll be satisfied with just reading it and
may never cook from it. Which, naturally, is one of the things
that make it so special.·

From left: Rutabaga potato chip fish cakes from "Simply Julia," baking tray chew meat from "Te Asia, With Love"; sumac chicken from "Ripe Fig."

Banana cream cake from "Zoe Bakes Cakes."

Potato salad from "Rodney Scott's World of BBQ."
What's the best way to discover Elin Hilderbrand? Look on the wicker shelf in your rented beach house. There you'll find her shoulder to shoulder with Dean Koontz, Terry McMillan, Emily Giffin and other titans of summer whose well-thumbed volumes have not been left behind so much as bequeathed to the next wave of vacationers. Once you've located a Hilderbrand novel, it won't matter that the water view you were promised is visible only from the roof. Say goodbye to Malibu or Mantaloking; you're now en route to Nantucket, where most of Hilderbrand's 27 books take place. Personally, I've never set foot on the island, but you could drop me at the ferry dock and I'd be able to find my way to Madaket Beach, Jewel Pond or any number of places where Hilderbrand's characters dine, swim, cheat, marry and, yes, die.

These novels are beach reads with undertow — a confluence of frivolity (picnics, convertibles, flings) and gravity (divorce, deception, loss). They unlock the doors of mansions and cottages, lay out buffets ranging from clam strips to bouillabaisse, and introduce characters of all ages, perspectives and incomes.

To become a Hilderbrand completist is to watch her evolution from ingénue dipping a toe in authorial waters to seasoned expert planting a flag on the dune, declaring: "I've survived some things. Listen up.

So grab a beach chair, refill your water bottle (or your rosé), and let these books tide you over until fall.

I love novels ripped from the headlines.

Where do you turn when your husband has cheated investors out of billions of dollars — and your sons may or may not have been involved, and the media is camped outside your Park Avenue apartment? In SILVER GIRL, Meredith Martin Delson flees to the fog-shrouded Nantucket mansion of her oldest friend, Constance O'Brien Flan. (When it comes to names, Hilderbrand takes the same approach she does to meals: You can never have too many.) Clearly the Madoff family inspired this plot, but Hilderbrand gives it her own sun-kissed, optimistic spin — which is not to say it's all Rosa rugosa, just that there's a silver lining to the ugliest of circumstances.

Give me the best of the best.

I have no patience for dead people who hang around in fiction, but I made an exception for Vivian Howe, who gets killed in the opening pages of Hilderbrand's latest, most philosophical and (I'm declaring it) best novel, GOLDEN GIRL, which comes out on June 1. Like her creator, Vivi is a "wash-ashore" on Nantucket, a best-selling author of beach reads and a mother of three — and let's hope the similarities end there. At the beginning of the book, a hit-and-run accident lands Vivi in the Beyond, where she is granted one summer to watch over her children, plus three "moguls" should she want to influence their decisions. The story is a family saga, a mystery and a moving retrospective that manages to be clever without being coy. As an investigator tells the chief of police Ed Kapenas, who plays a recurring role in the Hilderbrand oeuvre: "This is a very life-immitating art here, Chief. I feel like I'm living in one of Vivian Howe's novels." But, she adds, "They usually have happy endings.

Show me a woman who says, 'To hell with all that.'

In A SUMMER AFFAIR, Claire Danier Crispin is bogged down by expectations and responsibilities and haunted by the role she might have played in a near-deadly car accident. When the husband of the driver — whose final moments were purchased by Claire — asks her to chair the Nantucket's Children Summer Gala, she decides to skip the event. The story is a reminder of her own guilt, and a chance to reconnect with old friends and old times. The result is a latest, wine-fueled planning sessions with the handsome billionaires who's the polar opposite of Claire's husband, television-dissed husband; our friend drama and the reappearance of a high school flame. Think you know where this is going? Think again. Hilderbrand is way too smart to give away the whole story in her title.
Hook me up with an old-fashioned rom-com.

Before Mallory Blessing dies, she tells her son, Link, to look for an envelope in her desk drawer. On the front of the envelope are two words — “Please call” — and inside is a phone number. Link tells his mother’s instructor and is shocked to find himself in touch with Jake McCcloud, the husband of the front-runner in the upcoming presidential election. We learn that Mallory and Jake have enjoyed a secret yearly rendezvous for 28 Summers, through marriage, kids, jobs and Jake’s wife’s political career. Why the two haven’t been able to make it as a real couple becomes clear as the story unfolds, but still, we root for them, visit after visit, knowing how the story will end and hoping we’re wrong.

If I don’t get out of the heat, I’m going to faint.

To me, the appeal of a mousy beach is as baffling as the hoopla over frozen hot chocolate, so I will admit that I rarely paid attention when Hilderbrand published her first wine novel — aptly named WINTER STREET — in 2014. By the time I got around to delving into the saga of the Quinn family, they had three more books to their name: WINTER STROLL, WINTER STORMS and WINTER SOLSTICE. We meet this fractured family as they’re about to celebrate Christmas on Nantucket, where their patriarch, Kel ley, owns the legendary Winter Street Inn with his second wife, Mimi. Just as the Quinns are about to converge for the year’s most stressful holiday, Kell ley walks into Room 10 and finds Mimi in the arms of the man they’ve hired to play Santa Claus. From there, we’re off to the dysfunctional family derby, with homely eggnog and extravagant galore.

I need a break from Nantucket.

In honor of her 50th birthday — and her twin brother’s — Hilderbrand returned to the year she was born, when the Vietnam War was raging, Woodstock was thrilling and Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon. In SUMMER OF 69, we follow the descendants of Elvis Nichols to their summer home on Nantucket and to Martha’s Vineyard, where the rebel child, Kirby, has a job at the thirteen-town Inn Edgartown. Here, Hilderbrand explores the challenges of unrequited and interfaith relationships in the ’60s, the stress of having a beloved brother deployed overseas and the tragedy incurred by a young, drunk senator. She stitches real-life events onto a fictional canvas and provides a soundtrack with her chapter names, including “Both Sides Now” “Born to Be Wild” and “Fly Me to the Moon.”

I’m in the mood for sisters against the world.

In BAREFOOT, Brenda Lymon and Vicki Lymon Storey arrive on Nantucket with Vicki’s young sons and a pregnant neighbor who’s leaving her cheating husband. The plans for the sisters to relive childhood summers in their aunt’s Sconset cottage while Vicki undergoes treatment for lung cancer and Brenda resolves from a professional scandal. But Vicki’s boys, Brenda’s work and their histrionic ride to Siasconset Pond are foiled by cries and the presence of a wise, biddable, supernaturally capable college student they hire to care for Vicki’s boys. Published in 2007, Hilderbrand’s sixth book shows a mother getting her sea legs at the same time she catches a glimpse of her own mortality. From the instant her taxi careened into Aunt Lee’s crowded clambake driveway, I was dabbing my eyes with my beach towel.

I’m looking for ‘Parent Trap’ vibes with an adult twist.

When Billy Frost and Eleanor Rowen split up, each parent remains sole custodian of one identical twin daughter: Billy and Harper live on Martha’s Vineyard; Eleanor and Tahlita on Nantucket. All is (mostly) well until Billy dies and Tahlita’s daughter rebels and suddenly the twins have to find a way to bridge the 20 or so miles between their islands and their lives. Unlike their cinematic forebears, these sisters grew up together, but what they don’t know about each other is what makes THE IDENTICALS one of Hilderbrand’s most binge-worthy confections. Also, Eleanor is a designer — think L’Ri Purliner — so this one includes a layer of fashion on top of the usual maddeningly spreading and postcard-worthiness scenery.

Actually, I need a break from this country.

WINTER IN PARADISE is the first installment in Hilderbrand’s second trilogy of wine books (and it came out the year before “Summer of 69”). This time, she drops the New England sand off our feet and whisk us to the Caribbean (where she spends part of each year). Our tour guide is Irene Steele of Iowa City (where Hilderbrand went to graduate school), a widow who goes to St. John with her sons to try to make sense of her husband’s death in a plane crash. Why does she have a fully furnished house on the island? Why was he away from home so much? One man’s double life turns out to be his survivor’s good fortune in ways I will not reveal, I will just say that, 24 hours after I started this book, I purchased its sequel, WHAT HAPPENS IN PARADISE, and I did not leave either book to be enjoyed by strangers at the end of my vacation.
Ruled Britannia

BY DEXTER PALMER

SPECULATIVE FICTION and historical fiction are closer cousins than one might think, and alternate-history novels (such as Philip K. Dick’s “The Man in the High Castle” or William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s “The Difference Engine”) can give enterprising writers the chance to work in both genres at once. Fans of such stories will be richly entertained by the lavish world-building and breakneck plotting of Natasha Pulley’s “The Kingdoms,” and it’s best to approach the book knowing as little as possible, in order to experience the re- veal of its setting along with its amnesiac protagonist. (Minor spoilers follow, so first I’ll spoil this review — exquisite praise, with the occasional jab.)

We begin in Victorian England, retro-futuristic, full of familiar wonk and smoke, but showing some key differences: Two of its major cities are “Londres” and “Pont du Cam,” and the farmer’s rail network is called the “Metro,” with a suspicious accent harking over the e. It turns out that we’re in an alternate timeline in which England has been annexed by the French, the result of Britain’s decisive loss in the Napoleonic Wars decades before. But things got complicated. In a cleverly executed narrative development that reads as if Patrick O’Brian were harvesting from the films “The Final Countdown,” a wormhole is discovered that allows ships to travel through time, and the beleaguered Georgian-era English use this portal to harvest military technology from their Victorian future, in a last, desperate plan to turn the tide of the war.

The story shifts between various time periods as the protagonist, Joe Tournier, becomes involved in an attempt to change history. He spends much of the novel’s early pages in a state of bewilderment, not entirely due to the intermittent amnesia that results from time travel. Other characters have a habit of withholding crucial information from poor Joe about his surroundings and identity, or supplying it piecemeal, as if they wish to prolong his suspense. This becomes less of an immediate concern once the narrative begins to accelerate through a page-turning procession of kidnapping, imprisonment, romance and naval warfare — the last rendered in compelling, gritty detail. (Beautiful, surreal imagery appears throughout the novel, too. A description of a town on the Outer Hebrides that’s suddenly beset by a strange winter is particularly memorable.) Eventually, a somewhat, sufficient reason is supplied for the enmity of Joe’s companions, though by then readers most likely will have guessed his secret. If there’s no mystery here, the dramatic irony that takes its place is a fine substitute.

A SMALL, DRIVING CORE of logic is usually the price to be paid for the pleasure of a story in which effect precedes cause, and so time travel stories should be judged not by whether they are completely coherent, but by how artfully they conceal the fact that they are not. “The Kingdoms” manages the trick well. Pulley mostly plays fair with her plotting, even with her sly misdirections, and in the novel’s bitter-sweet final pages things click neatly into place. Readers of historical fiction who view the genre as a chance to pit their tal- ent for history against the author’s will find a strong opponent. Excepting the rare case of anachronistic slang (unprintable here), the time periods are meticulously detailed, and the changes caused by altering history (such as the Channel, or something like it, existing in 1890) are carefully worked out.

It’s 400-odd pages but reads as if it’s half as long. Clear a weekend if you can, and let yourself be absorbed.

World of Pain

BY NADJA SPIEGELMAN

HAVE YOU ALLOWED yourself to forget, perhaps for the purposes of survival, the innocent clarity with which you saw the world at 14? I don’t mean the strength of the emotions you felt, the ones that linger with us as adults in manageable, washed-out shades — lust, love, shame, rage. I mean the way that the arbitrary injustice of the world, and its cruel divisions — rich and poor, weak and strong — made themselves starkly apparent. The Japanese novelist Mieko Kawakami has not forgotten. “We often talk about death being absolute,” she told The Guardian last year, “but I can’t help but think that being born is no less final.” Her characters grapple with the most fundamental obscurity: that of being alive at all.


HEAVEN

By Mieko Kawakami

Translated by Sam Bell and David Boyd

175 pp. Europa Editions. $27.95

passed inside a pencil case: “We should be friends.” At first, the 14-year-old narrator, whom the other students call Eyes for her lazy eye, believes the note is a prank by the boys who bully him. But the message is from Kojima — nicknamed Hazmat — the unwashed girl with the other girls torture. The two parasites form a stable, second-tier alliance.

Reading the notes they pass to each other evokes the same hot flush of shame as stumbling upon one’s own letters from that age. But the rare times the two seek out the onlooker, the onlooker, in person, Kojima delivers long philosophical monologues. What differentiates us from objects? Is there no god, then why is there suffering? “We’ve understood something things while we’re alive, and some after we die,” she declares.

“What matters is that all the pain and sad- ness have meaning.”

Impeccably translated by Sam Bell and David Boyd, the book is full of masterfully set pieces of violence, scenes of senseless bullying so harrowing you can almost feel the pain yourself. To call these moments cinematic is perhaps to do them an injustice. The nar- rator’s internal world is all we see when the bullies sit a defeated volleyball over his head and kick him until the floor of the empty gymnasium runs with blood. His tormentors are nearly faceless, their vio- lence a force of nature. It seems like something they have always known: how to beat someone without leaving marks, how to torture without being caught.

When Eyes, lame and slumbering, asks one of his classmates why he bullies him, his mother says, “I suppose to Protect You From All This” and the editor in chief of Asio Quarterly, an interna- tional literary magazine forthcoming in 2022.

Mieko Kawakami

NADJA SPIEGELMAN is the author of “I’m Sup- posed to Protect You From All This” and the editor in chief of AStro Quarterly, an interna- tional literary magazine forthcoming in 2022.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROV TOUYAA

his work, how his female characters are often sacrified for the sake of the male leads. With “Heaven,” one encounters Kawakami’s own flat male narrator. He does not understand her, and the bullying plunges him into a catatonic depression. We long to see the world through Kojima’s perspective but instead only glimpse her peripherally through his. The book feels off-kilter in that way, perhaps intentionally, the two protagonists functioning as a lazy eye and an all-seeing one — an overlapping double view of the world.

But the disorientations of the novel align into perfect vision for the breathtaking ending, which is an argument in favor of meaning, of beauty, of life. It is rare for a writer as complex as Kawakami to be so unflinching and at the same time endearing and(resolution). But then again, to read her work is to feel that she is not afraid of anything at all.
CHRISTIE IS that child: a maker of mischief and purveyor of compulsive lies; resident shoplifter at Mrs. Bunty's sweet store; the class imp, rather than its clown. She is the child you don't want to find on your doorstep, asking for your own.

She is the 8-year-old narrator of Nancy Tucker's gripping, unsettling debut novel. She is also a murderer. We learn this in

THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING
By Nancy Tucker

Tucker's pulpy first sentence, "I killed a little boy today," half of the novel's chapters are dedicated to the aftermath of that crime, as Christie evades suspicion in the midst of a shamed, claustrophobic British town. These are interspersed with the story of Julia—Christie's older pseudo-mom, bestowed on her once she's caught. Following years of institutional care, and with her new identity already revealed and imploded, Julia is desperate to live a structured, mundane life, for the benefit of her own daughter, Molly.

Christie's observations are immaculate, loyal to her age and her desperation. Her father is absent and her mother is cruel. She is left to forage for calories in sugar packets and other children's leftover milk bottles, starving and defensive. The most moving passages of the novel come in her scrawling to endow her parents with rational kindness. When she is in trouble, her mother simply locks her out of the house, and she must climb through the kitchen window to return. This, Christie reasons, is "why Mam didn't give me much food, because she knew if I got too fat, I wouldn't be able to squeeze through the kitchen window when I needed to. It was just her way of looking out for me, really."

Starvation is so well captured here: the relentless, obsessive drudgery of it, "a form of madness." Christie is fascinated and repulsed by bodies better nourished than her own. At first, this fixation feels excessive, exhausting. Knees are "paddings;" a baby in a sun hat is a "fat minx-room;" mothers are described, collectively as "hump." But as Tucker opens Christie's small, sparse world, this too becomes pitiful. In other people's flesh, she can't help seeing food.

Discomfort comes, too, in the proximity of the dual time frames: Christie as murderer, Julia as mother. As Christie wheelies closer to other toddlers in the neighborhood, Julia expresses all of her old efforts in raising her daughter, from "trainers with lights" in the heels to church on Christmas Eve. There's a unique, visceral fear for children who are murderers—you know those mug shots as well as I do—and Tucker sets that against our hope for redemption. Of course we want Molly to remain with Julia. But how can we help worrying for her when Julia tags her from a wall? As they board a train, undisclosed to Julia's probation officer? Of course we want them to stay together. Don't we?

There is misery here, but there is also a dour British humor, the stuff of "The Royle Family" or the original version of "The Office." It is there in Julia's pilgrimage to the town where Christie grew up, in train cafes bestowed with abysmal puns (Choo-Choo) and Happy Birthday hunting ("Every day someone's birthday, isn't it?"). It is there, too, in Christie's droll gaze, a blend of cynicism and naiveté that can be difficult to swallow. Watching visitors to the house of mourning, she muses on the advantages of losing a child: "I thought having a kid die wasn't actually too bad, really. It got you a lot of cake and stuff."

By the end of the novel, the voices of Christie and Julia reside deep in your skull: visceral and wicked, sad and wonderful, all at the same time.

"What do you get when you combine The Wizard of Oz with Back to the Future? You get a delightfully nostalgic romp in Shine Until Tomorrow (Rere Bird Books) by Carla Malden. Through the eyes of Mari Caldwell, and the lens of her vintage Leica camera, we behold a coming-of-age tale about a teenager so preoccupied with her future that she must travel back in time in order to accept her life today."

-Valerie Taylor, Booktrib

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WENHAM, MASS., is a genteel hamlet north of Boston, home to horse farms and a venerable teahouse. Just down the road, the Myopia Hunt Club hosts polo on Sundays; John Updike golled there. The Red Sox reliever Bob Stanley lived in Wenham. One day in 1986, Stanley’s children, aged 4 and 5 at the time, were playing in the driveway when an unfamiliar car pulled up. The driver emerged, picked up one of the kids’ bicycles and hurled it at a basketball hoop. Before peeling away, the stranger implored the children: “Tell your father he sucks!”

Stanley had just finished his 10th season with the team. For years, the sinkhole had been Boston’s most effective reliever; he still holds the club record for appearances. In the winter of 1986–87, however, the memory freshened in the minds of New Englanders was the wild pitch Stanley threw in Game 6 of that year’s World Series, allowing the tying run to score in the bottom of the 10th inning.

Later in the same at-bat, Stanley redeemed himself by getting the Mets’ Mookie Wilson to hit a playable grounder down the first base line. That grounder, however, passed through the bobbled legs of Bill Buckner and into the tormented psyche of every Red Sox fan. Never mind that there was a Game 7, in which Boston jumped out to a 3–0 lead. Stanley’s name was mud, and at least one incensed fan was willing to make the drive to the pitcher’s bsoccul corner of Essex County to tell him so.

For nearly two decades, the failure of the ’86 team to record that final out was a wound that wouldn’t heal. Then, in 2004, the Sox finally won a title. Stanley, Buckner and company could now be remembered as heroes, not heels. In TWO SIDES OF GLORY: THE 1986 BOSTON RED SOX IN THEIR OWN WORDS (University of Nebraska, 288 pp., $25.95), the baseball writer Erik Sherman burnishes their legend.

The book is organized as a series of 14 conversations with veterans of the 1986 campaign. Sherman is not a hard-nosed interviewer; he’s more comfortable throwing batting practice than chin music. A charily Roger Clemens recounts that he was nearly scratched from an April start because he’d gotten stuck in traffic. Arriving at Fenway just in time to get into uniform, he went to the mound and struck out 20 Seattle Mariners. A similarly volatile Wade Boggs catalogs his legendary superstitions. (“Legendsary for his superstitions,” reads the last line of Boggs’ Cooperstown plaque.) Before each plate appearance, he would write the Hebrew letter chai in the dirt with his bat. “I’m not Jewish,” he tells Sherman, “but it was easier than carrying a rabbit’s foot in the back pocket and then sliding on it.”

