Up in Arms

By Randall Kennedy

IN "THE SECOND: Race and Guns in a Finally Unequal America," the historian Carol Anderson argues that the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, which provides for a "well regulated militia" and "the right of the people to keep and bear arms," offers "a particularly maddening set of double-standards where race is concerned." On the one hand, she claims that slave-
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The New York Times Book Review
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UNSTOPPABLE

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“LEADER AND THE CHAIN: HOW DOMESTIC SLAVE TRADERS MAPPED AMERICA,” by Joshua D. Rothman. (Basic, $12.) Accounts of American slavery often overlook the central role of the traders who profited. Rothman’s history focuses on three of the biggest.

LIZZIE & DANIEL, by Mary Bly. (Dial, $23.) Bly — known to historical romance fans by her pen name, Eloisa James — here delivers a contemporary novel about a Shakespeare scholar facing a dire medical prognosis, who travels to the Tuscan island of Elba and meets an Italian chef with a 12-year-old daughter.

WHERE YOU ARE IS NOT WHO YOU ARE, by Ursula Burns. (Amstand, $27.95.) As the chief executive of Xerox, Burns was the first Black woman to lead a Fortune 500 company. Her memoir charts her path from stem cell housing in New York City to a career in engineering and business, crediting her mother’s support.

THE KITCHEN, by Shoshana Cohen Stopek. (Holt, $25.) A family saga of the 1950s and ’60s, this novel follows the lives of three women working in the same kitchen in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

HOME WATERS: A CHRONICLE OF FAMILY AND A RIVER, by John N. Maclean. (Canongate, $22.95.) Maclean’s father, Norman, wrote the classic novella “A River Runs Through It.” This memoir is an ode to its inspirations.

WHAT WE’RE READING

Like everyone, I reduced my social circle because of Covid. But there was an unexpected addition to my pool: John Maynard Keynes, the father of macroeconomics. The trillions of dollars governments spent on the crisis—exactly what Keynes would have prescribed—drove me to finally read his masterwork, “The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money.” Then I turned to Robert Skidelsky’s magisterial three-volume biography. I’m now in the second tome, “John Maynard Keynes: Economist as Savior 1926-1937,” which details the events of this 20th-century genius. First Keynes shocks fellow Bloomsbury members, including the men he previously had relationships with, by marrying a Russian ballerina. He then leaves his political home, the Liberal Party, moving into the orbit of the second Labour. To top it off, he develops an economic theory that avoids the extremes of fascism and communism, basically saving capitalism from itself. Anyone who received a stimulus check owes him a debt of gratitude.

— MATT PHILLIPS, MARKETS REPORTER

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Letters

Star-Spangled

TO THE EDITOR:

David Osinsky’s erudite review of “The Four Winds,” by Louis Menand (May 16), points to the bright spots in American life that are often overlooked in histories of the early Cold War.

As comprehensive as both the book and the review may be, one wonders about the many significant factors that are omitted in Osinsky’s review, yet also contributed to America’s cultural ascendency. Certainly, for example, the development of musicals on Broadway and off (Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “My Fair Lady,” “West Side Story,” “Cats,” “The Fantasticks”) was no insignificant as “Bonnie and Clyde.” Then there’s George Balanchine, Leonard Bernstein’s Young People’s Concert, the building of Lincoln Center and the triumph of Van Cliburn.

This period also saw the rise of folk music, creating international stars like Odetta, Joan Baez, Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan.

Jazz continued to thrive and add to America’s renown through Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and Benny Goodman. Even television brought political conventions into people’s homes, while marking and unmaking political careers through the Checkers speech and the Kennedy-Nixon debates. Beyond that, Edward R. Murrow’s “See It Now,” Jack Paar, “Playhouse 90” and “The Twilight Zone” deserve mention. There was certainly a self-conscious yet reasoned examination of American society through social criticism in books like “The Lonely Crowd,” “The Status Seekers,” “The Affluent Society,” “White Collar,” “The Other America” and “The Feminine Mystique.”

America’s cultural reputation was also enhanced through the integration of professional sports, with figures like Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain setting new records. One also thinks of developments in science and technology from the Salk polio vaccine to transistors to the space program that helped make America a world leader.

Osinsky’s discussion of the period is truly captivating, but would be enriched and strengthened by inclusion of these elements.

SOUT I. COHEN

UNA sound?

TO THE EDITOR:

Fortunately for history and for Book Review readers, Andrew Solomon’s review of Katie Roche’s “The Invention of Miracles” (May 23) calls out her determination to “burn [Alexand- der Grishman] hell’s legacy to the ground” and tempers somewhat the damage done by inaccuracies and distortions in her book.

While today we seek, often appropriately, to reassess great leaders of the past, it helps to understand the times in which they lived and to strive for accuracy. Bell did not want the deal “invented” by having their marriages to one another. He told Gallaudet students, “I have no intention of interfering with your liberty of marriage.” Bell did not try to “invent” deaf culture, as Booth also claims, but in fact signed with his deaf mother and wife, in addition to lip reading and speech therapy. Furthermore, signing in Bell’s day meant time-consuming finger spelling, not modern ASL.

Worse Bell lives today, I bet he would be supportive of both ASL and new technologies to make sound accessible to the deaf.

SARA CROUSE,

CHRISTENTON, MD.

The writer is president of the Alexander and Melba Bell Legacy Foundation and great-granddaughter of the inventor.

Authorial Comeback

TO THE EDITOR:

I feel like I observed what will prove to have been the greatest moment in the Book Review’s history, maybe the greatest authorial comeback to a “bad” review ever? Cynthia Ozick’s poem in her letter to the editor (May 16) is a triumph! “For the blow shiver’s given / May she never be the shriven.”

SUSAN ADLER

WEST ORANGE, N.J.

A Canadian Treasure

TO THE EDITOR:

I was delighted to see Stacey Alwani, in her By the Book interview (May 9), introduce our distinguished Canadian treasure Robertson Davies to potential new readership. He was a prolific writer of great depth and range. His novels are complex—stories within stories, interesting charac- ters and intricate plots examining the human condition.

Roberts was also a play- wright, critic, journalist, professor and devoted diarist. In the 1970s, the Depthful trilogy was required reading in my small-town Ontario high school. I have enjoyed them at least three times since.

DEBRA DOLAN

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

WASHINGTON TIMES BOOK REVIEW

“Yankee history is rich and deep, with players so iconic their first or last name, or their nickname, is identification enough.”

– ALEC BALDWIN, from the introduction

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By the Book

Lionel Shriver

The author, most recently, of the novel ‘Should We Stay or Should We Go’ used to feel obligated to finish any book she started reading. ‘This is the dumbest rule I’ve ever instituted.’

What books are on your night stand?
Two books to prime for my next novel: Eric Hoffer’s ‘The True Believer’ and Charles Mackay’s ‘Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds.’ One exercise in reverse research — writing the novel first and then doing the homework: Kate Englehart’s ‘The Invisible,’ about end-of-life suicide. Finally, mercifully, fiction: Evan Morris’s ‘How to Survive Everything,’ which sounds like an antidote to the Englehart.

What’s the last great book you read?
I raced through Amor Towles’s ‘Rules of Civility’ and ‘A Gentleman in Moscow’ back to back. The prose style in both is a delight: elegant, clean, crisp and dry, like a good Italian white.

What’s the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?
From Konstantinov’s ‘We Have Been Harmonized’: In 2014, the Chinese Communist Party banned puns — which apparently led to ‘linguistic and cultural chaos.’

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?
Mass immigration from the perspective of the population on the receiving end (think Leslie). T.C. Boyle took on both sides of the immigration issue in ‘The Tortilla Curtain.’ Otherwise, fiction rarely expresses compassion for native observers whose hospitality is under strain. The story of the underlying immigrant is inherently sympathetic, so that’s the story we tell.

What kind of reader were you as a child? Which books stick with you most?
I was a sneaky reader. Reading was what I did when I was supposed to be doing something else. In elementary school, I sat in class with a book in my lap while the teacher mumbled on about fractions. This association between reading and getting away with something helped fortify my dedication to it, because I am by nature disobedient. For educators, harnessing reading to virtue is deadly.

For years, I hated reading anything assigned. I despised George Eliot as junior high, because reading ‘Sills Marner’ wasn’t my idea. (Comically, I have duplicated the assignment model by becoming a book reviewer) I still feel a guilty, subversive thrill when I sit down to read a book during the day.

As a kid, I went through various phases. By 8, I hit the horse books — proving once and for all that I’m a girl after all. By 10, science fiction — mostly the classics by Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, Arthur C. Clarke, etc. By 15, the classic classics: William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Thomas Hardy, the better part of the Russian canon. I’m grateful to myself for having hoovered up so many of these doury tomes in my teens. Even ‘Abolition, Abolition!’ might prove more of a slog now.

You’re organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers do you invite? Lawrence Osborne, Graham Greene and Edith Wharton. If Osborne alone shows up, we’ll have a wonderful time. He renews my faith in the possibility of being ‘larger than life.’