Clemens and Boggs, of course, went on to win championships (with the Yankees), so it’s easier for them to tell the old war stories. For other members of the ’86 club, the seasons continue to cast a pall. Oil Can Boyd, who was scheduled to start Game 7 but was passed over for Bruce Hurst, reveals that he has never gotten over the snub. “It really bothers me still to this day,” he tells Sherman.

As for Buckner, the Red Sox invited him back to Fenway to throw out the first pitch on Opening Day in 2008, the team fresh off another championship. The ovation he received brought tears to Buckner’s eyes. But his gratitude mixed with anger when he glimpsed a sign in the stands. “We forgive you,” it read. After the years he and his teammates had endured as the faces of Red Sox iniquity, the message, he felt, should have been Hey Buck — forgive us! Buckner (who died in 2019 of Leary body dementia) had come over to the Red Sox in 1984, in a trade with the Chicago Cubs. The Cubs of the early 1980s were losers whose inviability was starting to wear off. They’d finished 1983 with a record of 71-91, their sixth straight losing season. For 1984, however, General Manager Dallas Green engineered a series of moves (shipping off the declining Buckner; acquiring the pitcher Rick Sutcliffe) that would make Chicago a contender. By May, Bob Costas was comparing Ryne Sandberg to Roy Hobbs (the film adaptation of Bernard Malamud’s The Natural) that had just been released. By September, the Cubs had claimed the N.L. East title.

AN UNRECOGNIZABLY SUCCESSFUL Cubs team was just one of the wonders of 1984. In GLORY DAYS: THE SUMMER OF 1984 AND THE 90 DAYS THAT CHANGED SPORTS AND CULTURE FOREVER (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 336 pp., $27.99), L. Jon Wertheim, the executive editor of Sports Illustrated, argues that athletic endeavor was never the same after that short stretch of days.

Consider the N.B.A. As recently as the 1980-81 season, 17 of its 23 teams had lost money. “In every city that was home to both an N.B.A. and an N.L. franchise,” Wertheim writes, “it was the hockey team that brought in more fans and more revenue.” Even for players on a storied team like the Boston Celtics, life was far from glamorous. Flying home from Los Angeles for Game 7 of the N.B.A. finals, Wertheim notes, “the Celtics did not fly nonstop.

The Celtics’ series with the Lakers would usher in a new era for the league, one in which the indignities of a connecting flight would be a thing of the past. The drama of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson facing off in an electric, and vicious, seven-game series drew nationwide attention to the sport, and at an auspicious moment. Just a week after the Celtics’ Game 7 victory, the N.B.A. held its annual draft. The newly installed commissioner, David Stern, had the novel idea of televising the event and persuaded the US. Network to carry it, though the league had to pay the cable channel for the privilege. Viewers who tuned in witnessed an official entry of Hakeem Olajuwon. Minority rights activist Charles Barkley and John Stockton into professional basketball.

Yet Wertheim’s best evidence for 1984 as an annus mirabilis might come from the balance sheet, not the field of play. That summer, Nike executives signed Jordan to their brand; soon, endorsement dollars would outstrip salaries for many top athletes. Meanwhile, ARB acquired ESPN (from Texas), setting it on a path to profitability and, eventually, sports media dominance. And Peter Guber—then an executive at Coca-Cola, the University of Southern California, turned international amateur athlete coming into his own as a emerges as a打乱者。The Late Piano Games had made about $10 million in revenue. ultimately convinced Coca-Cola to pay $12.5 million just for the right to be the 1984 Games’ official soft drink. Elsewhere in the book, the case for 1984 can feel strained. Was the later success of the Ultimate Fighting Championship made possible by Daniel LaRusso’s crane kick at the All Valley Karate Tournament? Is Karate Kid? A chapter on the making of the film, released in June 1984, relies on that premise. Wertheim rationalizes the inclusion of the Cubs by noting that a young University of Chicago student, Tom Ricketts, fell in love with the team that summer. (He’d formerly counted himself a Kansas City Royals fan.) Twenty-five years later, Ricketts would buy the team. Seven years after that, the Cubs went on to win their first World Series since 1908. The 1984 team lost to the Padres in the N.L.C.S. after a devastating error in the deciding game by Leon Durham — Bill Buckner’s 1967 placement at first base.

A 1984 MILESTONE that Wertheim does not consider: It was the year that Peter Guber—who became commissioner of baseball after the Olympics ended — opened Mi
League locker rooms to women reporters.

Previously, teams had obliged women to wait outside the clubhouse until players had showered and dressed. Male report- ers, by contrast, were free to roam about the locker room. In 1977, Melissa Ludtke of Sports Illustrated was cov- ering the World Series between the Yankees and Dodgers, or trying to. In Game 6, the Yankees slugger Reggie Jackson hit home runs on three consecutive pitches. After the game, Ludtke waited an hour for Jackson to be made avail- able to her for comment. He declined. “Mel,” he said, “I’m exhausted, I’m going downtown. Sorry.”

Ludtke sued Uppperth’s predecessor, Bowie Kuhn, in federal court — and won. “The court held that Ludtke had been treated differently than her colleagues based solely on her gender,” Julie DiCaro writes in TOUCHLINE: Sports, Cul- ture, and Being a Woman in America (Ottawa, pp. 527).

Ludtke’s victory was narrow — it pertained only to the Yankees — but it paved the way for Uppperth’s leaguewide decision seven years later.

DiCaro is a former host on Chicago sports radio and cur- rently a writer and editor at Deadspin. Her book champi- ons the work of women like Ludtke, who refused to tolerate a sexist status quo. It’s also a cri de coeur about the current state of sports media, where women remain at a disadvan- tage. “I often say to people that I had it a lot easier than women do today,” Ludtke told DiCaro.

In no small part, that’s due to the advent of social media. Ludtke was attacked for having the temerity to demand equal access, but largely by columnists who had to sign their names to their views. The anonymity afforded by Twitter has led to new depths of viciousness. When DiCaro was on the air in Chicago, the mere sound of a female voice was more than many male listeners could bear. According to her critics, DiCaro’s voice “was simultaneously too high, too low, too shrill, too girly, too raunchy.” One commenter, at least, was willing to own up to what these critiques were really about: “I tune into sports radio to get AWAY from woman,” he wrote.

Basketball, soccer, and vocal coaches are among her more mild-mannered antagonists. In 2016, she appeared in a video based loosely on Jimmy Kimmel’s “Mean Tweets” segment. At one point, a man to read aloud, to DiCaro’s face, tweets that other men had written about her. The resulting footage is excruciating to watch. As the messages grow nastier and nastier, the men find it difficult to continue, squirming in their seats and struggling to make eye contact. The temerity is a visible effect on DiCaro as well, at least at first. “By the time my day of filming was over” she writes of the experience, “I’ve heard guys calling me fat and ugly and praying for my rape so many times they didn’t register anymore.”

Produced for E:60, the video, which also featured ESPN’s Sarah Spain, had an outside impact, discussed on “The View” and the “CBS Evening News.” Later, it won a Peabody Award. The video undoubtedly raised awareness of the treatment women like Ludtke and Spain have had to endure. Yet DiCaro’s book makes clear that conditions have not much improved: A toxic social media landscape remains one of many impediments to achieving gender equality on sports desks. After DiCaro lost her show in 2020 because of the pandemic, neither of Chicago’s sports radio stations had a female host.

LARRY OLMSTEAD, the author of FANS: How Watching Sports Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Understanding (Algonquin, 220 pp., $28.00), is not a social scientist. As he admits near the end of his book, he’s not even a sports fan. He is “a fan of sports fans.” Olmsted mounts his case for the subvers- iveness of sport with the passion of the season-ticket hold- er who marshals statistics, anecdotes and intuition to make the case that this is the year the Jets will win the A.F.C. East.

Olmsted leads heavily on the work of Daniel L. Wiern, a professor of psychology at Murray State University, who has identified 24 mental health benefits of fandom. Among them, Olmsted reports, are higher self-esteem, more con- scientiousness, fewer bouts of depression, less alienation and less anger. Julie DiCaro and Bob Stanley may wish a word with Dr. Wiern.

Olmsted further posits that, as traditional forms of commu- nity have declined, sports have continued bringing us together. In the era of bowling alone, the Super Bowl party has persisted. It’s a nice idea, yet even Olmsted allows that fandom doesn’t always bring out the best in us. He ac- knowledges that the faithful can be too quick to forgive the home team, no matter its transgressions. The people of Houston, for instance, still pull for the Astros.

IN CHEATED: The Inside Story of the Astros Scandal and a Colorful History of Sign Stealing (Doubleday, 389 pp., $29.99), Andy Martino offers the definitive account of the sign-stealing scandal that brought low the 2017 World Series winners, undermin- ing that victory and tarnishing the reputations of players and management alike. The book begins in the beginning: “The art of sign stealing stretches back at least to the days when Chester A. Arthur was president. It began with eyes, opera glasses, primitive buzzers and sconceurs who sang in a cappella groups.”

Mortiz offers this history not to condemn the Astros’ bad acts, but to put them in context, and on a continuum. An unwritten rule, enforced more by bean balls than ump- ires, long held that cracking the codex that pitchers and catchers use to communicate was permissible, provided it was achieved without the aid of what Ty Cobb called “me- chanical devices” operated outside the field of play. Those, he said, were “reprehensible.”

The 2017 Astros used mechanical devices of a sophis- tication that Cobb couldn’t have imagined. (Ironically, one of the technologies that made Houston’s scheme possible was the instant replay cameras Major League Baseball had installed to make the game faire.) In forensic detail, Mortiz describes the execution of the Astros’ scheme and assesses the advantage it conveyed. More compelling, though, his attempt to place the perps in context, especially Carlos Beltran, one of the ringleaders.

Beltran’s extraordinary physical talents had made him a breakout star with the Royals. As his legs and bat slowed, he discovered he also had an intellectual gift for code-breaking. Mortiz traces Beltran’s embrace of the rec- ognite art to 2007, the year after he struck out looking with the bases loaded in Game 7 of the N.L.C.S. From Mets vet- erans, he learned to decipher whether the opposing catcher was using the “chase the two,” “two out one,” or “A&B” sequence to conceal his calls, skills he would in turn pass on to his Houston teammates. Those Astros have their own share of the blame for the ensuing scandal, but Beltran’s descent down the slippery slope from all-but- sanctioned espionage to reprehensible cheating gives Mortiz’s narrative its compelling tragic arc.

KEVIN GARNETT PLAYED basketball with unrivaled inten- sity and eccentricity, attributes evident in his pregame rit- ual of banging his cleanly shaved head against the basket stanchion. His newly membranous skin is shot through with scar tissue. Abdominal surgery, a rib replacement. A knee. A Zen: An Unconventional Encyclopedia of Life, Basketball, and Every- thing in Between (Simon & Scholastic, 320 pp., $26) tells the in- teresting story of a character. The first entry: “Anything Is Possible,” transports the reader to the pinnacle of Gar- nett’s career. Those were the triumphant words he hollowed to the rafters after leading the Boston Celtics to a champi- onship in 2008.

Garnett, who wrote the book with David Ritzi, does offer, along the way, an account of his hardscrabble upbringing in South Carolina and his influential leap directly from high school to the N.B.A. But the glossy format suits his rest- less mind. He’ll pause to offer an appreciation of Barack Obama (“the first basketball president”), a paean to the peanut butter and jelly sandwich, an exegesis on the Book of Job. One entry (“Fact?”) is a welcome appeal, in these conspiratorial times, to shared reality: “If you’re going to be a hothead, be a factual hothead. Be an about information hothead. When you speak, speak with conviction, speak with facts and back your facts up with even more facts.”

Garnett credits his Boston coach, Doc Rivers, with help- ing him master his own hedonethic. “You’re intense, and I love your intensity,” Rivers told him. “But sometimes intensity can be too intense.” The soundtrack to Garnett’s hard-edge game was the harmless, relentless hip-hop of the late DMX. What he sought, he found from Rivers, was music to accompany his off-court life, a sound that could tame his energies, as least until tip-off. Garnett found it: a “new realm of relaxation,” in the work of another KG. When the soothing notes of Kenny G’s saxophone filled the air, anything was possible.
FIFTY YEARS AGO, on a hot summer night in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, an 18-year-old named Paula Obersrocking borrowed a car that belonged to her roommate, Debbie, and promised to be back soon. She never returned.

Despite the frantic efforts of her family and friends, the police weren't interested in the case: teenage girls, they said, went missing all the time. When someone discovered Debbie's abandoned car, the officers didn't even bother to examine it for evidence; they just told Debbie that the car was in a no-parking zone and would be impounded if she didn't move it.

Paula, of course, was dead, though her body wasn't discovered for four months. In WHAT HAPPENED TO PAULA? On the Death of an American Girl (Norton, 280 pp., $26.95), Katherine Dykstra delves into the old case files but soon realizes she'll never crack the decades-old crime. Still, she writes, "even if we knew how Paula died, it wouldn't solve the fundamental problem I'd been circling. Maybe this wasn't a mystery of one woman's life and why one woman died, but the mystery of why women die."

As Dykstra points out, back in 1970, it wasn't just the police who were uninterested in Paula's case; the local paper and radio station also declined to run stories about her disappearance. Dykstra ticks off the reasons: There is Paula's long-legged, blond beauty and her reputation as a fearless, headstrong "bad girl" (the night she vanished, she had been wearing a "scanty" dress). She had also been dating two men: one of them, Robert, was Black — at a time when, as one of Paula's friends told Dykstra, interracial dating was "the biggest 'no' there was." Finally, Paula may have been pregnant when she was killed. All these things lay behind the perception — of the town, the police, even her own family — that an 18-year-old woman had violated her own death.

In giving Paula a voice, Dykstra helps us understand a grave injustice.

GLENN STOUT also examines an old case, only he goes even further back — to the Jazz Age. In TIGER GIRL AND THE CANDY KID: America’s Original Gangster Couple (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 360 pp., $32.00), he describes how — a decade before Bonnie and Clyde — a pair of married bandits transfigured the nation. Margaret and Richard Whittemore, dubbed the Tiger Girl and the Candy Kid, ran a gang of jewel thieves in New York City. Margaret was the quintessential flapper, her blood hair cropped in a bob, her checked ruffled, her skirt cut short. Richard, who had embraced a life of petty crime since he was a boy (he once swiped silver spoons from a church supper), had already done time, and had in fact escaped from prison by killing a guard before he and Margaret fled to Manhattan, where they assumed new identities.

Paula, by the cash from the gang's daring daytime jewel heists, they lived the good life, staying out at clubs all night, buying fur coats and jewels. When anyone asked what Whittemore did, he told them he was in sales. "He let his gold cuff links, diamond stickpin and tailored suit do the talking for him," Stout writes. "That was enough for most people — it was not a time to ask too many questions. Someone probably figured he was a bookkeeper. Not to be outdone, Margaret was an integral part of the gang. She knew how to use a gun and was cool and unfazed when she executed a heist of her own at a confectionery shop.

Stout has done more than simply chronicle the couple's crimes. He has tried to understand what motivated the Whittemores. The world they lived in "was not the same as that chronicled by F. Scott Fitzgerald," Stout writes, "but how those romanticized mythologies of the era provided an irresistible fantasy, and how trying to live that fantasy played out."

BEFORE STOUT’S BOOK, I had never heard of the White-mores, nor did I remember reading about the "Cape Cod Casanova," the man at the heart of THE BABYFIDDER: My Som- mers With a Serial Killer (Atria, 342 pp., $28.00).

Around 2005, violent nightmares began to shred Lita Rodman’s sleep. Why was Tony Costa — the friendly motel handyman who had looked after her and her kid sister during their summers on Cape Cod in the 1960s, plying them with Lorna Doones and orange Popcicles — showing up in her dreams and pointing a gun at her head? After all, she remembered him as "one of the few kind and gentle adults in my life during those turbulent years." Her mother had some ideas. "Well," she said to her daughter, "I remember he turned out to be a serial killer."

Rodman soon became obsessed with Costa, and this book, researched and written with Jennifer Jordan, weaves her childhood memories from those long-ago summers with the story of Costa’s life. It’s part memoir, part true-crime investigation, and if that sounds like a jarring combination, sometimes it is, largely because the chapters about Costa are so skillfully researched that the ones about Rodman’s childhood feel sketchy in comparison.

Moreover, although it is distressing to watch two little girls caught in the web of a psychopath, there isn’t much in the way of suspense here. It’s not until Costa takes the sisters to see his "secret garden" deep in the woods that they seem to be in any real danger. It’s a truly chilling scene: "I knew gardens, and this didn’t look like one," Rodman remembers. She asks Costa what he has planted there. "That’s what we have to keep secret," he tells her. She gets scared: "This was the first time an adventure with Tony was becoming less and less fun. In fact, I was done with the garden. I wanted to go home!"

When I finished, I wondered if Rodman still has nightmares. Probably, I decided. I don’t think you ever get over the fact that your childhood babysitter was a serial killer.

IN A TANGLED WEB (Cinedale, illustrated, 304 pp., papers, $15.95), Leslie Rule — you, the daughter of the true-crime writer Ann Rule — investigates the murder of a young woman named Carly Les Farver who disappeared in Omaha back in 2012. Just as in Paula’s case, the police failed to respond, probably because family and friends were still getting text and emails from Carly. The ones she sent her boyfriend, Dave, were downright threatening, and they escalated every time he began to date someone else. It got to the point where the police were searching for Carly not because they were afraid something bad had happened to her, but because they believed she was cyberstalking Dave. Of course, she wasn’t. As it became clear, another young woman, one who saw Farver as a romantic rival, sent these texts and posed as Farver on social media.

It’s an enormously complicated case, and although Rule unpacks it with care — she definitely her mother’s daughter — "A Tangled Web" is not without problems. There is too much repetition, too many unnecessary anecdotes and, most annoying of all, a belaboring of the obvi- ous for the reader. (Does anyone really need an explanation of what Facebook is at this point?) Still, kudos to Rule for focusing on a female sociopath in her first book. Last spring, when the book was first published, she gave an inter- view in which she said, "I looked for a case with a female who killed because I want to remind readers that women can be dangerous."

TINA JORDAN is the deputy editor of the Book Review.
Kindred Spirits  BY CHRISTINE LEIGH HEYRMAN

SMALL GROUPS gathered for séances, some in ornately furnished parlors, others in humbler settings. They held hands or placed their palms on a table, then fell silent or uttered a prayer or sang a hymn. They tried to include equal numbers of men and women, among them, ideally, someone scarcely out of girlhood. Young women, they believed, were most receptive to messages from another realm, and some might even discover that they were mediums who could decipher knocking noises or speak in the voices of the dead or write as those spirits directed.

For many Victorians in both the United States and Britain, those parlor gatherings were a passing diversion, but for others, efforts to commune with the dead proved more sustained and far more serious. Spiritism — the belief that the living could communicate with the dead — gave comfort to the bereaved, assurance of an afterlife to the anxious and support for faltering Christian faith. But some among a select group of mediums discovered in Spiritism the chance to perform, to profit and to emerge, in the words of Emily Miskoréka’s title, “Out of the Shadows” and have a public voice.

Mediumism started in the Finger Lakes region of New York, for years a crucible of evangelical revivalism, new religions and reform movements. Early in 1848, members of the Fox family began to hear mysterious rapping sounds in their Hydesville home, a sign, they suspected, that a ghost was reaching out to them. When the adolescent Fox daughters, Maggie and Kate, revealed that they could commune with this spirit, their elder sister, Leah Fox Fish, monetized the girls’ claims, staging séances and scheduling private readings.

Although they inspired many imitators, the Fox sisters did not number among those mediums who subsequently developed Spiritualism as an organized movement in both the United States and Britain. Their ranks included Emma Hardinge Britten, who wrote its history and traveled the public lecture circuit as a trance medium in the late 1850s, delivering opinions about the issues of the day as dictated by the spirits. By contrast, Victoria Woodhall had cut her ties to Spiritualist groups when her claim to clairvoyant powers persuaded the tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt to back her in founding the first female brokerage firm on Wall Street. But shortly thereafter she managed to recruit both Spiritualist and women’s rights organizations to support her bid for the presidency in 1872. Meanwhile in Britain, Georgina Weldon — not a medium herself but a stage-struck Spiritualist — fought the efforts of her husband and his squad of doctors to commit her to an asylum. She challenged Britain’s lunacy laws with more than a decade of agitation, which included parading sandwich-board men as pickets, scattering leaflets from a hot-air balloon, giving theatrical performances and offering antic testimony in court.

MISKORÉKA’S CHOSEN Spiritualists are a colorful bunch, and her lively writing makes their careers fun to follow. But why bring them together in a book? The author ventures that these six women acquired a “voice within a patriarchal society” and, as such, belong in our accounts of “the journey toward female empowerment.” True, every one of these visionaries knew how to draw a crowd. It’s true, too, that Spiritualists as a group played a major role in spreading the message about women’s rights throughout the 19th century and that merely by standing up and speaking in public they were defying Victorian gender norms. Yet the goal of advancing feminism played little role in prompting the careers of the women described by Miskoréka.

Leah Fox Fish, a single mother deserted by her husband, needed the means to support herself and her daughter; and once a third marriage guaranteed her economic security, she retired. Neither she nor her sisters lent their support to any women’s rights organization. Emma Hardinge Britten — who from youth supported her widowed mother — turned to mediumship when her star as an actress faded on Broadway. Women’s rights numbered among her many lecture subjects, but Britain’s most consistent aim was to seize on any topic that would grab the attention of a paying audience. It’s hard to say what causes, if any, Victoria Woodhall took to heart because ghostwriters — especially her very corporeal second husband, Col. James Harvey Blood — wrote her speeches and articles. She latched onto the Spiritualist movement to gain support for her presidential campaign when business reversals and personal scandals threatened to derail her ambitions and move her from the public eye. Many Spiritualists and feminist leaders condemned her opportunism and ultimately both movements ended their connection with her. As for Georgina Weldon, although she excelled at confounding her male adversaries, her main goal was banking in the limelight, and she vied for it ferociously — even with other women.

Other Spiritualists would have made a much better fit as feminists, but Miskoréka’s ensemble do belong together in a different book — one that explores the making of popular entertainments in the 19th century and the origins of celebrity. Kate and Maggie, Leah and Emma, Victoria and Georgina: Victorian Kardashians all. They were pioneers in show business strategies, media manipulation and advertising techniques, and their spirits still lurk among the many people intent on making a spectacle of themselves.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS
Six Visionary Victorian Women in Search of a Public Voice
By Emily Miskoréka
Illustrated. 332 pp. Counterpoint. $27.

From left: Georgina Weldon, Emma Hardinge Britten and Victoria Woodhall.

Photos: From left: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY; NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE, EMMANUEL MILDRED; FOUGEE MUSEUM

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
IT WASN'T EASY getting to Iceland in the days before Björk, before Skyz, when no cheap trans-Atlantic flight stopped there. You had to avoid the obsyn at the end of the world, dodge the islands that surged sud-
desty out of the water and then made land-
fall at mountains of red-hot rock that spat fire into the heavens. Saints got there in holy dreams but nobody dared settle until A.D. 874.

This solves the first mystery about Ice-
land's history: why it is short. What Egill Bjarnason sets out to explain is how Ice-
land Changed the World, his joyously pe-
culiar book, in which it is almost full of force and drive — why Iceland is a country with the soul of a very small town and yet can sometimes shut down the world. Bjarnia-
son balances pride and realism so casually that you can almost take for granted a na-
tion whose Parliament once voted to abol-
ish the letter "z" (except in a few words such as "peizez").

Maybe it's the fish that give the country its special flavor. Iceland instituted prohibition in 1935, but it didn't last; the Spanish de-
clined to buy Iceland's salt cod unless it con-
tained to import Spain's red wine, which obliged the island to keep drinking, so the is-
landers said. Then Iceland started to issue licenses for fishing — papers that could be traded, sold or used as financial collateral. In the early 2000s, fishing boats poured money into the country's newly deregulated banks. That wound Iceland, disastrously, into cod-based international finance. In the 2008 banking crisis 90 percent of its financial firms went under in a week.

Or maybe it's a question of scale. Bjarna-
son portrays an island so small that it did-
't need a word for "nepotism" until 1995 because that's just how things worked in a place where everyone is more or less relat-
ed. Now there is also an app for avoiding incest at parties.

Iceland's ambition seems to have been almost accidental. The first settlers man-
aged in 100 years to invent a 10th-century kind of democracy because nobody had the right, yet, to be a landlord or king. They sailed west looking for lands glimpsed by lost sailors, which is how they found first Greenland and then North America. All this was happening even as the great gaps in the skin of the earth where tectonic plates pull apart inch a year, and restless magmas feeds volumes. You can still bury bread to bake overnight in

the hot Icelandic ground, and it's only a
half-century since NASA used Iceland's black volcanic deserts as a substrate for the moon when training astronauts. When these mountains blow, the world
knows about it. In 2010, the ash left five mil-
ion people stranded across Europe, after
flying became impossible. In 1973, thanks to
these same volcanoes, sulfuric fog smother-
ered Europe, there was ice in the Gulf of
Mexico and so monsoon at all in India. Ice-
land's volcanoes destroyed the rice crop in
Japan that year; they changed the world.

The country's human history is not quite
so impressive. Its revolution happened a
couple of decades after the French one,
when an English soup seller and his sailors came ashore while everyone was at Sun-
day services and kidnapped the Danish
governor. It was a fine moment but it took
decades before the locals talked about ac-
tual statehood. The first nationalists were
handcapped by their habit of dying early and drunk — falling down stairs, burning
up in their beds or drowning in canals.

And yet that nationalism, infused with
myth and pride in the distinctive Icelandic
language, also changed the world. When
the United Nations was debating the partition of Palestine, someone had to chair the
committee that would decide what to do; the Australian candidate backed away, as
did the Thai candidate, which left the man
from Iceland, which was also a new nation. His argument in favor of a two-state solu-
tion made possible the birth of Israel.

The Nazis had read the Icelandic sagas
and imagined an Aryan stronghold for
their U-boats; they found it hard to cope
with the wandering sheep, open sources
and open mockery they met in Reykjavík.
The British arrived at the start of World
War II and within a year the Americans fol-
lowed, and stayed. President Franklin D.
Roosevelt couldn't declare a shooting war
in Europe but he could persuade the Ice-
landers to invite him to protect them.

In 1986, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail
Gorbachev met in Iceland — an island mid-
way between them — and almost agreed
to eliminate nuclear weapons. The Russian Boris Spassky and the American Bobby
Fischer went to Iceland for a Cold War
dress match with Henry Kissinger inter-
vening by phone.

Being the place in between might be the
key to this very idiosyncratic history. After
all, Iceland starts with sagas full of hacking
honorary heroes and ends with the world's
first woman elected head of state in a di-
rect vote, known by her first name, Vigdís.
She owed her rise to a memorable Wom-
en's Day Off, which shut the island down in
a practical proof of what women's work is
worth, and for 11 years Iceland was at the
top of the league tables on gender equality.
Even so, an old lady asked Vigdís on the
huntsings if she was still a virgin.

As one gender studies professor tells Bjarni-
son, with just the right note of deprecia-
tion: "Between heaven and hell, we are, of
course, doing better than most places."
Flight Patterns

By Lynn Steger Strong

608 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $28.95.

"If you start here, you have to know that's where you have to stop." The start of Shipstead's book — her third, after "Seating Arrangements" in 2012 and "Antoniush Me" in 2014 — is thrilling and complicated, with many different threads laid out and back stories carefully and richly wrought; for the next 500-plus pages, I felt the fear I felt when a student's work starts strong, when other novels open high — knowing that, more often than not, lofty heights can't be sustained. But "Great Circle" stays high and maintains altitude. One might say it soars.

Shipstead's tale follows the story of two women. The first, Marian Graves, is one of the shipwrecked twins. Her decision to devote her life to flying is immediate and unreflecting: A biplane, "shrapnel and magnifi

"If you start here, you have to know that's where you have to stop." The start of Shipstead's book — her third, after "Seating Arrangements" in 2012 and "Antoniush Me" in 2014 — is thrilling and complicated, with many different threads laid out and back stories carefully and richly wrought; for the next 500-plus pages, I felt the fear I felt when a student's work starts strong, when other novels open high — knowing that, more often than not, lofty heights can't be sustained. But "Great Circle" stays high and maintains altitude. One might say it soars.

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This happens when Marian is 12 — "at an age when the future adult ratchets the wheels of itsbuckets of air, of its story." And, from that point on, a pilot is all she will ever want to be. It's one of those novelistic origin stories that do not leave space for questions, but Shipstead manages to pull it off.

The other main character (though her story doesn't take up the time or space that Marian's does) is Hadley Baxter, the recently shamed and fired star of a "Twilight"-esque series of movies, who is set to play Marian onscreen. In one of my favorite scenes, the movie is based in part on a journal found floating in its own life preserver in the Arctic, years after Marian's plane was lost at sea. Hadley is attempting to longitudinally circumnavigate the globe.

When we meet her, Hadley is on a path of self-destruction (as many of the best novelistic renditions of Hollywood starlets are). She is profoundly lonely, ill-advisedly in love with her former co-star's (and former boyfriend's) married agent. She might also have a crush on the movie's backer. Moods ensue.

Told in the first person — Marian's sections are told in the third — Hadley's share of the novel offers an intimate and biting point of view, combining the worn-out, jaded shen of Hollywood with the vulnerability of a girl attempting to leave her old self behind. Here's Hadley, describing lying in bed with her then-boyfriend's agent, while the boyfriend waits for them to join him at a restaurant: "We'd had sex, but we were lying there talking, making those first big careless gloved excavations when something about someone is new and unknown, before you have to get out your little picks and brushes, work tediously around the fragile buried stuff."

Marian's twin brother, Jamie — a sensitive, vegetarian, animal-loving painter — is another character we care for. So is their ne'er-do-well gambler painter alcoholic uncle, who took them in when their father went to prison and when he decided not to parent after his release. While she's still a teenager, Marian marries a wealthy bootlegger; their relationship is oppressive and turns violent, prompting her to escape to Alaska, where she joins an all-women's contingent of pilots during World War II. She will find love there, and it will be more dangerous and risky than the flights. There will also be immense loss.

"Great Circle" can sometimes feel a bit baggy, but that seems to be Shipstead's invention. This is a book explicitly invested in sweep. Here's Marian, in her journal: "I wish to measure my life against the dimensions of the planet?", and Jamie, on his art: "I've started to think what I really want to paint is the too-bigness."

It's a novel filled with the back stories of tangential characters. We have an overlay of Charles Lindbergh's story; we track some of Amelia Earhart's life events and voyages. We get "An Incomplete History of Missoula, Montana" that opens with the phrase "Fifteen thousand years ago."

But this far-ranging breadth is as much the project of this novel as any of these individual lives — including all the ways each life exists within the context of so many others, the way the natural world informs and forms us, all the ways we are still only and particularly ourselves.

Novels are about parts, but then the parts have to work together to create a whole. Being perhaps a less ambitious novelist than Shipstead, I kept thinking of all the other novels that might live inside this one. What's so impressive is how deeply we come to care about each of these people, and how the shape and texture of each of their stories collide to build a story all its own. The ending manages to pull each thread in a way that feels both thrilling and inevitable.

At a moment when so many novels seem invested in subverting form, "Great Circle" follows in a long tradition of Big Sweeping Narratives. I hope we always have literature that forces us to reconsider what the form can hold, but also: One of the many things that novels can offer is an immensible sense of pleasure, a sense that something you've seen done before is being done so well that it feels newly and uniquely alive.

"Great Circle" grasps for and ultimately reaches something extraordinary. It pulls off this feat through individual sentences and sensations — by getting each secondary and tertiary character right. In thinking about flight (and ambition and art), there is a suggestion that the larger the reach, the more necessary a stable foundation. Here we have an action-packed book rich with character, but it's at the level of the sentence and the scene, the small but unforgettably sustained detail, that books finally succeed or fail. In that, "Great Circle" is consistently, often breathtakingly, sound.

LYNN STEGER STRONG is the author of "Wane.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 45
ASSEMBLING COLUMNS is often an exercise in serendipity. For this one, I looked for works I thought would be wildly different from one another: a collection of short stories in translation, a debut about a single consciousness in multiple bodies, a young-adult techno-thriller, an Antarctic ghost story. But I was surprised to find, as I read my way through them, that they explored similar themes: adoption and child-rearing, intergenerational trauma, and characters who hunger for connection, community and belonging so powerfully that they transform their environments, on scales ranging from the municipal to the cosmic.

SARAH PINKERER’S WE ARE SATELLITES (Berkley, 385 pp., paper, $16) explores the far-reaching social implications of a new technology while staying deeply rooted in the day-to-day dynamics of a single family. Val and Julie are mothers to two children, David and Sophie; Val teaches at a private high school while Julie works for the office of her district’s congressional representative. At school, Val begins noticing students with small blue lights embedded in their temples; they’ve chosen to have a productivity-boosting device called a Pilot installed in their brains, allowing them to achieve a state “as close to actual multitasking as a person can currently get.” Teenage David desperately wants one in order to fit in, Sophie, who’s epileptic, can’t have one. Val hates the idea, while Julie’s cautiously curious about getting one herself. Over the course of a decade, we watch each member of the family grapple with the consequences of widespread Pilot adoption from their perspectives.

Pinkerer is a justly celebrated writer of short fiction, and while this is her second novel, it’s the first of hers I’ve read. I found myself second-guessing my desire to compare this novel’s texture to that of a short story; there are long silences between short chapters, significant narrative developments that are merely suggested or gestured toward rather than dwelled on at length. As it turns out, “We Are Satellites” was developed from two short stories featuring this family, and portions of those stories are woven through the novel. This isn’t a flaw, per se, until the very end, which feels less like a deliberate conclusion than like a zooming-out and shift away from the family’s activities and concerns; until that point, the book is taut and elegant, carefully introspected and thoughtfully explored.

I particularly enjoyed the mundanities of Val and Julie’s same-sex marriage, which the novel devotes little to address or make plot relevant in any way; all of Val and Julie’s problems are parenting problems, communication problems, not problems of justifying their relationship to the scrutiny of a bigoted society. Likewise, the sibling dynamics between the child Julie bore and the child she and Val adopted are carefully realized; the faultlines along which the family fractures have nothing to do with the presence or absence of shared DNA, and everything to do with the personalities of the individuals involved.

Naomi Krizter’s young-adult novel CHAOS ON CATNET (Tor Teen, 292 pp., $18.99) also depicts unusual family configurations with generosity and care. The worthy sequel to “Catfishing on CatNet” — which managed to be both a fantastic thriller and a phenomenally warm and kind bildungsroman — “Chaos” introduces new characters and a dark mirror to CheshireCat, the friendly sentient artificial intelligence from the first book who loves pictures of cats and helping people make friends on the internet. After spending years on the run from her abusive father, Steph is finally settling down in Minneapolis in hope of something like normal life: a long-distance relationship with her girlfriend, chattering with her CatNet friends, enrollment in a new school. Soon Steph betrays another recent arrival: Nell, a quiet girl raised in a Christian doomsday cult, living temporarily with her polymathic father and his partners because her mother’s gone missing under mysterious circumstances. Steph resolves to recruit CheshireCat to help. But CheshireCat is also trying to solve a mystery, having been approached by what seems like another sentient A.I. that is potentially responsible for engineered and escalating real-world mischief and disinformation in cities across the country.

“Chaos on CatNet” is deliciously readable, fully as fast-paced and heartfelt as its predecessor. Its flaws in comparison are minor: a less convincing villain and an abrupt ending that would have benefited from more emotional slack. But Krizter’s author’s note at the end is well worth reading; both in its own right and as context for the book’s truncation. “One of the interesting things about near-future science fiction is that sometimes you catch up to the future while you’re still writing it,” she says, before addressing the reality of revising a book in the Twin Cities while Minneapolis was on fire during mass protests and a pandemic. The overall slowness of publishing means that several of the books in this roundup include afterwords that try to bridge the gap between composition before 2020’s upheavals and revision or production throughout the year, offering a surreal glimpse into the limits of fiction.

River Solomon’s SORROWLAND (MC/Farrar, Strous and Giroux, $27) also features a Christian cult, but one that is run by two eccentric women. Both Scandia and her sister Helene are so thoroughly invested in their community that they systematically break the law to keep it running. Scandia, a pregnant Black teenager married to Cainland’s leader, escapes from the compound into the woods surrounding it, there she gives birth to twins, names them RV and Feral, and flees. Scandia, who rises from ritual rape, finds something else growing in her, possessing and unsettling her body by strange and painful degrees, and forcing her to sort out in a long, difficult journey to find answers and support for her condition.

Sorrowsand is a tremendous, riveting work, sinking deep, deep roots into the nightmare soil of American history in order to grow and feed something new. There’s a matter-of-fact ferocity to Vern’s voice, a need for confrontation and reckoning, and an absolute refusal of compounding half-truths in favor of furious integrity. The slow transformation she undergoes while parenting, traveling, and finding success is harrowing and profound, as she fights the horrors of her upbringing and pushes her limits to protect her own children from the physical and spiritual legacy Cainland has left in her.

This is Solomon’s third book, and it builds on thematic foundations sunk in “An Unkindness of Ghosts” and “The Dogs.” Like those, it is concerned with the haunting weight of history and its effects on queer Black bodies, it reckons, through a fantastical lens, with inherited traumas and the consolations and difficulties of building community. It’s far and away the most powerful of Solomon’s books yet, which
is saying something: its patient, rolling intensity is as defiant and devastating as its heroine.

ELLY BANG’S UNITY (Threepenny, 289 pp., paper, $16.95) brings us hundreds of years into a future that has weathered multiple apocalypses and is on the brink of an extinction-level war between political powers that operate from metropolises beneath the much-warmed Pacific. Danan’s been living in self-imposed underwater exile for five years — from the wrecked surface world and its dangers, but also from the vast, agglomerated consciousness of which she’s a small embittered part. But as tensions between the war’s belligerents, Epak and Norpak, reach a boiling point, Danan and her lover, Nooto, decide to risk heading for the blasted, inhospitable remnants of Arizina in search of the power and absolution of her whole, multiplied self. They employ the reluctant services of a haunted ex-necromancer named Alexti to get them there — but someone is hunting Danan and the larger consciousness she represents, and will stop at nothing to get to her.

“Unity” is an astonishing debut, twisty and startling, demonstrating both the disciplined development of a long-germinated project and the raw, dynamic flashes of an author’s early work. It shows intense interest in the distance between conversation and communions, the many overlapping and opposite meanings “unity” can contain: is unity a harmony of differences balanced together, or a pure homogeny? How can those differences be maintained, and what happens when they’re not? The book’s core concepts aren’t so much high as deep; it takes a few pages to get oriented within the premise, world-building and points of view, but it very quickly becomes an absorbing, thrilling ride.

SIMILAR INTERESTS in union and separation animate I’m WAITING for YOU! And Other Stories (Harper Voyager, 385 pp., $26.99) by Kim Bo-Young, a collection of four stories translated from the Korean by Sophie Bowman and Sung Ryu. The book is really two pairs of linked stories: “I’m Waiting for You” and “On My Way to You” open and close the collection, each telling one side of a groom and a bride’s struggle to meet each other at the correct time and place in order to marry, despite the vagaries of interstellar travel and relativity: “The Prophet of Corruption” and “That One Life” — set in a cosmic Dark Realm that contains our universe, and populated by entities that regard Earth as a school in which to experience embodiment — could be a single piece, with the latter functioning as an epilogue to the former. In addition to these, there are about 30 pages of notes: from Kim reflecting on each story, from the translators corresponding about friendship and art, and from a surprising final piece — the man who commissioned “I’m Waiting for You” as an unusual way of proposing to his partner, and the woman who said yes.