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn’t? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?
John Kennedy Toole has left us, so I feel free to declare that I detested Pulitzer Prize winner ‘A Confederacy of Dunces,’ which is interminable, not funny, and so tedious that (breaking my own rule) I came to despise the author personally. That is retrospective, but it was mine.

For I used to have another ‘rule’ that once I started a book I was obliged to finish it. This is the dumbest rule I’ve ever instituted. Before I pressed up, I used to count the immemorial hours of suffering. With so many books in the world, there’s no excuse for squandering your time on the ones that get on your nerves. I received memorably hate mail once (in gross font: danger, danger) carousing me for writing ‘The Post-Birthdays Man,’ which he reviled to the very last page, after ‘We Need to Talk About Kevin’ which he admired. I just thought: What’s wrong with you? If you didn’t fancy the book, it’s your fault you didn’t put it down.

What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?
‘Moby-Dick’ and ‘Crime and Punishment’ and ‘The Brothers Karamazov’ by Fyodor Dostoevsky, anything by Patricia Highsmith or Michel Houellebecq. On the first two, I may have missed the best for keeps. The latter two I appear to remedy. :=

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

Illustration by Mark Czarkowski.
Lost in the Quagmire

WE PROBABLY HAVE too many books about the Civil War and World War II, but certainly could use more examinations of our less understood conflicts. So it is good to see several new works explore more obscure corners of American military history.

WINNING INDEPENDENCE: The Decisive Years of the Revolutionary War, 1775-1783 (Knopf, $40). The veteran historian John Ferling sets out to redeem the reputation of Sir Henry Clinton, the British general who lost that war. As Ferling notes, the conventional view is that Clinton was "capricious, indecisive, overly cautious, muddled and confused, persistently inactive, lacking a strategic vision or a master plan and finally inhibited by his subliminal sense of inadequacy." The enjoyment of reading this huge volume is watching Ferling make his case that Clinton was treated "an accomplished, diligent and thoughtful commander."

Writing with admirable clarity, Ferling contends that Clinton's "Southern strategy" of shifting the focus of British military operations to Georgia and the Carolinas was an intelligent move. It might have succeeded, he calculates, had Gen. Charles Cornwallis, who led that effort in the field, not been both mendacious and indecisive. Having promised Southern planters that Ferling states, the British might have been able to retain much of the South in a peaceful settlement — perhaps even building on to Georgia, Florida and the Carolinas — and so move down the new United States into a precarious position for survival. But Cornwallis undercuts Clinton's strategy by disregarding orders and marching off to Virginia and then getting trapped there, at Yorktown, by the arrival of a French fleet. In the clumpy hands of Cornwallis, Ferling charges, the South became "a quagmire for the British."

SPEAKING OF QUAGMURES, several new books explore forgotten or neglected aspects of the American war in Vietnam, which remains one of our least understood conflicts.

COVERAGE UNDER FIRE: The 101st Airborne's Hidden Battle at Tung Nui (Camouflage, $34.95) is essentially a diary of one unit's experience in a combat operation in the late spring of 1969 that the United States Army and the Nixon administration kept almost secret because, on the heels of the "Hamburger Hill" battle, American casualties in the war had become a sensitive political issue.

Sir Henry Clinton (1721-95). Written in a pedestrian and sometimes awkward fashion by Ed Sherwood, an Army officer who himself was wounded in the Tan Ky fight, the book is a slog to read, but faithfully conveys the day-to-day life of American soldiers in combat, probably more accurately than would a smoother, more dramatic narrative. Like the operation it describes, "Coverage Under Fire" feels like "one continuous, long grind."

By contrast, I finished reading Robert J. Thompson's CLEAR, HOLY, AND DESTROY: Pacification in the South and the American War in Vietnam (University of Oklahoma, $35.95) only because I was reviewing it. Typical of the poor writing is an unfortunate reference to a "grizzly" situation with American corps on a battlefield. I mention the book here because I don't understand why some American historians even now rely only on one side for most of their information about this war — and in this case, the losing side. I don't think the book's conclusions are necessarily wrong. But I think it would be a lot more persuasive if it took into account North Vietnamese and Saigon views. The Columbia University historian Leo-Hang Nguyen, for instance, provided an excellent example of how to do this several years ago with her splendid study titled "France's War."

AIR POWER'S LOST CAUSE: The American Air War in Vietnam (Rowman & Littlefield, $30) is a fair better book, well argued and readable. But as the author, Brian D. Lewis, who teaches history at the United States Air Force Academy, acknowledges at the outset, it has the same fundamental problem as Thompson's: "Official sources inside Vietnam today remain difficult to access, and the inability to delve into Vietnamese archives is . . . perhaps the central problem for Americans studying the air war." Indeed, Lewis's study relies almost entirely on American documents and declassified reports. Some of them are interesting. He concludes, for example, that during the war the Navy did far better than the Air Force in improving both aviation technology and pilot training. Still, I came away wondering why a book written now, decades after the war, about the failure of the air campaign, relies so heavily on sources from the archives of that campaign. Nguyen has demonstrated how to do this. Reading these two books led me back to contemplate how much less enlightening Ferling's book on the end of the American Revolution would be, if, for some bizarre reason, he had chosen to limit the scope of his research to documents from the British and the Loyalists. How much longer will American scholars try to understand the Vietnam War while largely disregarding the views of the victors?"
Home Away From Home?
A debut novel follows a family of Vietnamese refugees in New Orleans.

By BRYAN WASHINGTON

NEW ORLEANS CAN be a sticky place to capture on paper. An attempt requires navigat-
ing multiple histories, and juggling physical boundaries with lore lodged bone-deep in the mud. In the Louisiana of Eric Nguyen’s debut novel, “Things We Lost to the Water,” we find Wini-Dixie and shoddy apartment complexes and the gay bars at the end of Bourbon. We sweat under the humid-ity between ice cream parlors and mid- night jaunts through the Quarter. Public

THE LIVES WE LOST TO THE WATER
By Eric Nguyen

pools, dingy churches and curbside churches coexist alongside dayparades extending across the entire parish. But in this story surrounding a family of four that very quickly becomes three; there’s also the memory of another city: Saigon. The book opens in 1975, as a Viet-
namese woman named Huong has escaped that city’s turmoil and brought her sons, Tuan and Thinh, to New Orleans without her husband. Nguyen’s narrative strikes a very elusiver balance; vast in scale and ambitious, while lucid and inviting — enchanting, really — in its intimacy.

Together, mother and sons have left one home behind in search of the possibility of another, but what constitutes a home meta-

Huong finds a sort of solace in a new lover, a used-car salesman named Yiah, and Tuan gets involved with the Southern Boys, a lo-
cul gang of Vietnamese refugees. Binh, who adopts the name Ben, seeks comfort in his queen’s, and the fracturing that his sensu-
ality causes in his relationship to his family. Nguyen has created a revolving triptych of characters who, despite their differences, or maybe even as a result of it, remain a para-
dox to one another.

Tuan notes early on that “the water in New Orleans acted differently. Out on the shores of Vietnam and beyond, the water had been violent, shaking anything that lay atop it. But here, the water didn’t move; it stayed still, lazy.” The peculiarity of that water looms heavy as time passes, but as Nguyen guides us through the decades into the 2000s he never shows his hand; he lets readers wind their own internal wheels. This result is both inviting and unsettling. Nguyen’s characters exist within New Orleans’ myths — of mystery, splendor, pleasure — until they become inextricable from those narratives themselves.

The narrative structure changes subtly as the family’s years in New Orleans accumu-
late — the pace quickens, and the characters’ conflicts begin to converge — but still the emo-
tional tethers remain palpable. Nguyen is especially gifted at crafting a sense of longing, and the arc of Ben’s queer story line is raw-boned and poignant. The hallmarks of gay fiction are present: the faltering of a trusted confidant, the mystery of first em-
braces, the finding of one’s self in others be-
fore reckoning within. But Nguyen never lets Binh’s youth or the ever-present depres-
sion, and there’s an honesty in him that makes

BY BRYAN WASHINGTON in the author; read recently of “Memorial.”

The question of how to define home per-
sists throughout. Is it a place? A person? A state of mind? While unanswerable, these wonders are made approachable through Nguyen’s multiple perspectives.

Still, the mystery of belonging also raises the question of what it means to change. As Binh gazes at Ben after some time away, that thread is allowed to expand: “When people haven’t seen each other in a long time, there was always a comment on how different one of them looked. He searched and searched, but couldn’t find anything different about his brothers.”

THIS NOVEL BECOMES as much about mov-
ing on as it is about simply moving; Nguyen’s characters experience loss — of the boys’ father, of their homeland — but their losses don’t define them. Forward movement, even if it doesn’t take you quite where you wanted to go, is an act that must be learned. Picking for the final escape in the book, from a hurricane, Tuan piles clothes into a suitcase. “You’re doing it wrong,” his partner chides. “Only what’s necessary.”