This is a book as much about the process of translation as it is about science fiction, Buddhism and how to live among people.

The lovers’ stories are as powerful and clear as the middle stories are difficult and wooly, but the middle stories offer a sort of key to the outer ones. While the being called Prophets who live in the Dark Realm are obsessed with preserving the virtues of merging and dividing, the star-crossed lovers of our near future are striving to come together while the world keeps them apart. The shape and intention of the stories, pairs that make up two wholes that are then explicated by notes, echo the conceits of cell division, DNA and quantum physics.

More simply put: While the outer stories are much more enjoyable and moving than the inner stories, they all benefit tremendously from the supplemental notes, and leave a reader feeling as if the purpose of the book was to showcase not so much a collection of narratives but the love and respect between several people working together, sharing their minds across languages and distance to beautiful, dizzying effect.

IN MANY WAYS, Angela Mi Young Hur’s RULADON (Eerdmans Books, 408 pp., $26.95) is also about translation: translation as physical movement, from Korea to the United States to Sweden to Antarctica; secret knowledge translated across languages and time; and translation as interpretation across genres, from folk tales and family history to experimental physics and poetry. Dr. Elsa Park has spent years trying to get as far away from her mother’s Korean myths as possible, and with them, her mother’s conviction that the women of their family are doomed to repeat the patterns of tragic folk tales: stories of girls stolen or sacrificed, lost and recovered. Elsa is determined to choose science over superstition, but while researching neutrinos — so-called ghost particles — in Antarctica, she succumbs to an old hallucination of ringing bells and a lovely, mysterious woman with red ribbons trailing from her long black braid. Thrown off balance, Elsa pivots her research toward reconciling the stories of her inheritance with her scientific work, in order to find a way into — and more crucially, a way out of — her mother’s tales.

Elsa’s voice is an elegant punch to the face, a series of refusals — of politeess, of fawning, of fellow feeling, of any intimacy separate from brutality. She’s sometimes shockingly, almost helplessly cruel to people attempting to be kind to her, as if speaking around a mouth full of broken glass. I found myself loving her for the messiness of her overlapping truths, the mixture of tenderness, fear, love and anger directed at her family, colleagues and would-be lovers.

Integral to “Folkhorn” is a sense of stories as both constitution and escape, of their capacity to trap people as much as they can present as protective representation as by erasure. When Elsa is young, her mother tells her that “our entire people have been telling the wrong stories, making a wretched mess of our history. . . . No wonder we’re all massacred, despised and occupations, war. . . . What kind of stories, I wonder, do the white countries tell of themselves?” Once Elsa is grown, she paraphrases her mother despite herself, arguing that “by limiting the neutri- nos’ story, we’ve constrained our own cosmic existence.”

“Folkhorn” loops in and out of itself like a ghost’s red-ribboned braids, like a woman’s voice harmonizing with its own echoes. It’s beautiful and hard and hungry, full of sharp, painful observations, tile-like clichés open like prickly pears and devouring their hearts.

Six new novels feature characters who hunger for connection so strongly that they transform their environments.

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It was only recently that I discovered the joy to be found in audiobooks. A few years ago, I found myself in Chile, facing a long drive through the middle of the night. David Grann’s ‘The Lost City of Z’ worked like a kind of narrative amphetamine, keeping my eyes open when everything I knew of physiology said I should have been shut. I’ve come back to audiobooks on every road trip since — and not only because they keep me alert. Rather, I’ve learned that my mind can actually be in two places at once; that my imagination thrives in the blankness of forward motion. Here are five new books to immerse yourself in through your summer travels, when all you have to do for hours is look ahead and listen.

What in your hair, sim on your face, sound-bearing self-reflection blasting out of the speakers? Trust me on this one. Jenny Offill’s Gone Girl, Again: Essays, Reflections, and Illustrations (HarperAudio, 3 hours, 42 minutes) is like one of those long showers during which you find yourself so lost in a flow state that, when you snap out of it, you forget whether or not you’ve even shampooed. Sim, who wrote ‘Everyman’s a Alien When It’s a Alien Too’ (under the pseudonym Jenny Offill), is as well known for his charming illustrations as he is for his ability to fit profundity into a 280-character tweet, so one might question audio as a medium for this collection of short, memetic entries. One would be wrong; Sim’s own voice brings a measured tone to each section that’s part friend, part unpretentious poet. Anything lost in the sketches is more than made up for in smart, highly personal spoken detail. Recipes as family history, heart-wrenching descriptions of basement apartments and biographies of special homeless all take on —


After spending so much time in the minds of men, it was refreshing to hear from a whole lot of women. According to its editor, the TV and film producer Amy Solomon, Notes from the Bathroom Line (HarperAudio, 6 hours, 43 minutes) was born out of a paucity of collections devoted to female comics. The scope of this book’s 150 names is certainly one way to make up for lost time. Entries run the gamut from a set of one-line responses to a single prompt (“I’m lie you’re told to get out of plans”) to slow-burning essays and clunky illustrations (in the audiobook’s accompanying PDF file). There’s a lot here and it’s not all for everyone. Some might not love the recurring staples of standup comedy (past breakups, therapy), or the more niche experiments (Alexandra Petri’s crack at a Hemingway-style ‘Star Wars’ story, or Cecily Strong’s extremely thorough instructions for her funeral, involving a Jet Ski). But that’s OK; the variety is kind of the point. Especially in an iPod format. “Notes. From. Bathroom. Line.”

Of course, as we learned last year, there are times when escapist isn’t the answer; sometimes you have to stare directly into the void. In There’s a Revolution Outside, My Love (Random House Audio, 9 hours, 18 minutes), the Pulitzer Prize winner and former national poet laureate Tracy K. Smith and the literary editor John Freeman compile 40 dispatches from what Héctor Tobar calls “a generational uprising.” These testimonies from professors, poets, activists and activists are centered on last summer’s protests against the police killings of Black people, but they forge connections between many countries and their crises. These are histories that link the ‘Freedom Summer’ of the 1960s that of 2020; Minnesota to Haiti; the disproportionate effect of Covid on communities of color in incarceration and police overreach; letters from mothers to daughters to letters from sons to fathers. It’s not an easy listen, but it is important. There are calls to action (Randall Kennedy): “To the season for toppling Confederate monuments” and outbursts of frustration (“I am thinking about writing a prayer song… If I say it today, I think I’ll say it every day. ‘You cannot blame me for wanting to watch my child breathe all night.’”)

This book is a masterclass of grief, anger, fear and confusion, with glimmers of gratitude and hope: a comprehensive emotional document of a moment.

If there’s nowhere to pull over and again to process what you just heard, there are also plenty of more bite-size stories to choose from. Part of the audiobook’s “Words = Music” series, Yo-Yo Ma’s Beginning Mind (HarperAudio, 1 hour, 22 minutes) is available to download free. Ma is mostly known for two things: being very good at playing the cello and being a very nice guy. In March, he surprised soloists at a vaccine site when he spent his post-shot observation time playing an impromptu concert. The, after many live-streamed performances from his home over the course of the pandemic, in keeping with the musician’s reputation, ‘Beginner’s Mind’ feels like an intimate salut to a churchy and approachable virtuoso. Music seems under and in between stories of his upbringing in Paris and his move, still by childhood, to the United States. As a young cellist he traveled to Argentina and Brazil, places he says have had a profound effect on his understanding of music, and humanity; so have the other places he’s performed with, notably the pianist Kathryn Stott. The title encapsulates his wide-eyed approach to the world: equal parts unabashed, open and curious. As I listened, I found myself scribbling to transcribe the music he envisions into a playlist, in an attempt to do a little learning of my own.

IN THIS ISSUE: Art, Books, Music, Film, TV & Theater, Politics, and Culture.
EVERY DISASTER LEAVES behind a cloud of what ifs. With the Great War and the 1918 flu pandemic in recent memory, Thornton Wilder wondered why five travelers, on a Friday at noon 200 years earlier, were on the Bridge of San Luis Rey, in Peru, when the moorings broke. “Why,” he asked, “did this happen to those five?” Do we live and die by accident or according to some preordained plan?

In “Light Perpetual,” the English writer Francis Spufford poses a kindred disaster-haunted question. Five children vanish when a German V-2 rocket slams through the roof of a Woolworth’s in South London in 1944. “Shoppers, saucepans, ballistic missile: What’s wrong with this picture?” But what if the kids had survived, Spufford speculates, saved by mechanical error or “a hiccup in fuel deliveries”? And what if we had access to “some other version of the reef of time, where might-be and could-be and would-be still may be?”

Spufford’s vividly imagined novel is based on an actual bombing attack on an all too real Woolworth’s, in which 168 people died. But his five children — Jo and Valerie, Alec, Ben and Vernon — are entirely invented and so, of course, are their later lives. As in Michael Apted’s “Up” television documentary series, Spufford checks up on his cohort in increments — five years on and then in 15-year leaps — from 1949 to 2009, when the kids are verging on 70 and surveying the wreckage of divorce and death and mental health.

When we first meet them — all white, all in the same school in a working-class district — the children already show hints of their future lives. Entranced by sounds — a passing train is “a scurrying of rust brown at the hash’s edge” — Jo will be a singer-songwriter: “Always hovering at the edge of the boys’ games,” Valerie, her twin sister, will make fatal choices with men, marrying a homicidal neo-Nazi. Vern (a.k.a. Vermin), an overweight bully, will prey on “the ill, the old, the lonely” to build his ghastly empire, “selling back to people a sanitized, touristic version of the grim old city.” True to his name, smart-aleck Alec will follow his love of words into newsprint, work as a proofreader and is drawn into a doomed union drive amid the rise of Margaret Thatcher. And then there is Ben — poor, under-sized, hapless Ben — who will be institutionalized for schizophrenia, immobilized by Thorazine and liberated through the faith-fueled love of a high-strung Nigerian restaurant owner.

We are admitted to their inner worlds through third-person narration that closely follows their thoughts, sustained by all his vices (gluttony, snobbery, cruelty and the rest) at a Glyndebourne-like opera festival, Vern — the most vital as well as the villain of Spufford’s characters — isn’t satisfied. Why, then, with all this clever beauty laid out for him to banquet on, does Vern feel a thread of unanswerable tightening inside him, a faint faint signal, growing stronger, that something is wrong?"

A nonfiction writer turned novelist, Spufford is a stickler for carefully researched detail. He wrote a study of British polar exploration and a defense of Christian belief before scoring a major hit with “Golden Hill,” his exuberantly realized adventure novel set in pre-Revolutionary Manhattan. In “Light Perpetual,” he explains how the rocket’s burn-line opens “a thread-wide front of charge propagating outward from the electric detonator.” Before computers replace linotype machines, putting Alec out of a job, Spufford delivers a fervent ode to the older technology: “Not enough to smell, pristine, now-mined, brighter than the brightest silver, there build up in stacked lines of metal all the words that a moment before were only blurry typescript or pen and ink.”

Spufford is a fluent writer, bringing a deft touch to the emotional force fields of parents and their children. I think I was moved as Jo was when she first hears a version of one of her old, abandoned songs remixed, in loops and samples, by her son. But Spufford can also be overly controlling of his characters, mechanically matching them up with somehow partners or tethering their fates via unlikely coincidences. Vern, on the lookout for a sucker ripe for getting ripped off on a real estate deal, happens to knock on Alec’s door. Val’s vicious husband, Mike, his skinhead crew in tow, picks a fight with bewildered Ben, a ticket checker on a bus, and his Jamaican driver.

Equally intrusive is Spufford’s distractingly practiced of lacing his character’s thoughts with literary allusions. Would Val, on a seaside prowl for a new boyfriend, really find herself thinking, in words borrowed from “The Waste Land,” of “con- necting again on Margate sands, everything they permanently connect at home”? And did Spufford name Valerie after Eliot’s second wife? Would psychotic Ben, conveniently, be a reader of Hopkins (“Oh the mind, the mind has mountains. Cliffs of fall”)?

As Spufford’s title suggests, the narrative arc of “Light Perpetual” bends toward redemption. The good — two teachers, a trauma-helpline counselor, a selfless helper in a restaurant — are rewarded. The wick ed — Mike the Nazi and Vermin Taylor — are punished. But the supreme being, doing out just deserts to the five kids rescued from Woolworth’s, is of course Spufford himself. I wish he had cut his richly drawn characters a little more slack.”
Woman on the Verge

BY JENNIFER HAIGH

If someone asked me to describe myself in a single word, depraved is the one I would use." So says Joan, the barely binged, 30-something narrator of "Animal," the propulsive, fiercely confident debut novel by Lisa Taddeo. Voracious and obsessive, Joan is addicted to love and its analogues — in particular, the adoration of a man who happens to be married to someone else.

The novel opens with an actual bang: Joan's married boss, with whom she'd had a passionate affair, bursts into a restaurant where she's having dinner with another man and shoots himself in front of her. (No spoilers here: It literally happens in the first paragraph.) The dead man is Vic, the avuncular creative director of the Manhattan ad agency where Joan works, a besotted sugar daddy who mentored, promoted, bedded, spoiled and stalked her. The memory of their affair hangs like Spanish moss over the first half of the book.

"I can tell you a lot about sex with a man to whom you are not attracted," Joan says. "It becomes all about your own performance, your own body and how it looks on the outside, the way it moves above this man who, for you, is only a spectator." She found the affair expedient. "At a certain point, I began to rely on Vic for everything," she admits. "At first I enjoyed all the praise and then I started to feel like I deserved everything I got, that he had nothing to do with it." After Vic's death, Joan sets off on a cross-country road trip, purging briefly for a one-night stand with a traveling salesman she meets in Texas, whom she seduces simply because his name is John Ford. "Along the drive I had been wanting to sleep with a real cowboy, someone without social media," she explains.

Her journey ends in Southern California, where she rents a house overlooking Topanga Canyon. Joan, a quintessential New Yorker, is comically immune to its charms. "There were lots of horses in the canyon," she observes wryly. "Women with long braids rode them over rocks."

In Los Angeles her days are filled with rummaging and shopping. She gets a job as a bartender and meets a variety of men who want to sleep with her, including Lenny, her seedy landlord, and River, a 22-year-old dropout who lives in a yurt. She pops pills and answers text messages from Vic's angry widow, and goes out of her way to befuddle a woman named Alice — a composite of every woman she has ever known, either real or imagined. Joan's insatiable need for sex, it seems, is her escape from her own life.

The novel is a novel gone wrong — an elaborate con in which the author aims to dazzle with what she does well: In an age of digital narcissism, Taddeo shows us how to be a self-centered, yet funny, unapologetic, yet witty, unabashedly sexual woman. "Animal" is a story about trauma, how it even becomes a love story, and how it adds up to be a novel that will leave you breathless.

JENNIFER HAIGH'S NOVELS INCLUDE "MRS. KEIMBLE" AND "HEAT AND LIGHT." HER SIXTH, "MERCY STREET," WILL BE PUBLISHED NEXT FEBRUARY.
THE WILD SILENCE continues the story of Rayner Winn as she explores the natural world. Winn returns to her home in Wales, where she interviews a farmer and discovers the value of traditional farming practices.

As a journalist, Winn explores the science behind the practice of farming. She discovers that traditional farming can provide a more sustainable and ethical approach to agriculture.

Mommy Issues
BY JULIE LYTHCOTT-HAIMS

Inside the New Science of Our Ancient Maternal Instinct
Abigail Tucker
336 pp. Gallstone Books; $28

As a journalist and young mother, Abigail Tucker wanted scientific proof that the female species possesses an innate maternal instinct. Yet after she spoke with dozens of scientists around the world, the hope of a clear biochemical explanation for mothering crumbled like grackle crackers in Tucker’s hands. The researchers admitted that “variation in a woman’s genes can — albeit to a very, very slight degree — help explain her real-world behavior toward her child,” and

many years of struggle, she died. She recalls that her former stay-at-home mother coped by taking on a touching job and a paper route, a level of stress and sacrifice Tucker couldn’t fathom at the time. Then Tucker herself is the parent in question, a married working mother of two with another on the way who lives a bustling, cooperative city neighborhood for a large, old country home. She discovers rotting beans and windows painted shut. Without neighbors to support her, the fantasy of country life unravels. Next her husband, the New York Times columnist Ross Douthat (her “emotional button” and “economic motivator”), becomes seriously ill, and she is bewildered by financial instability and fear, all while she cares for preschoolders and is pregnant with their third child.

She is practically feeding herself when the baby arrives, and when depression follows, her new doctor utterly falls her. Tucker is at her finest in retelling this dark struggle. She dips back into the science, this time with a visit to the California National Primate Research Center at the University of California, Davis, where she observes macaques — our ancient ancestors — and learns that those that fare best have a maternal grandmother present. Her own mother becomes her rock. From this humbled perspective she summons a deep compassion for mothers who have to go without this social support. Whether it comes in the form of family, friends, or kind strangers, she now knows this key. She proposes policy reforms that can better buoy parents of all genders.

Tucker climbed that mountain of inconclusive science and found answers to the terrifying and ancient task of mothering only to find the answers clearer to home. And that’s what makes her tale ultimately redeemable and encouraging. If you can set aside your expectations of reading about scientific breakthroughs and allow yourself to willingly cross the border from exposition into memoir, you might just see the value in her project — the author herself — awaits you.
I SURVIVED my first horror films at slumber parties. There would be five or six girls camped out in sleeping bags before a TV set, clinging to each other, wet-the-bed terrified. This collective experience of horror created a strong bond between us. It was the 12-year-old-girl version of going to war: If we could make it through the Chucky franchise, we could make it through anything.

That sense of collective female triumph is what makes Grady Hendrix’s new novel, THE FINAL GIRLS SUPPORT GROUP (Berkley, 342 pp., $22) — to be published on July 13 — such a great read. Hendrix, whose previous novels were about the terrors of Ikeas and a group of literature-loving Southern moms who play vampires, snucks at writing horror humor. That seems like a contradiction until you open one of his books, where you’ll find bloody bout books and machete-wielding serial killers and decapitated heads in the fridge. His characters are funny and real, though at least one will definitely lose a limb at some point.

A “final girl” in pop-culture parlance, is the only person left at the end of a horror movie, the one who lives to tell the tale. The seven women in Hendrix’s novel, though, are not actors: They are all sole survivors of different massacres. Their stories have been blown up by the media and sold to Hollywood, but even as their lives have been appropriated and commodified, they continue to suffer unseen trauma. Not one of those final girls has recovered psychologically.

Tale Lymanne, who has developed a range of protective measures to stay safe. She keeps her hair cropped short because “long hair can get grabbed” and wears running shoes so she can escape at a moment’s notice. Her only friend is Fine, short for Final Plant, a pepper plant that serves as roommate and confidante. Lymanne leaves her heavily armored apartment — which has a “steel mesh box the size of a phone booth” around the front door — only to buy food, get her mail and go to group therapy.

And it is here, with the guidance of Dr. Carol Elliott, who has also built a career around their trauma, that the final girls are learning to heal. Kind. Of 36 years they have met, and for 36 years things have been or less remained in a state of anxious tension, until Adrienne, a Black woman who escaped a massacre at Camp Red Lake, is hunted down and killed by the murderer’s nephew. It is the moment all of them have feared: Someone knows about the group and is coming for them.

Though the final girls’ plight has all the scars of great horror fiction, there is an element of truth in their situation that will be recognizable to anyone who has experienced real trauma. These women, who have all suffered at the hands of unstable men, have had to adapt their lives around violence. Lymanne says it best when she notes, “Men don’t have to pay attention the way we do. Men die because they make mistakes. Women? We die because we’re female.”