It’s a rare novel that conveys the vertigo of a journey without depersonalizing its indi-
vidualitarians, but Nguyen is an able captain, and the path he charts for us is illuminat-
ing. The tale ebbs and flows, but it does eventually, inevitably, return. And it isn’t long before Binh, sooner than anyone in this family, realizes that realization her-
self: “It was as when they were strolling along the river walk, eating ice cream cones, that she realized this had become her city, the place she lived but also a place that lived in her.” If you’re running from something, you’re still running somewhere...
Blowing the Whistle

Philip Agee's decision to reveal C.I.A. secrets in 1975 remains a source of controversy even today.

By JUSTIN Vogt

ONE MORNING in December 1963, the C.I.A. station chief in Montevideo, Uruguay, went to the city's Police Headquarters to tell security officials about a deflection campaign the Americans were planning in their country. Like the rest of Latin America, Uruguay was a Cold War battleground, and Washington was eager to discredit a left-wing insurgency — in this case, by concocting rumors that Soviet agents had infiltrated Uruguayan labor unions. Accompanying the C.I.A. chief was a 39-year-old case officer named Philip Agee, who was helping coordinate the plot.

As the Uruguayans reviewed the C.I.A.'s plan, a soccer match played on the radio. Soon, however, a different noise intruded. "I began to hear a strange low sound which, as it gradually became louder, I recog

ized as the sound of a human voice," Agee later wrote. At first, he thought it was a street vendor outside. But the sound persisted, and it became clear that it was coming from the room above. "The meaning grew in intensity, turning into screaming," Agee wrote. "By then I knew we were listening to someone being tortured." Agee was already harboring moral qualms about his work, and to his horror, he suspected — correctly, he soon learned — that the voice belonged to a Communist operative whose name Agee himself had supplied to the Uruguayans. "All I wanted to do was get away from the voice," he recalled.

Agee did get away — far away. He left the Central Intelligence Agency in 1966, and seven years later launched an unprecedented assault on the agency by publishing a book, "Inside the Company," that revealed the names of more than 400 C.I.A. officers, agents, informants and assets. The book created a crisis for the American intelligence community, with its personnel compromised and its sources and methods exposed, the C.I.A. had to disband many of its Latin American operations.

The story of United States intelligence features many leakers, whistle-blowers and even a few traitors. But no one had ever done anything like this before — and to this day, no one else has. Agee became a celebrity of sorts. His book wrapped its revelations inside a withering critique of American foreign policy, and fallout around the world hailed Agee as a hero. The C.I.A., he wrote, was "nothing more than the secret police of American capitalism, plugging leaks in the political dam and day in and day out that shareholders of U.S. companies operating in poor countries can continue enjoying the ripoff." He was repudiating more than just the C.I.A.; his real target was "the American project writ large," as Jonathan Stevenson, the managing editor of Spyview, argues in "A Deep of Treason," his new biography of Agee. "He was part of the opposition, but he was no longer loyal," Stevenson says. "Privately, book seeks to unscrew the mix of personal and ideological motives that drove him. "His detractors might say he just got mildly disillusioned with C.I.A. work; tried to take the quiet, confidential way out; got frustrated; was reduced by a couple of hefty women; felt the allure of dissident celebrity; and only then became a real dissident." Stevenson writes. He accepts that view and casts Agee as "a figure of profound ambivalence and considerable tragedy." That portrait, however, is undermined by the rigor of the portrayal. The book is remarkably well researched and treats complex issues with admirable clarity. But Stevenson so thoroughly outlines Agee's shallowness and self-regard that his nuanced assessment ultimately seems too charitable.

There is little doubt that Agee grew disenchanted with Washington's hypocritical backing of authoritarian governments. And it is true that Agee took a huge risk with much more promise of personal profit. Christopher Hitchens suggests that the C.I.A. as one point plotted to assassinate him.) But his decision to expose the agency came two years after he had ceased working there, during which he grew increasingly bitter owing to a messy divorce and a failed business venture. Moreover, he worked on his tell-all memoir while living in Havana and maintaining contacts with Cuban intelligence officials; Stevenson conveys with other historians who have concluded that Agee became, in essence, a Cuban asset — set, given the nature of the Castro regime, understated his pose as a principled defender of liberty.

The C.I.A. recovered quickly from the damage Agee had inflicted. He was never charged with a crime because, strange as it may seem, it was not clearly illegal to reveal the identities of intelligence officers when he did so. After a brief period of notoriety, he faded from view, carrying out a peripatetic life on the fringe of international literature, nursing various grudges. By the time he died, in 2008, he was largely forgotten. Ultimately, despite Stevenson's efforts to raise the stakes, Agee's story seems less about moral responsibility than about the wages of disdain than about what might be called the banality of betrayal.

Still, if the book falls short in some ways as biography, it delivers an itinerary. It offers a vivid snapshot of America in the mid-70s, when the collapse of institutional authority after the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal was followed not by revolution or reform but by exhaustion and decadence. As Stevenson writes: "The heroic and expensive idealism that had arisen in the 1960s was giving way to doubt and paranoia, a kind of creeping corporate co-option and, ultimately, downward so- cial lassitude and introverted resignation." Agee wanted his actions to be seen through the prism of the earlier moment. He was late to the party, however, and to the extent that his revelations had an impact, it was less to hinder American power than to feed the million that took hold in the country. Agee's exposé did contribute to a broader shift, however. The C.I.A. was not just a pow- erful government agency but also a pillar of the WASP establishment, and Agee's book appeared at a moment when that barrier of power was already coming under fire and losing its grip. Agee might seem an unlikely anti-establishment figure, but he fits a cer- tain type: the white American man who en joys access to elite institutions but does not fit the social mold well enough to gain full ac- ceptance, and who comes to resent and turn against the establishment. As Stevenson writes, "He was well bred but not integrated — establishment but not Ivy League, select but not Skull and Bones, an upwardly mobile re- cessional Catholic and not a patriot." Such class distinctions and their effect on one's ability to attain status (as opposed to simply money and power) have fed the grievances of many of the establishment's, including Joseph McCabe, Richard Nixon — and, more recently, Donald Trump.

Stevenson allows Trump a number of times, warning that his depredations have made it more likely that "another Agee could emerge." Yet the contemporary figures whose stories most closely parallel Agee's in Edward Snowden, the former National Secu- rity Agency contractor who publicly re- vealed the secret collection of Americans' electronic communications in 2013 — that is, during the Obama administration. And members of the national security establish- ment already have come forward to reveal Trump's skullduggery, but they hear little re- semblance to Agee. Think of the anonym- ous C.I.A. whistle-blower whose allega- tions led to Trump's first impeachment, or of Alexander Vindman, the Army lieuten- ant colonel who was a powerful prosecution witness at Trump's first trial in the Senate. Those officials did not seek to take down what Agee (or Trump) might have seen as "the deep state," but to protect it. Mean- while, during Trump's term, broad sections of the American left carried out a dizzying about-face: Having spent decades criticizing American intelligence agencies in ways that echoed Agee, many liberals now em- braced them as defenders of the Republic. Stevenson is right to conclude, though, that had Agee lived long enough to witness it, he might have felt "guiltily vindicated by Trump's transmogrification of American government." Agee would have seen the events of recent years as confirm- ing his basic view of America: The often are vocal, the people easily misled, the right ruthless, the left weak and the country in terminal decline. Agee was hardly alone in seeing things that way in the mid-1970s, and he would have found company today. If with any luck, he will prove to be less a prophet than a stepped-on dog — correct only a decade or so.
No Chance

What gets in the way of consistent and fair decision making?

By STEVEN BRILL

A study of 1.5 million cases found that when judges are passing down sentences on days following a loss by the local city's football team, they tend to be tougher than on days following a win. The study was consistent with a steady stream of anecdotal reports beginning in the 1970s that showed sentencing decisions for the same crime varied dramatically — indeed, scandalously — for juvenile matters and drug crimes depending on which judge drew a particular case.

A study at an oncology center found that the diagnostic accuracy of melanomas was only 64 percent, meaning that doctors misdiagnosed melanomas in one of every three lesions.

When two psychiatrists conducted inde- pondent reviews of 208 patients in state hospitals, they came to the equivalent of a tovagan agreement 50 percent of the time on what kind of mental illness was present.

When a large insurance company, con- cerned about quality control, asked its un- derswriters, who determine premium rates based on risk assessments, to come up with estimates for the same group of sam- ple cases, their suggested premiums var- ied by an eye-popping median of 50 per- cent, meaning that one adjuster might have set a premium at $9,000 while a col- league might have charged $15,000.

Doctors are more likely to order cancer screenings and operations they see early in the morning than late in the afternoon.

In a study of just a few college applicants to pick a candidate from among a sim- ilar pool of students, 50 percent of the admissions officers who were sophisticated and corrected. But another team whose scores were in different directions away from the target is shooting poorly, not hitting the correct. A third team, whose shots all go to the left of the bull's-eye, is shooting high and low is both biased and noisy.

Some decision heuristics are relatively easy. "Occasion noise" — the problem of a judge handing out stiffer sentences depending on whether a favorite sports team won or lost or whether it's before or after lunch (yes, studies have found that, too) — can, like bias, be recognized during a "noise as- sist" and presumably dealt with. "System noise," in which insurance adjusters, doctors, proctors or business strategists assess the same facts with that un- fortunately variability, requires a more ener- getic decision hygiene.

However, as the authors point out, the steps of decision hygiene — like those of common hygiene, such as washing hands — can be tedious. Their benefits are not directly visible; you might never know what problem they prevented from occurring.

One example of effective decision hy- giene has to do with the Appger scores, which looks at the overall health of newsmen. Doctors score the baby on five criteria ranging from appearance of its skin to its heart rate, with scores of zero to two for each category. If the scores, once added up, arrive at a seven or higher, the baby is considered to be in good health. "The Appger score ex- isted until they wrote guidelines that helped doctors work and why they re- duced noise," the au- thors explain. "Unlike rules or algorithms, guidelines do not eliminate the need for judgment: The decision is not a straightforward compu- ter decision. Disagreement re- mains possible on each of the compo- nents and hence on the final conclusion. Yet guidelines succeed in reducing noise because they decompose a complex decision into a number of easier subjudgments on predefined dimensions."

Another compelling example of "decom- posing" a decision involves a case study of a corporate merger decision. Rather than the bankers and executive team giving the company's board the usual pre or even presentation, the CEO, first tasked various senior executives to come up with their as- sessments on seven aspects of the merger, ranging from talent of the team to be ac- quired to the possible financial benefits. Importantly, there were separate teams working on each aspect, so that their judg- ment was not colored by positive or nega- tive noise emanating from another verdict, falling into the trap of what the authors call "experience noise."

It's also for that reason that some of your people interviewing a job candidate should know what their colleagues' opinions are and which methods to use. In other arenas, such as insurance under- writing, "Noise reduction" isOral establishing hard and fast rules and even using algorithms, when which means that they should, in theory, "eliminate noise en- tirely." However, the authors point out that the way information gets entered into algo- rithms can itself be undermined by bias or noise.

The authors are sensitive to the fact that noise reduction, a point they illustrate in part with the story of the company that changed itself up as a result of a peer review process that included an overly compli- cated feedback questionnaire. Forty-six ratings on 11 dimensions for each rat- er and person being rated is too much.

Similarly, the costs of eliminating noise have to be weighed. The Appger's essay will be more fairly and accurately graded if five teachers read it independently selecting five or 10 criteria and averaging their as- sessments, not just picking the high and it providing an overall impression. So what is the deal with "noise reduction? We can accept the noise in the fifth grader's grade much more easily than we do in a journal article or when deciding a col- leges applicant's fate. Beyond bureaucracy and cost, there's a
loss of dignity when people are treated like numbers instead of individuals. There’s also the danger of forcing a rule—think of Jack Welch, the former C.E.O. of General Electric, who made it set practice to fire a percentage of his lowest performers each year, even if many were still performing well. Forced ranking in this context, or in the case of an elite military unit, makes no sense, and relative scales and relative judgments would have made for better decision hygiene. In other situations, the oppo-site approach can create problems: raising everyone individually with no comparisons, such as the honey-gum-staples guidelines that allow over 50 percent of the federal civil servant workforce to be judged “fully successful.”

Thus, the authors cite the lawyer and au-
thor Philip Howard, who in books such as “The Death of Common Sense” has docu-
mented the dangers of bureaucratic lingo, rules and numerical ratings replacing hu-
an judgment in so many decisions.

Kalmann, Simon and Sunshine also ac-
knowledge the judicial backlash against fed-
eral sentencing guidelines passed in 1987 that were meant to reduce the mas-
ive inconsistencies. Many judges bril-
antly believed that these federal guide-
lines—and even more stringent ones legis-
lated in many states—sidestepped them from making the human judgments they were put on the bench to make. That con-
tinuing backlash, and the fact that pros-
cutigators and judges learned to game the
new rules, has been a key force behind re-
cent criminal justice reform efforts.

The authors’ general argument, how-
er, is that there is too much noise that a major course change in order across mul-
tiple disciplines. In too many arenas, they maintain persuasively, we’ve allowed too much noise at too high a cost.

The trick is finding the right balance, not looking for perfect fairness or accuracy, which will always be blurry. A rule that sets a birth date of Jan. 1 for entrance into kindergarten is going to be arbitrary and unfair to the child born at 11:59 the night before. Although another rule will give parents a bonus tax deduction for be-
ing born in that earlier year; But it’s a bet-
ter way to choose those who get to start elemen-
tary school than interviewing every 4- to 6-year-old.

A digital body scan examined only by an algorithm might be an efficient way to check for melanoma, but I’d rather trust the terrific doctor who checks me every few months. Then again, I wouldn’t mind if he checked his conclusion against the algo-
- rithm.

“None” is about how our most impor-
tant institutions can make decisions that are more fair, more accurate and more credible. That its prescriptions will not achieve perfect fairness and credibility, while creating pitfalls of their own, is no reason to turn away from this welcome handbook for making life’s lottery a lot more coherent.

Band-Aid
One Ohio hospital reveals the failures of American healthcare.

By MONA HANNA-ATTISHA

THE BUSINESS OF sickness is perverse. In too many instances, medical interventions are ineffective Band-Aids. Other factors, like where you stand in the social, racial and economic pecking order—and what ZIP code you live in—matter.

When you’re sick, we hear
You are the one who will heal us.
When we come to you
Our rags are tore.
And you top round our naked bodies.
And you top round our sickness.
A glance at our rags would tell you more. It is the same cause
Our bodies and our clothes.

In health, light, and dollars in a Small American Town, Brian Alex-
don shares this empathy from the porch of a struggling rural hospital, known as Jes-
ian, Ohio, community as the “Band-Aid Sta-
tion.” While the nonprofit hospital fights to stay solvent and independent, each day brings new gut-wrenching stories. From the C-cent’s lesion-filled strategic planning meetings to life-or-death moments at the bedside, Alexander vividly and grippingly translates the byzantine world of American healthcare into a real-life narrative with people you come to care about.

Reporting over a period of two years, MONA HANNA-ATTISHA (@MMonaAttisha) is director of the Pediatric Public Health Initiative and author of “What the Eyes Don’t See: A Story of Race, Resistance, and Hope in an American City.”

PHOTOGRAPHS OF GREAT WRITING FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE HOSPITAL
Life, Death, and Dollars in a Small American Town
By Brian Alexander

In one small rural hospital town, a family doctor’s practice is a lifeline. But what is the cost of care in this community of 3,000, and how do the financial strains affect patients and the community?

In “The Hospital,” Alexander chronicles the life and death of a small rural hospital, offering an intimate look at the challenges facing rural healthcare providers.

The hospital serves a population of about 3,000, and the doctor who runs it is a familiar face to many in the community. But as the hospital struggles to stay afloat, questions about the cost of healthcare and the impact on patients’ lives arise.

One of the main themes in “The Hospital” is the role of the doctor in the community. Alexander explores the relationship between the doctor and his patients, and how their trust and loyalty are tested in the face of financial difficulties.

Another important aspect of the book is the focus on the impact of healthcare costs on patients and their families. Alexander documents the toll that high medical bills can take on people’s lives, and the strategies they use to cope.

In addition to these personal stories, Alexander also looks at the broader trends in healthcare in the United States, including the rise of for-profit hospitals and the implications for rural communities.

Overall, “The Hospital” is a powerful and thought-provoking examination of rural healthcare and the challenges faced by healthcare providers and patients alike.

Heading to the Covid-19 ward in a Wisconsin hospital.

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

"The Hospital" offers a poignant and
believable portrayal of the daily struggles faced by rural healthcare providers. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the future of healthcare in the United States.
Struggling With Demons

A dark family memoir of schizophrenia and matricide.

By LISA MILLER

Trouble comes to every family eventually. But what kind, and can you ever see it coming? It's this, the ability to recognize and cope with crisis, that can mean the difference between life and death. Evasion might be easier — if you don't acknowledge the dysfunction in the people you love, the delusion goes, then maybe you can avoid the loss, the grief. But it's hard to sustain evasion, and action, from beneath a hopeful fog.

"Everything Is Fine" is the succinct and haunting title of Vince Granata's imperfect memoir of how his brother Tim, suffering from schizophrenia, bound their mother's wrists with duct tape on July afternoon in 2014 and killed her in the family room of their house in Orange, Conn., using two serrated knives and two sledgehammers.

Everything Is Fine
A Memoir
By Vince Granata
224 pp. Norton, $27

The rest of the family was out of the house that day, working, shopping, visiting friends. The author — then 27, a Yale graduate, an English teacher — was in the Dominican Republic, teaching children how to read.