That’s a sentiment you’ll find in Riley Sager’s thrillers, which explore the female psyche under extreme duress. “Final Girls,” published in 2017, is about a woman named Quincy Carpenter who goes on vacation with five friends and becomes, like Lymane, a final girl. Since then, Quincy has survived on Xanax and confrontations — she owns a baking company called Quincy’s Sweets that is an Instagram hit — but when another famous final girl is found dead, everything changes.

“Final Girls” is, like “The Final Girls Support Group,” deliciously scary, and I can think of nothing better than pairing them for a summer horror double-feature.

SAGER’S NEW NOVEL, SURVIVE THE NIGHT (Bottom, 336 pp., $27), which comes out on June 28, opens when Charlie-Jordan decides to drop out of school after her best friend, Maddy, is murdered by the “Campus Killer,” who has been slaughtering young women and taking a single tooth from each as a trophy. Charlie-pets her name and descends upon her ride-sharing board as fate would have it, a man named Josh Boxer, who claims to work on campus, happens to be driving her way and would be happy to share the cost of gas. And so one long and terrifying night begins.

Charlie, who’s mapping out how she suffers from periodic amnesia resulting from what she calls “movies in my mind” — stress-related hallucinations that eclipse reality. When she’s overwhelmed, her consciousness floods with images, “movie after movie after movie. Like they’re on the bill at a cineplex so tightly scheduled the ushers don’t even have time to sweep up the spilled popcorn between shows.” There are times she can’t tell if she’s living in reality or in a film. She may have seen the Campus Killer before he murdered her friend, but she cannot say for sure what he looked like, or if he was even real.

Trapped in a car with Josh, Charlie struggles as her mind punishes her with confusing narratives. Is this guy’s name really Josh? Does he work on campus or on campus? Is he actually driving to Akron, or is he planning to kill her? What is that weird noise and what is in his head? She does know one thing for sure — Maddy’s death is making her very, very angry. “Nobody tells women that once it is their turn, it is their life.” That the blame falls squarely on the awful men who do terrible things” and the “society that raises them, molds them, makes excuses for them.”

IT IS A SENTIMENT that holds true for Puritan New England, said the author of Chris Bohjalian’s harrowing new novel, LOOK OF THE WITCH (Doubleday, 416 pp., $25.95). It was a time when women were without financial or legal independence, and relied on their husbands or fathers to protect them. But what happened when a woman’s husband was the very threat she must escape? This question becomes, in the case of a master of master, Chris Bohjalian, an excruciating tale of a woman who insists upon the right to navigate her life, and the consequences when she does.

Mary Deerfield, the daughter of a well-off Boston import, grows up with the daily shadow of her husband, Thomas, who at 45 is “not twice her age but close enough.” Because Thomas “keeps his anger inside his head,” and because Mary has never been able to live up to what is expected of her, she is unable to harm with impunity. But after he drives a three-pronged fork into her hand, Mary returns to her parents’ home and, with their help, petitions for divorce.

The folk plays a vital role in the story. Folk songs are often regarded as suspicious by the colonists; their resemblance to Satan’s trident gave them an air of evil. Needless of the stigma, Mary’s father gives her a few forks, setting the stage for her downfall. A servant accuses Mary of burying the forks in her garden, a sure sign she’s a witch.

At the novel’s dark center is Thomas, a terrifying, vindictive brute who has essentially imprisoned Mary. Even after she’s petitioned for divorce, she must live in his house, where he rapes and threatens to kill her. The divorce hinges on the question of whether Mary’s character is that of her husband’s; she must prove she isn’t even with the Devil. She is left with the perplexing question: “Where in the Commandments did the Lord God forbid a man from stealing his wife? Murder was a sin; sticking a fork in one’s wife was … what?”

WHILE IT’S IN the present, there are similar power dynamics at play in Melissa Marr’s chilling debut novel, SHATTER (Berkley, 360 pp., paper, $17.95). Beth, a pretty, serene
The first cookbook from New York Times Cooking

No recipes. You don't need them.

"Join me in cooking this new, improvisational way, without recipes." —Sam Sifton

Horror stories can bond people.

In Cynthia Pelayo’s modern-day retelling of the Pied Piper legend, *Children of Chicago* (Abrams, 312 pp., $26), Lauren Medina is 14 years old when her 9-year-old sister, Marie, somehow disappears in a lagoon in Humboldt Park; a book of Grimm’s fairy tales is found at the water’s edge. Lauren, who was supposed to be watching Marie, is discovered nearby — barefoot, her jacket missing, trembling from the cold, with no idea what happened. The tragedy has haunted her for years. When another child dies at Humboldt Park, Lauren, now a police detective, is thrust back into the nightmare of what happened to her sister. The killer, a mysterious figure dressed in black, is called the Pied Piper after the legend about the legendary figure who rid the town of Hamelin of its rats by playing hypnotic music on his flute. When the mayor refuses to pay the Piper, he played another tune and led away the town’s children. The children of Chicago, it seems, are being taken by a modern-day modern-day.

Fairy tales are the thread that connects Lauren to everyone she has loved: her ex-husband, Robert, teaches folklore and fairy tales, and her father — a detective who grooms her for her job — has locked away terrible secrets. His mind, “like Bluebeard’s castle,” is “full of rooms filled with blood.” The Pied Piper’s return is signaled by visions in Lauren, both literal — “time to pay the piper” is spray-painted on trees and trash cans — and through a series of terrifying happenings: She hears eerie music and glass cracking, sees visions of a decapitated boy, and watches her sister appear hanging from the ceiling fan with “a rope tied around her neck. Eyes bulging. Hair dripping wet. Her white polo shirt and khaki skirt — the school uniform she dreamed in. Soaked.”

At the heart of the mystery is a single black page from an old book, filled with “shimmering golden script.” It harms all who come into contact with it, and has the power to spread the Piper’s reach in ways that terrify Lauren.

Pelayo references Robert Browning’s poem “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” and in that poem we find a character much like Lauren Medina: a survivor who experienced the music of the Piper, and who followed for a time, but was left behind, friendless, with haunting memories and a sense of loss.

And in after years, if you would blame
Him sadness, he was used to say,
—It’s dull in our town since my pipes went left.
I can’t forget that I’m bereft
Of all the pleasant sights they see,
Which the Piper also promised me.
As it turns out, the Piper’s promise is Lauren’s worst nightmare.
FOLK MUSIC is a form of memory: Songs from other times and places summon our collective past. So it’s strange that Beryl Thompson, known for updating British folk music in the 1960s, begins this memoir by resisting memory: “I don’t want to re-
member, but now it is time to think back. The arrow is rising through the air and speeding towards its appointed target.”

Thompson was born in London in 1949 and was playing guitar professionally by age 18. His early work — four years with Fairport Convention; 10 years with his first wife, Linda — has been gone over obsess-
ively. The kooky folk-rocker he pioneered has been treated superbly in Joe Boyd’s “White Bicycle” (2006) and Rob Young’s “Electric Eden” (2016). Writing of this memoir was interrupted by the suicide of his co-author, Scott Timberg, in 2019. Yet “Beeswing” is wry, un-pandering, anti-ob-
litigatory. Because the sound Thompson created with Fairport was rooted in con-

women in evening gowns. There was a fa-
mous sausage sandwich stall in one corner of the market square, and there, at around 11 p.m., the three cultures would collide.”

Fairport made five records in three years, going progressively deeper into British traditional music: murder ballads, laments, jigs, reels. They lived in an 18th-


BEEESWING

By Richard Thompson with Scott Timberg
Illustrated. 256 pp. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. $27.95.

1967 to 1975: the high times of electric folk; a post-gig motorway crash that took the lives of Fairport’s drummer and his own girlfriend; the quietly epochal records he started making with Linda a few years later; and their conversion to Islam, which led them to withdraw to Suffolk and prompted him to go on pilgrimage to Mecca — and to the publication of the book — as he ruefully observes, “The niche remained a niche” — the book’s period accent makes it feel fresh and exploratory.

Richard Thompson was born in 1936.

LONDON’s openairgoers would collide with ‘hippies dressed as deranged peacocks’ around 11 o’clock at night, ing audience that consumed less and went out to concert less.” The change appeared a development that shapes our present: the ubiquity of recorded music. “I find it hard to fight it off . . . I love to put on one track, crank it up, give it my full attention — and then I can be nourished for the day.”

The author’s style is blunt, unpretentious and brisk; he knows how to move things along entertainingly. “Hollywood Eden” brings the lost humanity of the record business vividly back to life. The era he explores, however, was as fragile as the perfect wave. A 1968 car crash disabled Jan Berry. The personal lives of the Mamas and the Papas and the Byrds’ group was short-lived. The Beach Boy Dennis Wilson would eventually drown in a drunken drive into the Marina del Rey harbor. Some of the con-

vertibles had turned quaint, but in this book, their coolness is restored.

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photographic PROOF—OF-COUPLeY-COURTENey-Thompson, MicHAEl-OurArchives/GEPplY ImAgeS
JOHN HARTFORD ARMSTRONG was a Black conjurer. In the 1920s and ’30s, he traveled up and down the Eastern Seaboard performing magic tricks for Black audiences that would pack into churches to watch him make things disappear. One of the highlights of his show was his daughter, Ellen Armstrong, who joined as her fa- ther’s assistant when she was just 6 years old. Later she developed her own bit, zigzagging through the crowd professing to be a mind reader. She’d touch people’s heads and claim to know what they were thinking about the person sitting next to them. Ellen’s father, known as the “King of the Colored Conjurers,” died suddenly in 1939 when she was 25. Everyone expected the show to end, but Ellen kept it going for another 30 years. Perhaps it was her most impressive trick.

Ellen Armstrong is one of multiple ex-traordinary Black performers whose lives are chronicled by Haif Abdurrahq in his new book, “A Little Devil in America: Notes in Praise of Black Performance.” In it, this poet, cultural critic, essayist and music buff uses the tales of Black perform- ers to make a profound cultural point about America. The book is also a candid self-portrait of Abdurrahq’s ex- perience as a Black man, written with sincer- ity and emotion.

Sun Ra, the count-bass composer, is among the Black performers featured in Abdurrahq’s book. He was born Herman Poole Blount in 1914 Birmingham, Ala., and named after another popular Black magi- cian of the era. Sun Ra’s music, the book explains, is the sound of the cosmos. He and Black man, Black Herman’s main act was being buried alive. And apparently he was so good at it that when he died, on stage in 1914, no one in the audience believed he was truly dead. Sun Ra wasn’t a magician; he did claim he had experience. But he was good at it. What he did claim to have experience on the other side. In his case that meant in space. He liked to tell people he had been ab- duced by aliens who sent him back down to Earth to “speak through music.” His mus- sic became a conduit for Black people and the cosmos. You run out of language to ex- plain the avalanche of anguish. I feel when faced with this world, and so it can’t make sense of this planet, I’m better off imagin- ing another.” Abdurrahq writes.

Josephine Baker was earthbound, but no less remarkable in Abdurrahq’s eyes. She dropped out of school, became a wait-ress and performed on street corners hop- ing for a big break. At times she was so broke she would rummage through garbage for food and shelter. She eventual- ly made her way to Paris at 18, when the city was still in love with jazz and Black cul- ture. And yet what fascinates Abdurrahq about Baker is what happened after her success. Baker became a spy for the French Resistance during World War II, helping to send weapons and planes to Britain and using her charm to get men in power to reveal intelligence to her. America couldn’t offer her a big enough role. So in Paris, “she crafted the version of her- self that felt most true to what she wanted.”

Baker and Sun Ra are both well-known Black artists, but Abdurrahq also peppers his book with less familiar examples of great Black performers. William Henry Lane, a.k.a. Master Juba, was an enter- tainer with the ability to mimic any dance move he laid his eyes on. When Charles Dickens caught his act during a visit to America, he called him “the greatest danc- er known.” So when P.E. Barnum needed replacement for an Irish-American clog dancer in one of his minstrel shows, Mas- ter Juba got the gig, reciting the white man’s words, which he had ripped off from African dance anyway. The clog dance never got over being replaced by a Black man and frequently challenged, Juba in dance competitions. Of course, Master Juba always won.

The irony of a black man performing in blackface for so long that he believed he was better at “Negro music” than white “Negroes” is not lost on Abdurrahq. “There will always be an audience wanting a Black face, but not necessarily a Black person,” he writes. And even when the au- dience fighting for Blackness in his basement for the wrong reasons. Dave Chapelle walked away at the height of his career when he noticed white people laughing during his set. Abdurrahq notes that this has never been a shortage of Black people will- ing to perform their Blackness for the right audience. Bert Williams, the vaudeville-co- median, wore blackface to get at a job at the Ziegfeld Follies, performing his Blackness so well that white critics said he was “tran- scended race” and seemed “almost detached from his race altogether.” Abdurrahq recalls an episode of “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” in which Carlton is re- jected from a Black fraternity by its presi- dent because he is “Not Like the Other Blacks.” Abdurrahq points out that by the end of the series, the audience is left won- dering if it is Carlton, the Tom Jones-loving prep, or the dashiki-wearing fraternity president who is the one performing his Blackness.

Here’s where the book gets more inter- esting. Abdurrahq acknowledges that he knows what it’s like to be in Carlton’s posi- tion and “diluted from a specific set of Blackness.” The more challenging issue, he confesses, is that he has also been the fraternity president, forcing other Black people to how to his expectations when, as he puts it, “we are all outside the borders of someone else’s idea of what Blackness is.” It’s one of the more powerful observa- tions in the book, and it’s reinforced by each of the lives Abdurrahq captures so well. “The problem is that there is no way to prove oneself Black enough for every type of Black identity in the States, let alone the world,” he writes. It’s a lonely proposition and Abdurrahq doesn’t pre- tend to have any solutions. Rather, he is left thinking “how crucial it is to love Black people even when feeling indicted by them. Even when that indictment is not out of love (which of course it sometimes is), but out of them assuming you for a standard you are not capable of rising to.”

Abdurrahq has written an important book on the transformative power of that kind of love. Where it falters are the mo- ments when he yanks the reader from one pop culture reference to the next at break- neck speed, jumping from astrology and the moon to Michael Jackson and the moonwalk; spacesuits and Patti LaBelle to space travel and Billy Dee Williams; 400

ounces and Afroturism to Travon Mar- tine and the Columbia shuttle disaster.

Whiphop may occur, but it’s worth fol- lowing along. Those not interested in Ab- durrahq’s musings on “Green Book” and Alhamay may find themselves moved by his sching writing on his family—leading to the book’s devastating final chapter—and particularly his mother, whose death he also wrote about in a previous book.

Here he describes the way she laughed and how he could tell her mood by the way her steps carried through their home in Co- lumbus, Ohio. He remembers watching her taking off her hijab and picking her black Afro until it was big enough to look “like a whole black planet.” Her presence acts as a sort of spirit guide. She is joined by Don Cornelius, the creator of “Soul Train,” who died by suicide in 2012.

Before he started “Soul Train,” Cornelius was a journalist who understood that mu- sic was the backbone of the civil rights movement and saw his show as a place where its ideas might evolve. Abdurrahq recounts watching reruns and studying the legendary “Soul Train” Line, in which dancers shuffled and twisted, flipped and drifted in between two solid lines of fellow dancers clapping their hands and waiting for their turn to show out. The “Soul Train” Line is the ultimate Black performance in Abdurrahq’s book; “Black people pushing other Black people forward to some bound- less and joyful evil.”

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
IN THE early 1990s, during the peak of the AIDS crisis, the writer Daniel Garrett founded Other Countries, a workshop for Black queer writers that would publish three anthologies of poetry, essays and visual art focused on the complex lived experiences of Black queer people. In his introduction to the collective’s second volume, “Sto- journer: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS,” Garrett noted that the collective’s works were of critical importance because they were creating culture. Garrett continued with a striking assertion: “We are ex- periencing ourselves as a people, and shaping the consciousness of ourselves as a people. We are creating ourselves.” Nearly three decades later, Brian Broome’s debut memoir, “Punch Me Up to the Gods,” continues that Black, queer, writerly work of self-creation.

“Punch Me Up to the Gods” is a coming-of-age story that explores Black manhood and queerness in the Rust Belt. The title of the book is a reference to the ways that Black boys are often socialized into rigid conceptions of manhood—sometimes by the use of violence. “Any Black boy who did not sign his name was simply what we termed to be punch-back up to God to be remade, reshaped,” Broome writes. With this book, Broome hopes to counter the forces that push by exploring the beauty of queer Black manhood, while offering a new way to write about that beauty.

“Punch Me Up to the Gods” opens with, and is framed around, Gwendolyn Brooks’s nod to Black manhood, “We Real Cool,” but Broome ultimately resists what the poem says about masculinity. “What- ever it was, I already knew by 10 years old that I didn’t have it.” Broome laments. Instead, he argues that whatever “it” is—be it coolness or masculinity or manhood—isn’t worth our devotion.

Broome, who is a Pittsburgh-based poet and screenwriter, refuses to parse down his interrogation of manhood, and he offers up his own life as a window, writing with lyricism, vivacity and unflinching honesty as he ushers readers through the stages of his becoming. But he is not the only character in his memoir. He places the story of his past coming-of-age with a present-day scene that he witnesses of a young Black child named Taun being berated by his father. “As Taun’s father’s voice becomes louder, demanding that the boy stop cry- ing, all I want to do is pick the boy up to make sure he’s all right.” As chapters shift from past Broome to present Taun, the book establishes a metanarrative about the routes some Black boys must travel to reach self-realization, to reach freedom. The book explores themes that are also explored in contemporary memoirs by Black gay writers, like Casey Gerald’s “There Will Be No Miracles Here” and Saeed Jones’s “How We Fight for Our Lives,” themes of escape, journeying and self-discovery. Broome is writing, how- ever, from the perspective of a Black gay man who came up in the generation before Jones and Gerald. And his writing is as lu- cid, heart-rending and, on occasion, hilar- ious, as it is necessary.

BROOME EXPOSES WITH ELEGANT DETAIL THE MALNUTRITION THAT EATS AWAY AT BLACK BOYS because of the pressures they face to become the ideal image of manhood—even if the consequence of that rehashing is the an- nihilation of Black boys’ spirits. Broome describes that angst as an “unadulterated ache,” and with “Punch Me Up to the Gods,” he sets out to document and—ulti- mately—heal that pain.

He ends the book at the conclusion of a trip to France, where he pays homage to James Baldwin, who died in the country in 1987. Broome admits, “I am no James Bal- win.” And he is right. He is no Baldwin. He is Brian Broome, and he has arrived on the page by way of an act of self-invention.

“Punch Me Up to the Gods” feels like a gift. There will come a day when some Black child like Taun will have read Broome’s masterwork and possibly com- mit to staying alive because of Broome’s words. They will tell him that “Punch Me Up to the Gods” is a testament to the insur- gent and irrefragable power of Black queer being. That it reveals that Black queer men are our own best creations. 

IN LESS THAN FIVE YEARS, I am an expert in horror movies in Times Square. It’s great to be with like-minded people choosing advice to imperiled B actor onstage. DO NOT go into that basement. Unfortunately, reading Nancy Jo Sales’s latest, a fact-busting but harrowing account of our relationship to damsels in distress, dating apps, does not offer the same pleasure. Because this is real life—and worse, this is the author’s real life. I’ve just spent hours murning: Nancy, don’t text Kim, Nancy, honey, do it, be strong. Nothing, Personal, which is very per- sonal, explores what Sales calls “the corpo- rate takeover of dating.” Apps like Tinder, Grindr, Bumble and OkCupid have facili- tated—or exploited—the most basic of hu- man needs: the desire to connect. Or do they? Because that is Sales’s star- tling premise: that apps are designed to keep us hooked while preventing us from finding love. The swiping, the likes, the pressure not to appear needy—all are making us unhappy. This buffet of human- ity on our little screens is precisely what warms us: We’re full, but we keep eat- ing.