Tim had wrestled in high school at 270 pounds, and at 23, he was still gigantic, living at home, sleeping through the days and spending nights in the basement lifting weights while his psychosis was slowly decaying. He used to watch devils' movies and communicated with via Google. On the morning of his mother's death, he warned her that those devils were winning. "Something bad is going to happen," he told her in the kitchen. "They are going to come for me. If something looks like a suicide, just know that I love you." Then he killed suicide and homicide blazed in Tim's mind.

In the Granata home, things had not been right for a very long time. Both parents were tried as emergency room doctors, but even they were stymied — trapped — by the horror show suite of no choices schizophrenia presents. Sufferers can't perceive how sick they are, nor can they be held against their will, unless they present a danger to themselves or others. So many don't seek help, and absentee a trip to the E.R. or a 911 call, loved ones have no way to obtain it for them. Tim's brutality was unusual, but otherwise his illness ran a typical course. He had threatened suicide a number of times, leading to a brief hospital stay. Medication seemed to stabilize him, but when he was sent home he flushed the pills down the toilet.

The author is 4 when his parents brought his triplet siblings home to this very same house. In an atmosphere as obsessed with success as Orange — a suburb dark warning, he'd stood at the kitchen counter eating a banana, offering his mother reassurance. "I said things are going to be fine," Claudia tested her husband. "He ate fruit!" No mention of what he said. In her final moments, a mother yearned for a sign of normality — maternal sons don't eat bananas, do they? And yet, the question mark indicated that she wasn't so sure. It was the last message she'd ever send.

Unfortunately, this memoir news to the family myth even as it seeks to expose it. In therapy, after the fact, Granata comes to realize that he is "a people pleaser" and this is the problem. The author can't bring himself to subject his family to the direction that the story requires; despite his decision to write about them, his impulse is still to protect them. His father and brother Chris are largely absent from its pages, their silence implying, perhaps, their disapproval. His sister, Lizzi, is present, but her portrayal is qualified: Her brother does not speak for her.

And yet, this is what memoirists do. They push and probe, complicate answers, confront old wounds. They presume to know what others are thinking and feeling, and then turn the interrogation lamp on their most intimate, protected places. Most disappointing here is the absence of Claudia herself, a woman in her full maturity, a doctor, a math teacher, a mother of four. How deeply she must have struggled to devote herself to Tim, while also protecting herself and the others from his chaos. Did she comb her stress to friends? Did she fight with her spouse about which to mitigate the terrible thicket of options available to them, the financial and emotional costs, the reputational toll? Telling this story is an act of bravery, but Granata needed to linger more in the painful places. He reaches for his love for his brother, but he also needed to hold his mother's heart in his hands. "There are ways my mother failed", he writes, and then, conceding how difficult this admission is for him, runs from the sentence as if it were a grenade.

It was Tim who called his day. Claudia did not, a cause not for judgment — her death was a random, maybe unpreventable — but observation. Instead of excusing this, however, Granata has normalized her according to his family's ethos of stoicism. She is a bakewalk, the North Star, "stunningly intelligent," "a voracious reader." "I'm going through hell right now," Claudia said one evening. "Vince, I don't know what to do." But she didn't say more, and he didn't ask, and they dropped the subject in order to continue to be fine.
As the World Burns

A novel set in a scorched Australia urges us to pay attention to the things that matter.

BY DAMIEN CAYE

WHEN THE CHARACTERS in Richard Flanag-

an's intriguing new novel look at their

phones, the sentences run on without punctuation. It's a stylistic, reader-focused tic: We join the uninterrupted stream of phone and headlines from the cata-

strophic wildfires that scorched Australia a little over a year ago. We glide past "in-

cinerated kangaroos in fetal clusters of

struggling, charred koalas burst bloated

cattle on their backs."

Or maybe we pause the scroll as Anna, a

successful architect who is the book's pro-
tagonist, registers "a south coast town at 6

in the morning pitch black except for a

sickly red glow when the glow comes you

know how to go."

That uneasy choice — to skim and ig-
nore or to slow down and think — captures what Flanagan is up to with his eighth nov-
el, "The Living Sea of Waking Dreams." It is

partly a family drama about these mid-

dose-agers sifting trying to save their

mother from dying, but mostly it's a cry of

alarm about what we choose to pay atten-
tion to — and what gets lost in the scramble

for success and fastball design.

Flanagan, often described as Australia's great-

est living novelist, wants us to recon-

sider our real and digital surroundings. He

turns climate change's harsh realities into

rivers of words, and also magical visions.

Whole landscapes vanish in the novel with-

out anyone seeming to care, but soon, cur-
osely, does Anna, bit by bit, starting with

her fingers.

The result is a beguiling book that
takes listeners on a journey that is strange and

scary. It feels at first like a dizzying collage —

newspaper tear sheets, maps, and hand-scribbled

notes jotted onto a Salvador Dali canvas. Viewed from

one angle, it's Flanagan's "Climate change

novel," his first fictional attempt to channel

the fury of earlier essays condemning Aus-

tralia's readers for downplaying the dam-

age of a warming planet while mining

holes of coal.

But in the end, like Flanagan's best work

(he won the Booker Prize in 2014 for "The

Narrow Road to the Deep North"), the nov-

el grounds itself in human ideals. Love. Hope. Dignity. These values emerge as if they

were part of the mystery, slowly, with clues

that pile up behind a curtain of flames.

The story begins with Anna and her two

brothers, Tommy and Teres, trying to de-

cide what to do about their mother, Fran-

cisco, who has been rushed to a Tasmanian

hospital after a near-fatal brain bleed.

Teres, the third child of the family, is a

wealthy manager of solid certainty who in-

sists that death must be fought. Anna, her

hands in despair for reasons unknown, is terrified and repulsed by her mother's

fighting between life and death, but she

cannot resist the urge to assert control.

Then there's Tommy, a struggling artist

with a stutter, who has never had much in-

terest in climbing the achievement ladder:

he's the one who had been taking care of

Teres for 18 years. But when his more ac-

complished siblings agree to sue whatever

power and money they have to keep her

alive, he does little more than acquiesce.

Something is broken in him, in all of them.

Maybe it has to do with another sibling,

who died when they were young. Or maybe

it's something more.

"The Living Sea of Waking Dreams," like

Jonathan Franzen's best novels, quietly

traces a societal rift around wealth and

what amounts to a "good life." After 30

years of strong economic growth, which

isn't even the coronavirus pandemic has
done much to dent, Australia is near, per

capita, one of the wealthiest nations in

the world, if not the wealthiest.

Many Australians are still not sure how

to feel about that. The gap in income and

outlook between Francisco and Tommy on

one side and Anna and Teres on another

can be found in countless families and sub-

urbs, with impacts on the country and the

national psyche that are rarely examined.

Flanagan does well here at least try, be-

ginning with the losses and anxieties that

accompany greater comfort.

The land and sea, in his telling, are the

first and most visible victims.

Teres' the conscience of the family, can

hardly stand the rain of Tasmanian, an is-

land at the bottom of the earth, with

Whole landscapes vanish

without anyone seeming to care, and, so, too, does the heroine.

"beaches covered in crap, birds con-

suming supermarket shopping bags, a world disappearing?" Some of Flanagan's de-

scriptions carry a similarly bitter tone. On

her phone, Anna slides right into past plays-

ides and lycra yarn in danger of extinction

and a burned kola screaming on Face-

book. But there is sadness aside the out-

rage, like soft after a blizzard.

"The Living Sea of Waking Dreams" is es-

pecially strong when its characters — and

the reader — actually figure to lament

what's gone or going: Christmas beetles

with "pasty metallic shells"; emperor

gum moths, with their "powdered Persian

rug wings"; or orange-bellied parrots, as

small as "flying raccoons."

The vanishing animals carry more emo-

tional weight than the strange loss of An-

na's body parts, or the money that her vid-

eo-gaming son may be stealing. The natu-

ral world is Flanagan's muse, and his

heartbreak at its demise never fades, in

part because it's not the only thing to suffer

when people become "remarkably unob-

servant." Also endangered are the values

that keep families together, that keep soci-

ties together.

Flanagan bears the brunt of that failure
to pay attention. Anna and Teres, high on

their own urban self-regard, simply

refuse to let her go, insisting on every

treatment possible regardless of medical

advice or cruelty. They love their mother.

But they cannot quite make sense of some-

one who had less and expected less: "Fran-

cie had come of age in a world where the

self — its problems, its needs, its desires

and its vanities — was not accorded the

privacy of time or the dignity of reflection

for people of her lowly class."

So Francisco endures, and the gap be-

tween her children widens. Anna misses

her mother but did not live a good life because

she was not free to chase her dreams.

Tomy "felt Francis found meaning in

what she had." He saw her life "as a tri-

umph of her will against the odds: a wom-

an who never allowed her circumstances to

reduce her."

If there is hope in "The Living Sea of Wal-

king Dreams" — and in interviews, Flanagan

has said there is — it may be found in that

simple adhesion. Look outside in the

face and find meaning in what we have left.

Human failure cannot be solved when we're

scrolling, lost in our dreams, or when the air

is tobacco fumes. What we see, stream and

share will never matter as much as the lives

and landscapes we can observe, contempla-

tive and touch.
A Space for Living
A fire at a retirement home reveals the entangled lives of its inhabitants.

By JEN DOLL

DEBORAH MCNAMER'S new novel, "Aviary," we learn right away that things are off. It hasn't been a normal autumn, as evidenced by the leaves on the trees falling in droop. They have clung, ash-colored, to the branches, inspiring general unease.

AVIARY
By Deirdre McNam 258 pp. McSweeny's, $24.

and several letters to the newspaper, which invited a certified arborist to weigh in." McNam writes. Because of extreme cold at the wrong times, the process of separation between leaf and twig has been interrupted, the arborist explains, but there's still the fact that the whole thing just feels wrong.

Also something's up in this family as well.

JEN DOLL is the author of the young adult novels "Unclaimed Baggage" and the forthcoming "That's Debatable," as well as the memoir "Save the Date: The Occasional Misfortunes of a Serial Wedding Guest."

Pleasant Run, the 24-unit retirement home where McNamer sets much of her action. First, there's the droll post-office manager, Bertha Bohnelath, who has been installed by the town's new, cheaper property management company. Bohnelath has a penchant for wearing Hawaiian shirts and flip-flops with Bermuda shorts, but he's not just a sartorial menace. He threatens the tenants he's there to assist, sets accidental fires and isn't even a decent handyman.

Then a mysterious fire rages in Bohnelath's apartment, and he and another resident, Viola Silk, go missing. The chief fire inspector, Lander Malik, is brought in to figure out what happened, an investigation that entwines his life with those of three Pleasant Run inhabitants: Cassie Mc- Mactin, who has lost her husband and daughter and is contemplating her will to live; Lou Uberti, a landscape painter who has a few secrets of his own; and Viola Silk herself, who realizes that she put a target on her back by posting a letter about Bohnelath to the new property management company. (There's also Clayton Spooner, a bullied teenager who becomes a key part of the story.)

McNamer — who has written four novels before this one and who holds a faculty position with the Bennington Writing Seminars' M.F.A. program — is a wordsmith of rare artistry who can take your breath away with a sentence describing a daily average of weather. She's also good, combining flawless prose with cutting cultural commentary. For instance, Lander Malik and CassieMc- Mactin refer to President Trump as "Little Boy," a "so-called statesman" who was "rap- idly plunging the world into a kind of atom- nuclear blast by the misery shiver of dollar signs."

But McNamer's characters are the true prize, what with the multitudes they con- tain and the way their stories slowly un- spool and intermingle. Inspector Malik sees McMactin to "someone who knew something he never would about the se- cret of engagements," and what we have to share across age and place and experi- ence is inherent to the novel. Even when it hurts — and, if you have anything as a way of feeling, this novel will make you weep — "Aviary" is a cleansing anti- dote to the last few years of political and cultural turmoil, a relief to our aching health anxiety, a tonic for our social media sickness. Set in Montana, where McNamer was born and still lives, the novel concludes just before the co- nvigorous took hold in the United States; there appears toward the end a haunting hint of what's to come.

Now, a year after so much went wrong, this quietly important book offers hope as it tackles grief and isolation and our es- sential humanity. It is an incontrovertible fact that we live and we inevitably die. Yet, we're here until we're not, and it's what we do while we're here that changes everything. That, you might say, is the se- cret of engagements.

Rich in Spirit
A novel takes German bourgeois norms to task.

By IRINA DUMITRESCU

RENI is a writer and mother of four in Berlin who has just received her eviction notice. Her friends live together nearby in a building they designed themselves, a cross between commune and architectural showpiece. Reni wrote a book mocking them and their pet project, and now they cannot forgive her. Unfortunately, one of them holds her lease. As she faces the prospect of moving to an unfashionable suburb, she writes a letter to her eldest daughter, Ilse. She wants Ilse to know that the German promise of equal opportunities is a lie. You can't escape where you're from.

The setup of Adik Stilling's new novel, "Higher Ground," is also most of the story. Reni — whose name comes from Paradisi,

HIGHER GROUND
By Anka Stilling
Translated by Lise Jones

Greek for unlettered speech — spends much of her time in a box room, capping angrily. She recalls her mother's early dis- appointments in love, as well as her own. She writes accessory letters and deletes them. It's not that she was excluded from the building's social events; friends asked her to join them and offered to cover the down payment. But she refused the offer, and be- bought them their steady jobs and decent children. Above all she seems to resent herself for not getting a degree, for marry- ing another artist, for having four kids and no steady income.

"Higher Ground," out now in an uneven translation by Lise Jones, promises a bit- ing critique of bourgeois norms. Reni is meant to be the outsider, a figure we can see how shallow and delusional her well-off friends really are, the visionaries, the writer pun- ished for her honesty. The problem is that Reni is an outsider only in her own imagi- nation. In fact, it is, like the rest of her gang, a young middle-class woman from a thriving manufacturing city in West Ger- many, who came to the struggling capital in the 1980s expecting it to be at her feet. Berlin's traumatic history of separation and forgetting doesn't touch her. Her immi- grant population — around a fifth of Berlin residents are foreign-born — is a punch- line. At one point Reni pictures her friends considering whether to offer their poor apartment to refugees, that is, if they don't "have really high expectations" or behave like "animals." The scene seems to reveal the cultural prejudice of Reni's social circle, but the kicker is that it never happened. It takes place only in Reni's mind.

Reni's life as an artist has not given her nobler values or desires, only less money to pay for them. She is not pouty, as she occasional- ly realizes: "I remind myself that none of us has to suffer." As a German citi- zen, she receives child benefits, subsidized day care, free education through universi- ty and accessible health insurance. But she cannot afford to buy four children in Ma- jorca, so this will have to do for righteousness indignation. The novel's latter half is over- shadowed by the anxiety of the omnious pending "autumn holidays," when the fam- ily will be forced to spend time together at home, in the center of one of Europe's most vibrant cities. Ultimately, Reni's greatest fear is not of losing a hollow, hypocritical, but of having to mix with "overweight people wearing polyester-T-shirts with lo- gos" in the bauhaus.

A novel does not need a gripping plot or a likable protagonist. But if it forgets three dependable pleasures, it should offer read- ers something else: a compelling voice, a startling point of view, scintillating lan- guage. The novelist Thomas Bernhard was renowned for writing unpleasant charac- ters who cared about the fortunes of Aus- trian society, but their interminable tirades were funny and sharp. One wanted to be on their side. Reni's monologues is all bitter- ness and wit. The most frustrating thing about "Higher Ground" is that by the end, one sympathizes with the people it was meant to denounce.
There are many ways to depict anguish—through physical pain and torment, or through silence.

For this column, I’ve written in the past about Chris Ware’s “Gary Brown” (396 pages, 18 years in the making, and weighing in at 2.5 pounds). Soith’s “Clyde Fans” (478 pages, 20 years, 3.13 pounds) and Jason Lutes’s “Berlin” (360, 22, 3.3). New from DC MONSTERS (DC Vertigo Graphics, 82.99, 41 pages), a 25-year labor by the British cartoonist Barry Windsor-Smith, and you have nearly a century’s worth of cartooning in just four books. For 260 large-format, black-and-white pages, Windsor-Smith conveys gory scenes of horror and tender family scenes, nightmarish dreams and quiet moments of connection. What starts off in the Victorian-rich world of the Gothic EC comics of the ’50s morphs into a wide exploration of memory, as the monster of the book’s title escapes from the lab, wreaks havoc in a childhood home and listens to ghosts re-enact the tragedy of his youth for over 160 pages. Then things get really twisted.

In 1919 Ohio, a writer boy named Bobby Bailey is brutalized by his own father, losing an eye before his mother escapes in a truck. The scene shifts to California 55 years later, when a headlines-hungry director Bobbi visits an army recruiting office in California. She meets Elise McFarlane, a black sergent whom normal past betrays past psychological turmoil. McFarland identifies black sailors. Bobby as the perfect candidate for the ultimate monstrosity project. But when he’s roused, critics, seeing some shared history with the readers react.