Sales (who also directed and wrote “Swiped,” an HBO documentary on this subject) has taken a deep dive into app use, and the results of her research are not as pretty as that could promise. The book that took you an hour to set up. To cite just one example, Sales connects a 2018 study on the rise in levels of loneliness among Generation Z and millennials to dating apps. And it’s not just the apps that are the culprits. It’s the phones themselves. Quoting the French philospher Paul Virilio, who wrote, “When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck.” Sales ruefully notes, “Smart- phones were the ship and shipwreck of re- lationships. They had made it easier to be in touch, and yet more difficult to emotionally connect.”

Sales combines rich reporting with her own dating app tales. She recently recog- nizes that she is signs of her romantic nature. Her readers might perceive—some- times. There are anonymous encounters, which Sales writes about humorously and exultantly (she has a gift for sex, scenes). Her lodestar is Abel, a mid-20s hipster she met on an app. Raven-haired, sinewy, with some nebulous construction job for a fash- ion company, he spends the three years of their “situational” drinking, smoking, disappearing, having nothing much to say, asking for money and being great in bed.

After putting in several months that she was interested in casual sex, Sales gets inundat- ed with K-rated pictures. Her conclusion: “Exercising your sexual independence by expressing your desire for a casual encoun- ter through the use of this technology could actually lead to more sexist behavior from men, many of whom would see it as an oppor- tunity to treat you as an object.”

Here’s another way of looking at it. Ad- Vertising for casual sex might mean that the people who answer are—wait for it— looking for casual sex. Similarly, Sales blames the companies that produce these apps for not taking the threat of sexual as- sault seriously, even as apps like Tinder have invested in the equivalent of panic buttons, where you can alert the police in case you find yourself in a bad situation. She seems outraged that we live in a cul- ture where you can’t enjoy risk-free en- counters with strangers without fear of be- ing hurt—and PS, don’t shout-shame me for wanting this.

I don’t. But I kept thinking: Pick a lane. Have sex with hookups, embrace the thrill, but accept that there’s risk and misogyny aplenty. In her interviews, Sales talks the complaints of women to heart, but not men’s. Women who want casual sex are scrumbles. Women who want real relationships are being cheated of them. And men who want them...where are they? Virtu- ally nonexistent here.

Sales gets props for not whitewashing the story. After a denouement with Abel that is both utterly predictable (to everyone but Sales) and depressing, she pivots to concentrating on the joy of more-time with her daughter, Zazie—“the true love of my life”—a wise, loving girl whom Sales chose to have as a single mother. I adored Zazie. You will too.

In the course of reading this book I was sending passages to my Tinder-fad in 10- year-old son, expecting him to be as un- fazed as I was. “Mom, this is just as normal,” he said. “It’s the way people meet today.” Then he asked for Sales’s number.

DARRELL M. MOORE is the author of “No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America.”
OLIVIA LAING is known for meandering, critical yet personal nonfiction, drawing upon the lives and work of others to explore a central question, from loneliness to addiction. In “Everybody”—her sixth book, following her 2016 novel, “Cruel”—and last year’s essay collection, “Funny Weather”—Laing’s concern is the human body and its relationship to freedom. Disturbed by the refugee crisis (those “hostile bodies . . . penned in camps from which they would potentially never escape”) and inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, in 2016 Laing came to the curiously naïve realization that the “painful, inclining progress” of 20th-century liberation movements had been “rapidly reversed.” Eager to understand the forces that “limit bodily freedom,” Laing turned to Wilhelm Reich, a 20th-century Austrian psychoanalyst most famous for his interest in orgasms. “What Reich wanted to understand was the body itself,” Laing explains. “Why it’s so difficult to inhabit, why you might want to escape or subdue it, why it remains a naked source of power, even now.” Laing shares this admirable desire and goes to great lengths to fulfill it. The result, however, is a well-intentioned yet ultimately exasperating book that would have been well served by the very thing it resists: clarifying constraints.

In eight chapters, Laing draws on a wide-ranging cast to explore the many ways the human body is managed by outside forces, and its myriad attempts to escape that management. Susan Sontag and Kathy Acker elucidate illness; Christopher Isherwood and Magnus Hirschfeld provide a look into the queer sanctuaries of Weimar Berlin; Andrea Dworkin and Angela Davis examine activism and sexual violence; Agnes Martin illumines the struggle to evade both gender and institutionalization; Malcolm X, Bayard Rustin and Edith Jacobson lend insight into imprisoned power; Philip Guston reverts the madness of the mob; Nina Simone helps us contemplate the uncertain future. Am I forgetting someone? Oh yes, and Laing herself, whose experiences as an herbalist, an environmental activist and a nonbinary person raised in a gay family in 1960s Britain occasionally illuminate the motivations behind this ambitious undertaking.

And of course there’s also Reich himself, yet another charismatic individual. Laing convincingly argues that he was more than just the sex-obsessed inventor of the orgone box, a kind of Faraday cage that promised health benefits. He was one of the first psychoanalysts to step out of his office and attend to the needs of working people. He coined the terms “sexual politics” and “the sexual revolution,” and, Laing writes, “functioned as a connector, drawing together many different aspects of the body.” But can one flawed man truly unite such a broad swath of subjects? While Reich’s work is most relevant to discussions of illness and sexual repression, while his experiences in Vienna and with the F.D.A. shed some light on the power of the state over the masses, Reich simply isn’t speaking to everyone in these pages. In previous nonfiction Laing has used physical journeys (to the River Ouse, to sites frequented by alcoholic writers) to structure her wandering insights, creating a tangible through-line. By comparison, Laing’s intellectual acknowledgement of this premise, Reich’s life and work fail as connective tissue, and feel more like a poorly considered premise.

Without this connective tissue, much of Laing’s analysis relies on transitional phrases that quickly sum up the topic at hand in order to move along to the next. But with so many ends to tie, Laing over-simplifies, relying on tongue-in-cheek turns of phrase that are ill suited to the gravity of her subjects. Referring to the global refugee crisis and Black Lives Matter movement amid the rise of repressive, right-wing movements in 2016, Laing writes: “The old bad news of bodily difference was everywhere again.” Surely Laing would agree that it’s not really the difference itself that’s the “bad news.” Of Malcolm X’s intellectual awakening in a prison
TIME WAS I COULD HAVE COVERED every queer romance novel put out by mainstream publishers and still have had room to spare in this column. Small and independent presses have been nurturing L.G.B.T.Q. romance authors forever, and digital self-publishing opened up still more doors, but up until very recently, the big traditional houses had far more queer villains than queer romance leads.

And then, for a great many reasons, and because of the work and passion of a great many people — something shifted.

It’s impossible to spot a sea change while you’re swimming in it. All I can tell you is that looking for multiple queer romance pairings used to feel like fighting against the tide, and now it feels more like a perfect summer wave rolling in and rushing around you.

We’ve still got the gay and lesbian press, and the independent authors on the genre’s innovative edge — but we also have the quirky princess contemporary with two Black women leads, and the Harlequin category romance where the alpha millionaire hero is gay and Asian, and a bisexual Jewish sex educator falling for a Reform rabbi, and a 17th-century dandy in sky-blue silk stealing the heart of a highwaywoman, and the young-but-cynical waitress desperately crushing on the hot girl on the subway who may actually have been trapped there since the 1970s — and that’s just in this column! There are two — two! — trans romances coming out later this year, and more gay and lesbian and bisexual characters in fall and winter, and I would call it an embarrassment of riches but what it really is, of course, is pride.

OLIVIA WAITE is the Book Review’s romance fiction columnist. She writes queer historical romance, fantasy and critical essays on the genre’s history and future.

below you’ll find six of this summer’s queer romances (and one straight one). They offer everything on the romance spectrum from sweet and sexy to rebellious, revolutionary and angry.

Casey McQuiston’s first book, “Red, White and Royal Bliss,” is a surprise in the romance between the grandson of a British monarch and the son of an American president. Her latest trade British princes for Brooklyn drag queens — the superior royalty, no question. ONE LAST STOP (St. Martin’s Griffin, 400 pp., $16) is about meeting someone attractive and mysterious on your daily subway commute — a girl, it turns out, who has been riding the train since the 1970s, thanks to a magical timeslip. But it’s also about loneliness, and being unmoored from normal time, and missing people you’ve lost, and dealing with generational trauma and fearing an unknowable future. It is an absolutely brilliant pandemic romance that never once mentions the pandemic.

The story throws knockout punches at the silences surrounding queer history and community. (Can it be a coincidence that the time gap between our girls spans the most devastating years of the AIDS crisis?) There are still too many L.G.B.T.Q. kids who grow up thinking they’re alone, isolated, too broken to be loved as they deserve.

McQuiston fights that on every page, laying the struggles of the early movement with those of this moment. She takes a familiar romance trope, the first kiss that obliterates everything that came before, and turns it on its head to make something revolutionary and breathtaking. When June-Skisses August Landry, old memories come rushing back: girls she kissed in the rain, girls she fought with in other cities, in other decades.

This kiss is an un-obligitation. It brings back what has been stolen. I can’t imagine anything sweeter than that.

AND SPEAKING OF monochromes, both Alyssa Cole’s original Reluctant Royals series and its spinoff, Runaway Royals, explore hereditary rule and social responsibility. We see kings and queens of Black African kingdoms with unique religious and political traditions, as well as British dukes and European princes. Throughout the books, we catch glimpses of a shadowy organization called the World Federation of Monarchies — and in the latest installment, the institution’s junior investigator, Bazemaria Cetchewaier, takes center stage as she hunts for a lost heir to the matrilineal Mediterranean island kingdom of Ibarania.

Only problem is, the heir in question — Makeda Hicks — would prefer to stay lost.

The other Royals books have actual rulers (and spouses of rulers) coping with problems of power — but IN HOW TO FIND A PRINCESS (Avon, 388 pp., paper, $7.99), there is no power for our princess to claim. The whole heir hunt is a publicist stunt to boost tourism to Ibarania’s flagging economy: anyone who heeds her will have ceremonial duties but no ability to shape policy. Which makes sense, since this book is an Anastasia retelling, and the Runaway throne has been an empty one since the dawn of the last century.

The book is a briskly funny, scathing poke at the emptiness of royal pageantry, and Cole makes virtuoso use of the familiar rhythms of a romance arc. When Makeda decides she’ll make the trip to Ibarania hoping to prove she’s not actually their princess, I began watching for clues as to how she was going to change her mind about her destiny. Romance novels delight in thwarting their lead characters’ most determined plans: People swear they’ll never fall in love, that they’ll only have one memorable night’s fling, that they’ll never trust anyone ever again. But that means anyone can be transformed before a reader’s eyes. Darcy is in at the start of the book, but he doesn’t stay that way.

And here, a princess who dreads being recognized as a princess has something else happen instead. I won’t spoil the reveal, but it’s shocking and joyful and absolutely perfect.

EQUALLY SEDUCTIVE is EE Otton’s trans historical, THE COMPANION (EE Otton, 430 pp., paper, $11.95), where the secret is not just the book’s gender fluidity, but that Madeline, abandoned by the social gaud of literary circles in 1948 New York City to stay in the country with Victor, a friend of a friend and a fellow writer. Victor has a past with the gorgeous piece of trouble next door named Audrey, and Madeline finds herself inexplicably drawn to both men.

Some books would make Madeline choose, but not this one. This is a caring and comforting trans poly triad, where sources of harvest work, scrumptious midcentury meals and long walks in the woods alternate with some of the most heart-rending, gut-wrenching scenes I’ve seen in a while. There are books that are hot, with dark and dangerous edges, or with juicy frolics full of giggles and dirty talk — but this book is sexy: Everything is vintage garments being unsnapped and form-fitting clothing being adored and wearing our pelvises falling to the floor and every, one being comically generous with the organs. Otton’s prose is crisp and clear as water, but the reader is left guessing with the thrust. (And other appetites — if you handed this with a cookbook of Madeline’s recipes you would make a mint.)

FOR THOSE WHO WANT precisely the opposite of comfort for their romance reads, try Judith Litt’s HARD SELL (Carson Adonis, 272 pp., paper, $14.95), which is from Harlequin’s non-romantic L.G.B.T.Q.-specific line, one that bears a strong resemblance to classic category imprints like Presents and Desire. Which is to say: spooky and dazzling and hauntingly tense.
We have here a May-December romance between an alternative data millionaire and his best friend’s younger brother: There are work deadlines, family confrontations, illnesses, accidents and the absolute maximum angst at every moment. The book is a bad decisions buffet — which is precisely what a high-stakes category ought to be.

Along with the age gap, we have a grumpy-sunshine opposites attract setup, which is normally one of my favorite things, but which ended up reinforcing my sense of the younger character’s youth and adding a slight anachronism. So for me, the archetypes canceled one another out, but for readers who love the age gap as a central engine of tension — and I know you’re out there — I suspect the layered tropes might reinforce one another and double the emotional payoff. It’s always a little odd to be reading a book and thinking, “This is a perfect story for someone who is not me,” but variety is the spice of the sign of a robust genre, and I’m looking forward to seeing where this series goes.

In terms of opposites attracting, Roxie Dunan is becoming a go-to author. Her second book, the Intimacy Experiment (Benbella, 334 pages, $16.99) — the first time in years that I’ve read a book about love and empathy and deeper truths. If this sounds like philosophy or theology, that’s one of the pleasures of a romance that so richly uses Reform Judaism as a lens into its characters’ inward journeys. I’m always interested in romances exploring religion that do not fall under the Christian esophymism “inspirational romance” — and Danun’s book is at its very best when it’s connecting faith, trust, strength and love in complex ways.

Sometimes a romance separates sex from intimacy to explore the space between. In Cecilia Grant’s “A Lady Avenged,” for instance, the initial plan is for the hero to get pregnant: The sex starts early and the romantic feelings follow later. “The Intimacy Experiment” flips this script: The blunt bisexual sex educator, Naanu, and a hot thoughtful rabbi named Ethan hold off from touching for a good, long, asching while, even though both are experienced and Naima in particular has always found sex to be simple and easy. There’s a lovely scene where she realizes she doesn’t want sex yet, and doesn’t know why, and she and Ethan work out what that means in a way that makes them both feel more emotionally invested even though the physical stuff is on pause.

It’s a powerful, thoughtful moment in an ambitious and rewarding story.

Our next book: not as subtle. Romance readers often discuss historical romances as a kind of shared fantasy setting full of implausible dukedoms brimming with abs and feminism: India Holton’s impossibly bountiful debut novel, The Wisteria Society of Lady Scoundrels (Berlino, 336 pages, $14.99), takes aim at that idea and blasts it out of the sky with a barrage of bloodthirsty charm. It’s the kind of book for which the word “rollingstock” was invented.

Do not be taken in by the sweetness of the cover: This story is so outrageously bitters that it ends up creating its own surreal logic. Of course a letter opener has a hidden rapier blade. Of course a respectable lady’s house in Mayfair is equipped with a flying spell and can say to Bath to hide emotions. Assassination contracts are as good as a letter of introduction, and stealing your target’s travel card is merely an attempt at flirtation (especially if she simultaneously steals your fountain pen).

And then everyone is in the air firing artillery at everyone else, and lies and treachery abound, and several people get repetitively and casually shot, stabbed, conumed, exploded and brainwashed and over an emerald crown.

This book has considered realism and put out the highest available window. Holton is handling as much fun in the English language will permit — the prose shifts constantly from silly to sublime and back, sometimes in the course of a single sentence. And somehow in all the melodrama and jokes and hilariously mangled literary references, there are moments of emotion that cut to the quick — the way a profound trauma experience can overcome you years later. The instant you know you’ve fallen in love with an acutely the person you shouldn’t. The moment you realize the way you’ve always solved problems has become its own problem, and now you have to find a way to unlearn it for your very survival. That last one, admittedly, does involve cannons, but it was very intense all the same.

Though set in alternate Victorian times — with an alternate Queen Victoria herself, no less — Holton’s book had me dreaming of the late 18th century on account of all the swashbuckling.

With the Querist Principles of Kit Webbi (three, 300 pages, $16.99), Cat Sebastian’s newest, we get the full Georgian-era experience: coffeehouses, lace cuffs, noblemen in pastel silks and ballad-worthy highwaymen whose shaving days are almost, almost behind them.

Like Holton’s, this book also features a chillingly villainous father, a life of crime and falling in love with someone you shouldn’t — but this is the realistic version, where pastel pants hurt, love can’t fix everything and the aristocracy is founded on and nourished by blood.

Highwayman, it turns out, is a pitch-perfect role for a querier historical hero. If you’re already risking your neck to steal purses and harry the gentry, you’d think nothing of risking your neck for someone else. You do, both Kit, our thief, and Percy, our silk-clad lord, have to make themselves vulnerable and learn how to trust. They are very good at doing this while precluding not to do it, which is great fun for the reader.

Romances have been equating goodness and nobility since forever, with characters discovering their true aristocratic origins to make sure no class boundaries were crossed in the making of a lineage (looking at you, Georgette Heyer). This story does the opposite: The noble lineage has been a fraud all along, and Percy has to come to grips with the idea of not being who he was raised to be — both in a financial and legal sense, as well as a moral one. The book does not do much to challenge class boundaries as dynamite the very idea of class itself, which is becoming a satisfying theme in Sebastian’s work. Laws that exist only to hurt people are unjust; systems that depend on people’s misery should be subverted and dismantled at every chance.

The right to love and be loved as we are is a compass that always points toward justice.
Dark Powers
BY THEO PADNOS

IN “PROOF OF LIFE,” Daniel Levin offers readers a cheeky bargain: Trust the story he relates, and you will turn away from the dark powers that have caused Syria to de-scend into the blood bath from which, after 10 years of fighting, it has yet to escape. The story goes like this: At an unspecified date in 2014, in a part of Syria controlled by ISIS and Al Qaeda, a blond, 27-year-old man disap- peared.

You can Google in vain for news of such a person; according to Levin, journalists cov- ering the region at the time never found out how (“straight off the honeycomb”) and dates to a table overlooking the strait. His Dublin companion, an extremely well-con- nected Saudi, makes some inquiries and ar-ranges for Levin to meet with a powerful Lebanese sheikh (code name: “the Sheikh”) in Beirut. In Beirut there is tea, another round of elaborate Middle Eastern hospitality and deep indifference to the lost man. Over many pages, the Sheikh philosophizes in his grand but vast way, Exhausted, Levin jets off to Amman. And so on.

In this book, now and then, certain phrases require careful parsing. On the opening pages, Levin promises a “search for a missing person in Syria.” But do those words mean that the search itself must take place in Syria? In this case, the closest the searcher comes to Syria is the Four Seasons in Amman. I like bargains as much as the next person, but Levin seems to have understood more about the dark powers in Syria. And I’m willing to believe that, from the vantage of the Four Seasons in Amman, the war in Syria could seem a game presided over by profiteers, in which every-one is on drugs and whose leaders only high belief in God and might even dress in a dress “The sexual overload triggered by adrenaline and fear was exhausting.”

PROOF OF LIFE
Twenty Days on the Hunt for a Missing Person in the Islamic State
By Daniel Levin

about this disappearance, though he knew about it right away because a well-connected friend of the disappeared person’s family summoned Levin to a restaurant in Paris, re-counted the story and pronounced himself at- ers’s never-ending war.

Levin’s search forces him to take up the path such men tread. Luckily, he shares their appreciation for the finer things in life. After lunch he meets with his pregnant wife in Paris (“this place has the best fish in town,” the friend says), Levin makes off to the Kempten- skil Hotel in Istria—a “gorgeous, former Ot- toman imperial palace on the Bosporus.” Here he is greeted by a waiter who brings

City of Light
BY FRANCISCO GOLDMAN

THEO PADNOS is the author of “Blindfold: A Memoir of Capture, Torture, and Enlighten- ment.”

FOLLOWING THE DEATH of my wife, Aura, who was fatally injured while body-surfing in Mexico, I received a signed copy of a grief memoir along with a personal note from its famous author, who advised, “Read lots of poetry.” Since then, I’ve passed that advice on, sometimes with a copy of the grief book I wrote. Early on, only poetry could give concrete expression to my lost love’s not-here-ness, and to raw grief. But that author and I both turned our struggles into verse. “The bereaved cannot communicate with the unbereaved,” is an oft-quoted sen- tence by Iris Murdoch, expressed by a character in “An Accidental Man,” who in the next sentence reflects, “only one is not bereaved for long.”