McFarland, instead, gambling on the program’s latest scheme “to create an ideal superman — an ultimate warrior,” using methods brought over by Colonel Friedrich, a Nazi scientist. Although the almost page size, the comic is full of dialogue: “All dark walls and densely crowded faces, the panels like prison cells. Mutilated in chemicals, Bobby turns mute, massive and grotesque to behold, like a decaying Hulk. Permanently, what seemed poised to be a story of a twisted soul’s revenge instead turns inward. The clock ticks to the 1940s, as young Bobby and his mother, Janet, await father Tom’s return from the war, where he is serving as a German interpreter for the Army. His homecoming keeps getting delayed, for mysterious reasons: Meanwhile, the sympathetic deity who defend the updates falls for Janet. Once back from the war, Tom is shattered and abusive, having seen things he won’t discuss. The excerpts from Janet’s diary from the emotional core of the book. Windsor-Smith’s overblown prose style is subtle and more convincing here, as he writes in the voice of a woman widowed by the war in spirit if not fact.

In the ’40s, serials join the mad scientist Friedrich as “Dr. Frankenstein,” and the name of his ghastly project alludes to “The Modern Prometheus,” the subtitle of Mary Shelley’s

All dark walls and densely crowded faces, the panels like prison cells. But a more fascinating, precise can be found in Windsor-Smith’s own work — specifically, his take on Wolverson, the alien alienist with the fast-lung claws. Windsor-Smith began as an artist for Marvel in 1960, at age 19; he left a mark with “The Savage Sword of Conan” (written by Roy Thomas) and illustrated other properties, from the Avengers to Iron Man. In 1985, he was the sole creator of “Weapon X,” part of the Marvel Presents” anthology series. Here he tells Wolverson’s origin story in a way that strongly echoes Bobbi’s transformation into the dread Prometheus. A down-and-out man (Logan) is tapped to be the subject of a power-hungry professor’s inhuman experiment. Time after time, techniques push his body to the limit. In a 2018 piece for the Comics Journal, Matt Schorr wrote: “Weapon X is a sadistic deconstruction of the genre. ‘Physical suffering is the subject of this comic far more than its mate character, who spends most of the book unconscious or incommunicado,’ he notes. Here is a superhero comic that seems ‘not just to dislike superhero comics but to utterly hate them’ — cynically, furiously.”

If we put the genius of “Monsters” 15 years in the past, we have the artist already at work on it in the mid-90s. How much did this story influence 1992? “Weapon X,” or was the influence the other way around? It’s an oxymoron. On the bigger canvas of “Monsters,” Windsor-Smith favorably evokes the motifs of a single violent act backfiring and forward in time, access generations and nations and the barrier of life and death itself.

From ‘Monsters.’

INTERGENERATIONAL PAIN ALONG WITH BLOOD Margaret Kimball’s memoir and now I SELL THE FAMILY SECRETS (HarperOne, 256 pp., $18.00). Born and raised in Connecticut, Kimball is haunted by the knowledge that when she was 4, her mother, Elaine, attempted suicide while the rest of the family was at church. There’s also an eerie indication that her older brother, Ted, now suffers from paranoid thoughts. In the vein of Are You My Mother? Homes? Kimball’s shifts through (and reproduces) evidence — letters and newspaper clips, medical records and legal documents — to make sense of her past and present. Her parents would divorce when she was young, and her father’s remarriage seemed to spark Elaine’s first attempted stay at an institution.

Elaine lands in the hospital again during Kimball’s high school years. Kimball writes that when bipolar disorder transforms her own mother “from parent to stranger,” reality becomes frighteningly destabilized, “as if all the trees in all the world splintered into trunks for branches.” Shortly thereafter, when her father and stepmother are heading for divorce, Kimball comes home to see her beloved kid stepfather gone, replaced with a heart-breaking sight: “I’m LEFT FROM THE HOUSE BUT DON’ T FORGET I LOVE YOU BUBBA. She splits off her name backward.)

Whereas “Monsters” depicts its anguished characters in excruciating detail, the style of “Secrets” is literally disembodied. People are noticeably absent from these pages, which typically show the faces and interiors, cluttered with text boxes. (With one exception, people are only drawn as they appear in archival photos.) At first these layouts can look arbitrary, like computer-generated backdrops, but in the end, the narrative spaces take on a subtly mesmerizing quality. As Kimball’s story “what it means to lose people who are still alive.”

From ‘I Don’t Now I Spell the Family Secrets.’

ED PARK is the author of “Personal Days” and a Graphic Content columnist.
"The Second"

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

holding Southerners more inside the
clauses of the Second Amendment in the
Bill of Rights in order to assure themselves of
a fighting force willing to suppress slave
rebellion. On the other hand, she
maintains that racist practices have de-
prived Blacks of access to arms that might
have enabled them to defend themselves
in the absence of equal protection of law.

These discriminations and the antipathy
behind them, Anderson charges, have gen-
erated a hostile catalog of allegations that
spur the establishment of the United States
and that grow each day. She shows that the
specter of armed Blacks was so alarming
that white authorities erected fears
deliberately, enacting statutes after statute
with alterations that invariably broadened
prohibitions and intensified punishments.

For purposes of policing Blacks’ access
to firearms, differences in legal standards
between African-Americans who were free
and those who were enslaved were often
swept aside. A Virginia law enacted in 1729
provided that, under penalty of whipping,
"no Negro, mulatto or Indian whatsoever"
was allowed to possess a firearm. A Florida
law authorized white’s “to seize arms found
in the homes of slaves and free Blacks.” Af-
rican-Americans deemed to be in violation of
such prohibitions could be summarily punished
with up to 10 strokes on the bare
back, all “without benefit of judicial tri-
unal.”

Anderson notes that in the struggle for
independence from Britain, many white
Americans led resisted arming Blacks
who were willing to fight for the rebels. The
racial policy of the Continental Army var-
ied. At one point, it became “whites only.”
But the exigencies of war forced a recon-
sideration of that policy. The Continental
Army allowed masters to free slaves for militi-
ary service. They also allowed free Blacks
and former
slaves who enlisted. Virginia came
to recruit free Blacks. South Carolina, how-
ever, steadfastly refused. Its leaders said
that they were “more appalled by the prospect of Negroes with guns than of sub-
mission to King George.”

Resistance to arming Blacks for military
purposes continued. Only under the stress
of combat did Gen. Andrew Jackson accept
Black soldiers in the War of 1812 and Presi-
dent Abraham Lincoln’s Union
forces to enlist Blacks in the Civil War.
Growing acceptance for armed Blacks in
the military proved even more daunting.
Anderson notes that Black soldiers
were persistently reviled, harassed and
treated by brutal violence. Justifying racially
motivated violence dur-

ing Reconstruction, a white Southerner re-
marked that “the sight of Negro troops
stirred the bosoms of our [ex-Confederate]
soldiers with courageous madness.” In
1865, the mayor of Richmond, Texas, ac-
cused Black soldiers of firing on townspeo-
ples, killing one and badly injuring another.
Even though evidence undercut the
allegations, President Andrew Johnson ordered the arrest of his
war, William Moor-
ing Era as future president and chief jus-
tice of the Supreme Court), to impose with-
out due process dishonorable discharges on
all 187 of the Black soldiers who made up
the First Battalion, Twenty-Fifth In-
fantry (Colored). Eleven years later, in
the aftermath of an altercation in Houston that
claimed the lives of 16 whites, including
five police officers, and four Black serv-
ict’s) was similarly blinded by
racism as the authorities executed 19 Af-
rican-American soldiers and imprisoned 54
others.

Anderson narrates numerous episodes in
which Blacks were terrorized by gen-
terating mobs, often with the support of local
law enforcement officers, state National
Gurads or federal troops. She also re-
counts how Blacks have been disabled re-
peatedly from defending themselves by
authorities who encourage enthusiasm for
the rights of gun owners when they are white,
right hostile when they are Black and out-
right hostility when they are disadver-

ted African-Americans committed to challeng-
ing the racial status quo. “The Second” is
written with verve, painted with broad
strokes and dotted with memorable anec-
dotes and vivid quotations.

Anderson’s account, however, is waiting
in important respects. She argues uncon-
vincingly, in the face of formidable schol-
arship to the contrary, that the aim to pro-
protect slavery was the predominant motive
behind the Second Amendment. She
views that the Second Amendment was
the result of [James Madison’s determina-
tion to save Patrick Henry’s obsession

about Virginia’s vulnerability to slave re-

torts, seduce enough anti-Federalists to
get the Constitution ratified and stifle the
demonstrated willingness of the South to
secede the United States if slavery were
not protected.” The Second Amendment, she
claims, “came into being...steeped in anti-
Blackness, motivated in the desire to
keep African-descended people rightsless
and powerless, and as yet another base tool
to keep the South mollified and will-
ing to stay aligned with the grand experi-
ment of the United States of America.”

Because the centrality of racism to
American history has often been obscured,
revisions adding racial realities are ur-

gently needed. Racism, however, for all its
importance, is not the only major influence in
the country’s affairs. Abdul Bowar Mayer’s
careful explanation of the debate over the
Second Amendment in “The Bill of Rights:
Creation and Reconstruction” (1998) points
to considerations that Anderson no-
tably studies, particularly “deep anxiety

In Anderson’s telling, dread of
Blacks was the essential, overriding
cause of the Second Amendment.

about a potentially abusive federal mili-
tary.” Anderson does not ignore altogether
such concerns. She alludes to “the anti-
Federalists’ fretted fear of a strong
central government” as a factor in their calcu-

lations. But in her telling, dread of
Black was the essential, overriding, motive
of the Second Amendment, an enticement
“rented in fear of Black people, to keep
them their rights, to keep them from tak-
ing liberty!” Such claims significantly over-
state the role of race in the amendment’s
development.