Poets often focus on whatever it might take to emerge from bereavement; however, ever long endured. In Gregory Curtis’s memo- ries, “Paris Without Her” inspired by the death of his wife of many years, Tracy, he describes “drowning in waves of grief.” But on the same page he declares, “I wanted to use memories of all our good times to try to recollect our past together with my future alone.” Memoirs of grief typically narrate a struggle to recover a sense of life’s mean- ing, through understanding, or will, or memory, especially of love.

PARIS WITHOUT HER
A Memoir
By Mireya Curtis

Curtis first sets eyes on Tracy on “a sunny spring day in 1974 at the shabby of- fices of Teen Magazine, then just one year old. The word was elegantly dressed and radi- antly beautiful, as she would all her life.” He left a charged current electrically, with his brain, and that intense, electric moment would give her power over me forever.”

Curtis was the editor of Teen Magazine, and later an author and a professor, but clearly his marriage and love for Tracy lay near the heart of her being. She seemed a wonderful woman and mother, with a gen- erous talent for life and beauty, who came late to a career as an interior decorator. In the book’s opening chapter, Curtis sketches their life in Austin, and the several trips to Paris that meant so much to them, before writing about Tracy’s excruciating death from cancer in 2011. There’s an obscene ab- surdity in etymologically naming, one instant to the next, from husband to wid- ow, a man feeling in all his being still mar- ried, but now weeded to death. Widowed at 66, Curtis sits in his apartment every night learning magic tricks by watching DVDs. As a replacement for a happy conjugal life, it seems that will have to do.

At the chapter jumps to 2013 and Paris, which as a widower he’s been regu- larly returning to. Curtis doesn’t offer much sustained focus on Tracy, as if inhib- ited by a sense of privacy, but he’s commit- ted to the idea that Paris represented their happiest selves: not a rejection of their “town-and-gown” lives in Austin, but one of alternative identities, even somewhat risqué, in a setting of aesthetic beauty and adventure, imbued with that city’s time-honored romance. Tracy years to be “filled by Paris.” This Paris is inevitably seamy and familiar, but Curtis’s descrip- tions are informative and closely observed, with cascades of precise detail.

It’s also an exclusively white Paris. Curtis describes the banlieues, where many immigrants live north of Paris, as “wretched,” and it’s left at that. I found it at times off-putting to be reading a book that por- trays contemporary Paris, so dynamically and complexly multiracial and multicultural, in that white-and-privileged way.

“Real grief,” however, that “horrible, ghastly panic” returns at the start of the book’s second half. Curtis’s struggle to overcome provides a new, urgent moment. Studies have found that widows and widowers from happy relationships face more severe mental and health problems than those from unhappy ones, and that for older, widowed men, one risk of persistent grief is increased mortality.

So when Curtis brings his private mourning into the Paris of the 1970s and 1980s, it conjures up a world of gardens and cafes, of romanticism, of the unfolding of love in Paris, and of the future. Curtis writes in his notes, “I treasure that old Paris: the one I knew. I loved its bars and cafes, its art and music, its gardens and parks, its architecture, its history. I loved its people, its character, its spirit. I loved its French way of life, its manners, its culture, its cuisine. I loved its particular light, its particular air, its particular climate. I loved its magic, its mystery, its beauty.”

Curtis then reconsidered, and decided against revisiting Paris in 2013, and so instead decided to write a book in which he reflected on Paris, and the city’s role in his life and his wife’s, in their marriage and in their death. As a replacement for a happy conjugal life, Curtis decided to write a book in which he reflected on Paris, and the city’s role in his life and his wife’s, in their marriage and in their death.
cheated by pooling my group with my younger sister’s, guilt of the sin of covetousness.

In “Revival Season,” her atmospheric, layered debut, Monica West probes that annual rite, when evangelicals are called to go forth and preach to all nations. West stirs her tale in a rich broth of religious aorist and personal betrayal. Each summer the Horthons, a Baptist family, trek in their minivan from their home in Texas to small towns scattered across the South, “bringing the word of God like manna to the starving.” Samuel, the patriarch, preaches the Gospel to crowds gathered in tents and truck chapels. West’s 15-year-old narrator, Miriam, watches in awe as her father lays his hands on the afflicted, healing them.

She and the rest of her family — her stow mother, Joanne; her younger siblings, Caleb, a youth aspiring to the cloth, and Hannah, doomed by select pain — a group with a secret: During the previous summer, Samuel struck a pregnant teenager who had sought his counsel. A current of violence thrums through him. In North Carolina, he begets a blind man who acquires him of a fraud, an act condoned off by deacons but surreptitiously observed by his daughter, whose halo worship leaks from her like helium from a balloon. West evokes Miriam’s naiveté — and awakening — to brilliant effect. “Papa knew all the verses in the Bible and could recite them on command,” she says. “He could make small talk about everything, from weather to car engines. Now he sat in the middle of the sagging mattress, completely silent.”

Word of the pastor’s death gets around. After the tour stalls, the Horthors return to Texas, each reeling from the implosion of this summer. Samuel peripherally sheds his home flock but his demons plague him; congregants decamp for other churches (a typical occurrence among evangelicals in the wake of scandal). Joanna struggles with an unwanted pregnancy and pines for her pre-marriage pleasures, music and dance. And Miriam loses her best friend when Samuel insulites the girl’s father.

But lest this sound overly familiar — a pastor’s fall from grace — West has a trick up her sleeve. Midway through “Revival Season,” she spins the plot on its head, upending the patriarchal order that is her true target. Samuel and Caleb are a dynamic duo as they save souls; the women withdraw to cook meals and clean up. But divine intervention rescues Miriam: Her superpowers may eclipse her father’s. He’s a grifter while she’s the gifted.

West’s most moving scenes depict Miriam’s care of Hannah. Like her Old Testament namesake, Miriam is the devoted older sister, tending to Hannah’s myriad needs, bathing, feeding and playing with her as their parents squabble. “I folded my arms around Hannah’s chest,” Miriam says, “and felt her fragile rib cage like so many bowed toothpicks, her rapid heartbeat, her body’s metronomic perpetual body motion.” That Hannah has escaped a cure is further evidence of Samuel’s deceit.

In Baptist culture, both Black and white, miracles are everyday events, clanging to “the Saints’” like suits and dresses worn on humid Sunday mornings. The racial distinction is critical. The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 when white Southerners split from their Northern brethren over slavery; and as Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes in his recent book, “The Black Church,” only a small percentage of Black Baptists belong to an S.B.C. congregation. And yet there’s communality among rituals, from hymns and communion to baritone prayers and baptism by immersion.

West beautifully nails these details as well as more casual ones, from adolescent flirtations to cups of grape juice. The Horthors even home-school to ward off their children from a world of vice. Their efforts falter with Miriam, though, as her savvy pushes back on a sense of duty. She does the hard work of the soul, a 21st-century St. Augustine, confounding her attraction to a broad-shouldered boy: “I crossed my legs to quell the tingle in my crutch when I thought about Jason Campbell.” After a candid conversation with her mother, the scales fall from her eyes: “Back in my room, I sank into my bed — feeling some comfort that I wasn’t the only one with twin selves. Ma didn’t hear, but she kept a whole other side shielded from Papa. I would have to follow her example and separate my selves as well... Before leaving the sanctum of my room, I would have to revert to the Miriam I had learned how to be — the Miriam who held her tongue and stayed quiet the way Papa expected.”

For all its merits, particularly its winning protagonist, “Revival Season” toggles between pitch-perfect moments and the occasional clunky sentence: “The tastelessDrive of French toast had jagged edges as it went down my throat, but I focused on swallowing instead of looking at Papa.” Still, West creates a vivid, intimate world on the page, dramatizing the compromises evangelical women must make. Redemption, as Miriam realities, comes in many guises. Her moral choices must be hers alone, and in this regard she affirms her personal relationship, if not with God, then with her emerging self.
“IT SOUNDS LIKE A description for one of those ‘great white hope’ stories involving kids facing difficult circumstances and a white 20-something bleeding heart with crazy hair and good intentions, the kind that ends with upbeat music and rehabs,” writes Liz Hauck near the beginning of her beautiful, absorbing new memoir, “Home Made: A Story of Grief, Groceries, Showing Up — and What We Make When We Make Dinner.”

“But this is not one of those stories,” Hauck goes on. “Salvation was never on the table.”

The idea was to help her father run a once-a-week cooking club at “the House,” the Boston residential home for adolescent boys in state care that Charlie Hauck had co-directed for most of his daughter’s life. Now in her mid-20s, a high school Spanish teacher as well as a seasoned volunteer and cook, Hauck liked the idea of working with her dad and doing something helpful for the kids in his care, teaching them to make meals for themselves.

When her father died after a brief illness, she goes ahead with the idea anyway: “I would never make another meal with my dad, but cooking at the House with his other kids like we’d talked about would be a kind of final nod to him, an offering.”

At an introductory meeting, Hauck has four teenage boys fill out questionnaires, listing favorite foods and cake flavors, allergies, things they know how to make or want to learn to make. Frank speaks his answers and the houseparent writes them down for him. Carlos is primarily interested in sugar and cream, and he chooses a recipe for “A Black Tooth.” Then there’s Kyle, who knows how to make blueberry pie and says he will write a “letter to my socks” to keep him company. Hauck has a plan to change beyond the boys and their responses.

One of the boys is in trouble because he has been caught smoking, and Hauck thinks that a session with him might help. He’s a young man, and he needs to think about his life and what he wants to do. Hauck explains that he can go back to school if he wants, and she promises to help him find a job.

The boys count on it: the promise of one communal dinner a week, the bottles of soda, birthday cakes, occasional meals at a pizza joint they call “Heaven,” the kibitzing and joking and cooperation of cooking together.

It’s clear there’s little continuity in their lives. When boys leave the House — which they do frequently, at a moment’s notice — they’re said to be “dead.” Hauck probes: “Where are they really? Sometimes, just. Sometimes, they’re ‘aged out’ or been placed in another home. Sometimes, they run away; sometimes no one knows where they’ve ended up. Leon spends time in the hospital having surgeries; Hauck wants to bring food. “I know it was about cooking,” she wrote, “but was slowly discovering that the project was also about belonging.”

She never forgets that she is white, privileged and an outsider to their experience. “I could imagine myself into their world, but it was only at the table they could feel a part of mine, for a few minutes, outside the House, we hardly existed. They were them and I was me. We lived in the same neighborhood, but different worlds.”

Hauck never sugarcoats the difficulties of the boys’ lives and the bare-bones institutional stubbornness of the House. Because she writes with such unvarnished clarity and pragmatism, sudden moments of tenderness burst open on the page, as when one of the boys affectionately calls her “Mom” or “Ma’am.”

Still, there’s no redemption in this story, no overcoming of adversity, and no feel-good ending. “Boys are supposed to have calibrated worlds and endings that make sense,” she writes, “but the boys don’t die, and the boys whom you meet in the beginning — the ones who make jokes while cutting chicken and help to feed other people and keep showing up to do it again — go to be heroes by the end of the story. This book doesn’t make that kind of sense.”

But it does make another, far more powerful kind of sense. “We know that systems fail, but food is revolutionary,” Hauck writes. “When in doubt, focus on the food.” Her focus throughout the book stays on the boys themselves, and her gratitude toward them for welcoming her into their house. It turns out that showing up and eating with them one week allows for startlingly deep moments of connection and community. That’s all that happens. And it’s extraordinary.
ON AUG. 16, 1817, the Belgica — a refitted whaling ship under the command of Adrien de Gerlache de Gomery — set sail from Antwerp in an attempt to explore Antarctica. She would limp back to Belgium on Nov. 5, 1899, with a captain and crew profoundly physically and psychologically broken by their wintering in the Antarctic ice. Advanced scurvy, aggressively poor planning, bad luck, prolonged light deprivation and (potentially) cyanide poisoning had tormented the surviving members of the expedition to the point of complete mental collapse. De Gerlache would spend the next few years of his life attempting to regain his health under the sun of the French Riviera, Frederick Cook, the ship’s doctor, and Roald Amundsen, the first man, despite having themselves suffered tremendous privations and struggles aboard the Belgica, would return almost immediately to sea. Amundsen would go from professional triumph to professional triumph until he and his plane disappeared over the Barents Sea in 1932, while Cook’s dubious claims to have summited Denali in 1909 and to have reached the North Pole in 1898 made him a national punchline, especially after a 1933 conviction for fraudulent oil promotions landed him in prison for seven years.

“Madhouse at the End of the Earth,” Julian Sanction’s exquisitely researched and deeply engrossing account of the Belgica’s disastrous Antarctic expedition — is a narrative of the ascending system failures. Anything that could have gone wrong certainly did. The expeditions that carried thousands of miles away and were performed by the time they needed them. The time that their captain’s gambit was cheaper than lemon juice barely put a dent in the crew’s scurvy. (Limes, white, less expensive, is a good bet. Some diets and insufficient language barriers impeded the crew, despite de Gerlache’s attempts to get more sponsorship money by stacking the deck with as many Belgians as possible. Tensions and miscommunication arose even between countrymen, with differences between “Dutch-speaking Belgians from Flanders versus French-speaking Belgians from Wallonia.”)

The expedition’s cook only became the cook by beating the tar out of the previous cook, and he himself would be fired and replaced with the captain’s utterly unprepared “personal attendant.” Eventually, even the ship’s cat got depressed and died, as did the Gentoo penguin adopted by the crew. The crew of the Belgica kept diaries of the expedition, which provide an extraordinary treasure trove for “Madhouse.” Sanction turned the diaries’ personal accounts to tease out the personalities and foars and cover-up the subject. They reveal de Gerlache’s constant financial concerns and his fraught professional relationship with the hideous King Leopold II. Cook’s diaries make it clear he joined the expedition as an anthropologist first and a doctor second. Sanction tells us Cook had returned to Brooklyn from a previous voyage with a dozen or so Greenland dogs, several trunks full of animal skins and two inuit teenagers, Kahl括括和 Matthew, whom he called Clara and Willy,; a deadly unsmiling contempt for the work; his is the insight that the Belgian Antarctic expedition was “sold as a scientific mission, but at its core it was a romantic endeavor” offers an accurate lens through which to view not just this one journey but so much of the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration that followed it.

Sanction often takes time away from his increasingly harrowing descriptions of life on the Belgica to admire the ingenuity and bravery that so often comes from necessity, which helps the reader better understand a man like Amundsen, who is never too sick or scared of starving to death to rave about the beauty of the landscape. Cook’s observations about what he termed “polar anemia” now commonly referred to as “winter-over syndrome” and studied extensively by modern researchers, have stood the test of time, as have the occasional “MacGyver”-esque treatments and protocols he created to keep (most of) the crew alive. These include an early form of light therapy during the many wintery months (stripping the men down and making them stand in front of a roaring fire) and his insistence that the men consume penguin and seal meat to fend off scurvy. Some of these skills he would use decades later to diagnose and treat the same condition in his fellow prisoners at Leavenworth, an only slightly more hospitable environment for humans than the Antarctic ice. There’s more scope in “Madhouse” for dark humor than for general levity, and Sanction knows when to employ it: “Several Mid-town Manhattan establishments started serving the ‘Cook Cocktail’ — gin, lemon juice, egg white, maraschino, plenty of ice.”

Although Sanction devotes the latter portion of his book to the post-Belgica exploits of Cook and Amundsen, it’s the fumbling, confused return of the crew to civilization that really brings the narrative home. Attendees swarmed around the men, encircling and suffocating them much as the ice had. A journalist observing the festivities noted that the adventurers looked “disspirited” and “untidy” by the attention. They had somehow become heroes and patriarchs of various nations in their absence, despite failing to set any records or reach the south magnetic pole, and the image of them wobbly disembarking in front of throngs of proud onlookers, first in Punta Arenas and then in Antwerp, reminds one of the end of Edward Lear’s poem “The Jumbilies”:

And in twenty years they all came back, In twenty years or more, And every one said, ‘How tall they’re grown! For they’ve been to the Lunes, and the Terrible Zone, And the hills of the Chunkly Bore; And they drank their health, and gave them a feast Of dumpings made of beautiful yeast; And every one said, ‘If we were there, We too will go to see in a Skieve, To the hills of the Chunkly Bore!’

The men of the Belgica would soon discover that they themselves had returned to a very different world from the one they had left. While they had been trapped in the ice and choking down slabs of lightly scoured pigeon meat, Marconi had developed the first wireless telegraphy, the Dress-fus affair had been widely reported on, and, as Sanction puts it, the Spanish-American War had been “declared, fought and settled in their absence.”

Upon the crew’s return, men and women alike appeared unsettled by the presence of the expedition’s survivors, which confused the explorers until Cook had access to a mirror again and saw what the civilians saw at a single glance: “Our skins were rough, like snail-grazers; and our hair was long, stubby and liberally lined by bunches of gray, though the oldest among us was less than 35 years of age.”

Adrien de Gerlache’s ship, the Belgica, trapped in the ice in the Bellingshausen Sea.

NICOLE CLIFFE is a founder of The Toast. She has written for The Guardian, New York Magazine and Foreign Policy. She is currently on book leave from her biweekly parenting column at Slate.
Girl Meets Boy
A transgender coming-of-age story.

By PATRICK NESS

NOW HERE IS A beautiful little book that car- ries a great, great weight on its shoulders. In story terms, Kyle Lutfi’s “Too Bright to See” couldn’t be simpler. A young person, over one key summer, finds themself, embrac- es that self and moves on into the fu- ture stronger, more certain. Who could pos- sibly object? Well, the young person in question is transgender, and the world into which this book is published is in an increas- ingly unfairly one for these children. Around the country, legislatures are sud- denly busy enacting a variety of laws against transgender boys and girls, includ- ing one-deying them medical treatment to transition before they’re 18. Some of these laws have been too extreme for even very conservative governors to sign, but actual enactment of, or court not the idea. Lutfi’s is a moral point-scoring act of the kind of minority I was a gay child in the ’80s. I’ve already been so to this radio. According to the Trevor Project, L.G.B.T.Q. kids consider, attempt and com- mit suicide far more than other groups of young people. In a political culture where their rights to an equal life — and in the case of transgender children, to even exist — are demeaned and curtailed, queer kids die. They die, essentially, of shame, when there is no way out of their identities to be ashamed of.

This is the sort of unique burden child- ren’s books are asked to carry and again. So what a joy it is that Lutfi carries it so gracefully. When I say lives will be saved because of this book, I only wish it were hyperbolic.

Bug lives with her mother in rural Ver- mont. She’s 13, that terrible crap of an age, right when everything is about to change.

It’s the summer before middle school starts, and Bug’s best friend, Moira, has be- come a lot more interested in makeup, hop- ing to fit in. Bug has other concerns, espe- cially the recent death of her beloved Uncle Roderick. A former drug queen in New York, Roderick was such a force of life that he may, in fact, be literally haunting Bug af- ter his death. This is a very clever meta- phor indeed, because Bug is haunted. When Moira talks wistfully of becoming a new person in middle school — “You don’t have to change, but don’t you want to?” — Bug remains troubled that what she sees in the mirror never matches how she sees herself. “A lot of books have a moral,” she tells us, “some lesson about how you have to stay true to who you are. . . But those books never tell you how to figure out what your self is.”

I am being particularly prounoun- use here because Bug uses “she” throughout the story until the moment of self-discovery — and then he doesn’t. “Too Bright to See” is the story of what it’s like to realize the gender you were assigned at birth is not the one you actually are. Lutfi — a trans- gender man himself — tells the story with such truth, such purity, such memorable emotional clarity that you may be moved to tears by Bug’s triumph in the end.

I occasionally wished “Too Bright to See” was in something other than the earnest first-person present tense that sometimes makes contemporary books for children, but this is a small card. This book is a gentle, glow- ing wonder, full of love and understanding, full of everything any of us would wish for our children. It will almost certainly be banned in many places, but your child absolutely must certainly need to read it.
THE SECOND: Race and Guns in a Fatally Unequal America, by Carol Anderson. (Bloom.) A provocative look at the racial context for Americans’ right to bear arms. Anderson’s fervently argued new book contends that the Second Amendment was inspired by “fear of black people” — a desire to ensure that whites could suppress slave rebellions.

ANDREA ON FIRE: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s, by Elizabeth Hinton. (Sawight, $25.95.) Hinton documents hundreds of violent urban protests by Black Americans beginning in the mid-1960s, as policing grew increasingly aggressive. Such protests must be understood, she notes; not as riots but as “ribeless” against racial injustice.

WINNING INDEPENDENCE: The Decisive Years of the Revolutionary War, 1778-1781, by John Ferling. (Bloom., $40.) This huge volume, written with admirable clarity, seeks to redeem the reputation of the general who lost the war to the Americans while describing a military situation that became a “quagmire” for the British.

THINGS WE LOST TO THE WATER, by Eric Noppen. (Game, $20.) In this debut novel set in New Orleans, surrounding a Vietnamese family of four that very quickly becomes three, there’s also the memory of the city they left behind: Saigon. The book is vast in scale and ambition, with luminous and riveting in its intimacy.

A DROP OF TRAGEDY: Philip Agee and His Exposure of the CIA, by Jonathan Stevenson. (University of Chicago, $27.50.) It has been almost 39 years since Philip Agee revealed secrets of the C.I.A., but Stevenson shows, the case remains controversial to this day and raises serious questions about the actions of white-habro.

NOISE: A Flow in Human Judgment, by Daniel Kahneman, Olivier Sibony and Cass R. Sunstein. (Sltt., $32.) Three prominent thinkers tackle the problem of “unwanted variability in judgments” — the lack of consistency that leads to unfairness in spheres from medicine to criminal justice to child custody cases and affects everything from corporate mergers to what movies get made.

THE LIVING SEA OF WASHING DREAMS, by Richard Panigan. (Hopkg., $27.95.) As wildfires rage, the three adult siblings in this novel by a Booker-win-

ning Australian writer try to decide what to do about their ailing mother in the hospital. A story of family dynamics and societal rifts, it’s also an ur-

gent cry for a distressed earth.

AVAKIAN, by Debbie Macomber. (William, $24.) Things are off in the retirement home where this novel is set. New management has taken over, the residents are isolated, even the trees aren’t behaving like usual. When a fire breaks out, it reveals the ways the inhabitants’ lives are entangled.

THE KINDER LIE, by Nancy Johnson. (Morton, $27.99.) In Johnson’s debut novel, a Chicago woman feels herself at a crossroads: Her husband wants a baby and she does not. The time has come to tell him about the child she gave up for adoption before escaping her dead-end hometown.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: nytimes.com/books
New View
Talking to a writer who has vaulted onto the best-seller list is a bit like listening to an Olympian who has just won a gold medal. There’s a certain celebratory flurry, a dependable repetition of the word “sur- real” and, as with an athlete’s appreciation for a coach, an abiding sense of gratitude for the editor and agent who helped lift him onto this literary podium.

“Every few weeks or months, I’d get another rejection.”

“Who isn’t talked about enough are the rejections, and the long periods of limbo while a writer awaits word on a publisher’s decision. So it was nothing when Joanna Ho, the author of the best-selling picture book “Eyes That Kiss in the Corners,” broached the subject in a phone interview.

“You’re waiting for something. The book was on submission for over a year and a half,” Ho said, whose debut is about a young Asian girl pondering the shape of her eyes and realizing that, although she doesn’t look like her friends, she shares a visage with her mother, her grandmother and her sister. “Every few weeks or months, I’d get another rejection, so I was wondering if it was ever going to be published.”

He’s agent, Caryn Wiseman, encouraged this stay positive. “She said, ‘We’re going to find a home,’” Ho recalled. HarperCollins purchased the manuscript and bought Dung Ho (no relation to Joanna) as an illustrator.

“Eyes That Kiss in the Corners” is now in its 12th week on the children’s hardcover picture book list. The experience has indeed been surreal for this author who doubles as the vice principal of a high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ho tries to keep her “author life” and her “school life” separate, but sounds equally passionate when she talks about her upcoming projects — three picture books and a young adult novel — and a recent invitation to speak at a school-wide assembly, the highest honor of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

“Part of me is like, I don’t want to talk about myself,” explained Ho, the daughter of immigrants from Taiwan and China. “The other part is learning to take up more space, to open up publicly, to own my accomplishments — which is not really how we’re raised, as women or as Asian people.”

Growing up in St. Paul, Minn., Baltimore and the Bay Area, Ho never questioned her identity. She said, “I was always very proud of being Chinese. But at the same time, I never questioned the invisibility of Asian people in school and in books. We were so invisible, you didn’t even know it was an option to be seen in the curriculum.”

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Paperback Row
by Jennifer Krauss

SAINT K., by Alexis Schaitkin. (Celadon, 388 pp., $26.99.) After a young woman is murdered on an idyllic family vacation in the Caribbean, her sister looks back at what happened. “Any death of course creates all kinds of questions about choices that were made, but we rarely spend any time on the regret,” Oshyn Krasnitsky wrote in the New York Times Book Review. “That’s the story we tell.”

EAT THE BUDDHA: Life and Death in a Tibetan Town, by Barbara Demick. (Random House, 302 pp., $27.99.) Anne Fadiman praised this history of Tibetan resistance to Chinese domination as a “brilliantly reported and eye-opening work of narrative nonfiction.” It focuses on the town of Ningzha, which has become the self-transliteration capital of the world.

SEX AND VARIETY, by Kevin Kwan. (Anchor, 368 pp., $17.97.) Our reviewer, Elizabeth Eng, called Kwan’s fourth novel, about a high-society wedding, the perfect beach book. “The only deep think about it is the sea off the coast of Capri, where the book begins.”

LUSTER, by Raven Leilani. (Farrar, 240 pp., $17.97.) Our reviewer, Jamilah Nasir, said this novel about a young Black woman who moves in with her white lover, his wife and their adopted Black daughter — “reads like a mesmerizing novella” with “sentences like ice that crackle or melt like a languorous drip; plot suddenly, wildly flying forward like a bile-dike a fall.”

THE BIGGEST BLUFF: How I Learned to Play Attention, Master Myself, and Win, by Maria Konnikova. (Penguin, 384 pp., $27.97.) How did a former with a Ph.D. in psychology become a poker champ? “Kon- nikkova hasn’t written a book about her success with cards and chips exactly,” Michael Pietsch wrote in our pages. But she “sets the house on the power of her mind to synthe- size big philosophical ideas and psychological insights at a time when we, too, find ourselves question- ing our futures, hoping to master our fate and playing much bigger odds than ever before.”

THE ANTHROPOCENE REVIEWED, by John Green. (Dutton) A collection of new poems that review different facets of the human-centered planet.

ZERO FAL, by Carol Levine. (Random House) The three-time Pulitzer Prize winner brings to light the secrets, scandals and shortcomings of the Sound Service.

KILLING THE MOB, by Bill O’Reilly and Martin Dugard. (St. Martin’s) The 10th book in the conservative commentator’s Wlying series looks at organized crime in the United States during the 20th century.

WHAT HAPPENED TO KNOT, by Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey. (Farrar) An approach to dealing with trauma that shifts an essential question used to investigate it.

ROSE, by Daniel Kahneman, Oliver Sacks and Cass R. Sunstein. (Little, Brown Spark) What might cause variability in judgments that should be identical and potential ways to remedy this.

YEARBOOK, by Sarah Raugh. (Crown) A collection of personal essays by the actor, writer, director, entrepreneur and philanthropist.

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

THE PREMONITION, by Michael Lewis. (Norton) Stories of skeptics who went against the official response of the Trump administration to the outbreak of Covid-19. The profiles include a local public-health officer and a group of doctors who received the FBI’s disapproval.

THE BOMBER NIPAL, by Malcolm Gladwell. (Little, Brown) A look at the key players and outcomes of precision bombing during World War II.

UNTAMED, by Glennon Doyle. (Dey) The adoptive and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.
SALES PERIOD OF MAY 16-22

**CHILDREN’S BEST SELLERS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>STAMPED (FOR KIDS)</td>
<td>Jason Reynolds, Ibram X. Kendi, and Safia Elkhansha</td>
<td>&quot;Stamped&quot; for younger readers. ( Ages 6 to 10)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>WONDER</td>
<td>R. J. Palacio</td>
<td>(Kwok) A boy with a facial deformity starts school. ( Ages 8 to 12)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>THE ONE AND ONLY ROD</td>
<td>Katherine Applegate, illustrated by Patrick componente. (Kwok) Statue of a boy on a dangerous journey in search of a long-lost object. ( Ages 8 to 12)</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>THE ICARUS DEATHS</td>
<td>J.K. Rowling, (Scholastic) A deadly secret threatens the kingdom of Cormorosca. ( Ages 8 to 18)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>REFUGEE</td>
<td>Alan Gratz, (Scholastic) The true story of three different conflicts for safe haven. ( Ages 9 to 12)</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>A BIRD’S BILL</td>
<td>James Patterson and Chris Grabenstein</td>
<td>(Seaver) A yes in the life of a duck, a girl tries to save her own mother. ( Ages 10 to 14)</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>GROUND ZERO</td>
<td>Alan Gratz, (Scholastic) Parallel stories of Branchan and Redditt are take place on Sept. 11th, 2001 and 2019. ( Ages 9 to 12)</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>AMARI AND THE NIGHT BROTHERS</td>
<td>B.D. Strand and Breiden, (Simon) A boy and a girl are caught in a time travel adventure. ( Ages 8 to 12)</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>BECOMING: ADAPTED FOR YOUNG READERS</td>
<td>Michelle Obama, (Scholastic) A memoir of the former first lady. ( Ages 10 to 14)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>THE COMPLETE COOKBOOK FOR YOUNG CHEFS</td>
<td>Mia Aspra, (Scholastic) Kid-tested recipes. ( Ages 8 to 11)</td>
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**Picture Books**

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<tr>
<td>I WISH YOU MORE</td>
<td>Amy Krouse Rosenthal</td>
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<tr>
<td>THANK YOU, TEACHER FROM THE VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR</td>
<td>Eric Carle, (World of Eric Carle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE HUNGRY THINGS YOU WILL BE</td>
<td>Emily Whitfield Martin, (Random House)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHADY BABY</td>
<td>Gabrielle Union-Wade and Dwayne Wade Jr, illustrated by Tara Nicole Whitaker, (HarperCollins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>THE CIRCLES ALL AROUND US</td>
<td>Brad Montague, (Dial) Expanding our social circles. ( Ages 3 to 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT THE ROAD SAYS</td>
<td>Chris Ware, illustrated by Carlin de Moresch, (Brave) The story of a boy's journey. ( Ages 6 to 10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HARD LOVE</td>
<td>Matthew A. Cherry, illustrated by Yuhidy Harrison, (Roaring Brook) A tale of self-acceptance and respect. ( Ages 4 to 8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EYES THAT KIDS IN THE CORNERS</td>
<td>Joanna Ho, illustrated by Deng Ho, (HarperCollins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>GRUMPY MONKEY</td>
<td>Suzanne Lang, illustrated by Max Lang, (Random House)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WE ARE WATER PROTECTORS</td>
<td>Carole Lindstrom, illustrated by Michaela Goade, (Roaring Brook) Standing up for environmental justice. ( Ages 3 to 6)</td>
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**Young Adult Hardcover**

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<tr>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>REALM BREAKER</td>
<td>Victoria Aveyard, (Mira) A new world of possibilities. ( Ages 13 to 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MISTER IMPOSSIBLE</td>
<td>Meggie Stern, (Scholastic) Romeo, Hermoine, and Boudic to make dreams more powerful. ( Ages 13 to 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>STAMPED, by Jason Reynolds and Hallie Khadi. (Little, Brown) A powerful exploration of history and antiracism in America. ( Ages 13 to 17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ONE OF US IS LYLIN</td>
<td>Karen M. McManus, (Delacorte) For two students, a secret to detention leads to murder. ( Ages 14 to 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RULE OF WOLVES</td>
<td>Leigh Bardugo, (Harper) The second book in the King of Scars duology. ( Ages 14 to 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOMOYI EVER AFTER</td>
<td>Emiko Jean, (Flatiron) When she uncovers her father's identity, Emiko discovers that she is a Japanese princess. ( Ages 12 to 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LONE</td>
<td>Alexandra Brackman, (Disney-Hyperion) To get revenge for her family's murder, Lone must re-enter a school she knows as the Agon. ( Ages 14 to 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FIREKEEPER'S DAUGHTER</td>
<td>Angeline Boulley, (Feiwel) A Native American girl investigates a deadly new drug being distributed in her tribe. ( Ages 14 to 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONCRETE Rose</td>
<td>Angie Thomas, (Illinois) A novel about a young girl who decides to leave the life of crime after she finds out she'll be a father. ( Ages 14 to 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOOD GIRL, BAD BLOOD</td>
<td>Holly Jackson, (Scholastic) For two students, the disappearance of their friend. ( Ages 14 to 18)</td>
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**Series**

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<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>SHADOW AND BONE TRILOGY</td>
<td>Leigh Bardugo, (Square Fish) The first novel in the Grisha series. ( Ages 12 to 18)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIARY OF A WIMPY KID</td>
<td>Jeff Kinney, (Amulet) Books about a boy and his friends. ( Ages 9 to 12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWESOME FRIENDLY KID</td>
<td>Jeff Kinney, (Amulet) Books about a boy and his friends. ( Ages 9 to 12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>WINGS OF FIRE</td>
<td>Tui T. Sutherland, (Scholastic) A story about a dragon's journey. ( Ages 10 to 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PECY JARICK AND THE SYMPIANS</td>
<td>Rick Riordan, (Disney-Hyperion) A boy battles mythical creatures. ( Ages 10 to 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S</td>
<td>Scott Cawthon, (Scholastic) A boy and his friends visit a haunted house. ( Ages 8 to 12)</td>
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**A PRIDE FIFTY YEARS OF PARADES AND PROTESTS**

**AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD**

**THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW**

**A VISUAL POWERFUL**

A VISUAL POWERFUL
**THAT SUMMER**
By Jennifer Weiner
432 pp. Alfred. $28.

Weiner’s undoubted boss of the beach read, is back with another stunning, past mystery and past love story, with a strong dash of coming-of-age, “That Summer,” welcomes readers into the lives of Diana “Daisy” Shoemaker, her teenage daughter, Beatrice, and Diana Starling, the glamorous corporate consultant whose emails mistakenly land in Daisy’s inbox.

In her early 20s, Daisy put her own aspirations on hold to marry a wealthy, domineering, to-the-manner-born lawyer, Hal Shoemaker, who still defines himself by his years at an elite New Hampshire boarding school. Even after decades of marriage, Daisy exists on the periphery of Hal’s world, a homemaker whose efforts are occasionally appreciated but never admired.

Diana’s misplaced emails offer a glimpse into a life of gilt and independence in a time when Daisy’s life feels particularly small. While Daisy’s cooking, cleaning and arranging monosyllables out of her teenage daughter, Diana is jetting off to tennis tournaments and celebrating birthdays with spa weekends in Marin County. Soon the two women strike up an unlikely friendship, but the reader suspects that Diana is keeping secrets — big ones. You don’t have to be a detective to see that more connects her to Daisy than their shared first name.

While the mystery’s grand reveal is fairly obvious, the getting there is fraught with tension and twists that keep the pages turning furiously.

Weiner’s book is less concerned with what happened that summer on the Cape than with how the impact of that event has crocheted wildly across the years, coloring the lives of Diana, Daisy and now Beatrice. It’s a thoughtful approach that allows characters depth and complexity, rather than reducing any one of them to a singular moment of trauma.

“That Summer” incisively examines the way privilege shapes and shields those who wield it, and explores the circuitous path toward healing when justice falls short. Despite the heavy subject matter, Weiner’s prose is as warm and inviting as ever.

**SUMMER ON THE BLUFFS**
By Sunny Haudin
400 pp. William Morrow. $27.99.

Hostin’s debut novel is aspirational escapism at its best, balancing an idyllic setting and lush, evocative language with emotional depth and afloat social commentary.

Since coming to New York from New Orleans in 1972, Amelia Vaux has found success on Wall Street and lasting love with steady, adoring Omar Tanner. Together, Ama and Omar have built their dream life, including a gorgeous summer home in the exclusive Black Bench community of Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard.

Though they have no children of their own, Ama and Omar have lavished love and support onto their three — now grown — goddaughters: Perry, a lawyer; Olivia, a financial analyst; and Billie, a marine biologist.

Strangely, the Vaux Tanners seem to have chosen their goddaughters at random, with no obvious prior connection to their families — but each woman privately wonders whether there’s more to the story.

For years, their children went missed, but everything is changing now. Since Omar died, 65-something Ama is looking toward her next act. She urges the three women to spend one last summer in Oak Bluffs — with the promise that, by the end of the season, she’ll select a lucky beneficiary who will inherit the house.

Hostin, who is a co-host of “The View,” nails the balance of sincerity and affection, and woven with comedy, creating a dynamic that feels wholly authentic. Like the godmother, Perry, Olivia and Billie have created lives that look perfect on paper — but like Anna, they’re harboring secrets. Over the course of their final summer together, tensions rise, relationships are tested, and all is revealed in a thoughtful, nuanced fashion.

While Ama and Omar’s decision to withhold information from their goddaughters isn’t fully explored, the twists and turns of the mystery are genuinely surprising and pack an emotional wallop. Hostin’s story is a vast, intricate and ultimately rewarding one about love, family and self-fulfillment.

Despite the weighty subject matter, the language feels like a warm breeze through a silk shirt. In short, this book is summer incarnate.

**THE SIREN**
By Katherine St. John
416 pp. Grand Central. $28.

If there’s one word to describe “The Siren,” it’s this: salacious. Cole Power, a megastar, is making a movie — his son, Jackson's directorial debut. Despite Cole's icy relationship with Jackson, he has not only agreed to fund the film, but has also agreed to star in it, opposite his ex-wife, Jackson's former stepmother, Stella Rivers. For Stella, the project is a lifeboat.

After her one-year marriage fizzled, she endured a very public meltdown, a stint in rehab and a failed reality show that left her financially ruined. Her career is nonexistent. Her money is gone. The only thing holding her together is her enigmatic assistant, Felicity, and the chance at redemption offered by a starring role.

Tate Wasserman, a disgraced producer, also needs "The Siren" to catapult her back to respectability in the industry. The three narrators — plus the articles, interviews and Instagram posts scattered throughout — make for a reading experience that’s as layered and decadent as a slice of tiramisu.

On the outermost layer, news reports and gossip columns show the media’s perception of events, from a distance. Taylor’s chapters duel primarily with the challenges of being a woman in Hollywood. Stella’s sections dive a bit deeper, probing the American obsession with building up women only to destroy them.

But perhaps most intimate of all are the chapters following Felicity from childhood to present, which brilliantly flip the “small-town girl coming to L.A. with a dream” cliché on its head. Is she after a role, revenge or something else?

As St. John reveals the assistant’s dark past and teases at her true motive, the sense of foreboding grows alongside the threat of a hurricane hitting the film’s shooting location in the Caribbean.

If you put “The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo,” “Gone Girl” and “Big Little Lies” into a blender, you might get “The Siren” — pulpy and scandalous enough to compete with a glossy-paged gossip rag, but with brisk, lucid writing.
THE INNER CRITIC

YOU'RE NO GOOD.

THIS WON'T AMOUNT TO ANYTHING.

WHY BOTHER?

YOU CALL YOURSELF A WRITER?

YOU'RE IMAGINARY!

POOF!