Finally, Anderson, who is also the author of
several influential books, including, most recently, “One Person, No Vote: How

Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our De-

cocracy,” provides little useful guidance
regarding contemporary approaches to
the matter of “race and guns.” A historian
need not be a policy analyst. But Anderson
wades into the volatile debate over the le-

gal and wisdom of competing views on
gun possession. Citing a Supreme Court
case in which, she says, fellows were
striped of the right to bear arms, she
writes disparagingly that “this ruling, of
course, bill disproportionately on African-
Americans, because an unequal justice system had unnaturally created mass in-

carceration and imprisoned the Black
community.” She elides completely the is-

sue of whether there might be good reason

In Anderson’s view, Blacks are racially vic-
timized whether gun control is permitted
(Thus perhaps reducing the amount of gun-
fires unleashed on the streets) or whether
gun control is restricted (Thus perhaps giv-
ing ordinary folk more scope for self-de-
defense). Anderson acknowledges the dilem-
ma but offers no advice for moving beyond
it. “This is not a pro-gun or anti-gun book,”
she asserts. “Guns are not the issue here.
It’s Black people... The Second Amendment is so inherently, deeply flawed, so based on Black exclusion and
depression, that... it can never actually redi-
mate the way to civil and human rights for 47.5 mil-

lions of African-Americans.” For Anderson,
there is no better or worse alternative, only
an unchanging and unchangeable racial
curse. ❄️
as an icon of personal dignity and civic virtue. We rarely, if ever, stop to think that the biggest obstacles that Levin and his band of Black Americans confronted during the Jim Crow era were not racist dema-
gogues, such as the Alabama governor George Wallace, nor white supremacists, such as the Ku Klux Klan. The biggest threat to the struggle for Black citizenship and equality in America during this period was, as it remains ours, the police.

"America on Fire: The United History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s," by Elizabeth Hinton, a Yale Uni-
versity professor of law, history and Afri-
can-American studies, and one of the coun-
try's leading scholars of mass incarcer-
ation, offers a groundbreaking, deeply re-
searched and profoundly heart-breaking account of the origins of our national crisis of police violence against Black Americans. Her book conceptualizes the Black free-
dom struggle between the 1960s reconven-
tion of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Lives Matter 2.0 demonstrations that galvanized the nation, and much of the world, in 2020.

Through 19 crispily written and lucidly analytical chapters, Hinton refrares the conventional understanding of the long summers of the 1960s and their aftermath. She begins by challenging the common use of the term "riot" to describe the civil dis-
turbances that threatened to shake America at the time. Hinton reminds us that the racial massacres that formed an archipelago of Black suffering and death from Springfield, Ill., in 1908 to Chicago in 1919 and Tulsa, Okla., in 1921, were racist, in-
spired by whites, although they remain unlabeled as such.

Indeed, also have been the violent clashes, of course, with the police, that have broken out in the course of the 21st century. In the present, the term "can only be properly under-
stood as an expression of economic and po-
tical insurgency." "America on Fire" persuas-
ively expands the frame of these act-
as from a discrete six- or seven-year pe-
riod in the '60s to encompass, in evolving stages, every decade since. By her calcula-
tion — she includes a 25-page timeline of dates and locations — between July 1964 and April 2001 nearly 3,000, very violent, urban rebellions erupted in the United States in response to the racially biased po-
licy of housing projects, public schools, parks, neighborhoods and street corners. America learned the exact same wrong lessons from the burning embers of Watts, Newark and Detroit, setting the stage for a shift from the War on Poverty to a War on Crime funded by the 1968 Safe Streets Act, which put the federal government in the business of crime control and encouraged local police departments to identify poten-
tial criminals before they committed crimes — in short, to try to manage prob-
lems caused by systemic racism beyond residents' control.

Hinton recounts, in finely grained detail, how new resources devoted to policing Black communities in cities such as York, Pa., and Stockton, Calif., exacerbated the racial segregation, disarmament, vio-
ence and punishment that would perman-
tly scar the entire nation. The 1965 Kerner Commission report on the urban upheavals of the '60s became an instant best-seller that urged wholesale-structural changes in policing, social welfare policies, employment, health care and more. But the commission's recommendations were ig-
ored in favor of equipping cities with police departments that had "verifiable ac-
tivities at their disposal."

"America on Fire" documents scores of confrontations among Black communities, the police and white vigilantes in small and midsize cities undergoing a grueling process of school desegregation, emerging Black electoral power and inequality target-
ted by a rapidly decentralizing econ-
omy. The police became a ubiquitous pres-
ence, surveilling, harassing and intimidat-
ing Black communities at the precise mo-
te that Great Society programs pro-
gressed. The message was simple: Hinton


tells us, "Black people should get used to the police being part of their pickup bas-
ketball games, walks home from work and family barbecues." The expansion of law enforcement paralleled the rise of Black electoral officials, creating a Dickensian fork in the road for much of the African-
American community. Those able to es-

cape from housing projects, poverty and segregated neighborhoods found access to unprecedented opportunities just as the po-
lice were designated the primary enforc-
ers of the nation's rigid color lines.

In a very real sense, "America on Fire" chronicles how low enforcement became the nation's main policy tool both for stem-
ning urban unrest and for stifling Black demands for citizenship and dignity. What Hinton characterizes as "the cycle" — "overpolicing" practices that resulted in Black rebellion, which led to more violent countermeasures by law enforcement, backed by elected officials from both major parties — instability transformed not just big cities but "smaller municipalities that are left out of standard accounts of this era.

In the late '60s and '70s, police depart-
ments from Alexandria, Va., to Atlanta, Par-


Demonstrators in Minneapolis in April, during the trial of Derek Chauvin.


PENIEL E. JOHNSON is a professor of public affairs and history at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of newly released "The Jefferson and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr."


THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 17
Behind the Jim Crow Curtain

On May 31, 1921, a prosperous Black community was preparing for a celebration.

By BRENT STAPLES

THE CITY OF TULSA, OKLA., unbleached hell on earth 100 years ago this month when it erupted into a show of white terror and burned the prosperous African-American community of Greenwood to the ground. Thirty-five square blocks of homes, churches and schools — along with a storied business district known as Black Wall Street — had been systematically torched and reduced to ash.

By creating “Opal’s Greenwood Oasis” and “Unspeaking: The Tulsa Race Massacre” for young people, the authors of two new picture books have remembered that many who survived the fiery conflagration of 2021 were children at the time.

Kinsey Bookier was 8. Seventy-five years later, he recalled hiding in the attic while white vigilantes marched his father away at gunpoint and set the house ablaze. As Kinsey and his siblings fled through streets where everything was gone, the eldest of them asked, “I don’t think so, but we are in deep trouble.” Elsewhere in Greenwood, 8-year-old Ethel House sat on her porch and heard what sounded to be hollisters but soon realized was gunfire. After driving the Houseys from their home, white marauders stripped it of valuables, destroying what they could not carry away.

“EWOD Lett was 14,” his family nearly enragéd in his grandfather’s wagon but ran ahead of a white man who used the sword and shot Ethel House’s grandfather dead. “My mother lets out a scream,” he recalled in the 1990s. “Oh, you have killed my father, you’ve killed him,” and I thought he was going to do the same thing to my mother.”

African-Americans came to what is now Oklahoma in the first half of the 19th century on the Trail of Tears — as property of slaveholding Native Americans — and later as freedmen, numbered for the purposes of African-Americans from the white supremacyist South. Yet Americans raised with the Hollywood version of history are often surprised to learn that there was a significant Black presence on the frontier and that Greenwood was a nexus of economic power commanded by a Black elite including doctors, lawyers, bootleggers, real estate developers and newspaper editors.

The authors of “Opal’s Greenwood Oasis,” “Unspeaking: The Tulsa Race Massacre for young people, the authors of two new picture books have reminded us that.

From “Opal’s Greenwood Oasis.”

From “Unspeaking: The Tulsa Race Massacre.”

lines and that called for “separate neighborhoods, schools, phone booths, and railroad and streetcar coaches.”

Like “Opal’s Greenwood Oasis,” “Unspeakable” celebrates the flourishing world that Greenwood had built behind the Jim Crow curtain. Weatherford describes the enclaves all-Black school system as a place “where some say Black children got a better education than whites.”

Children’s Books / American History

BRENT STAPLES writes editorials on politics and culture for The Times and is the author of the mỹs ’Parallel Flow.”

SUNDAY, MAY 30, 2021
COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS
SALES PERIOD OF MAY 9 – 15

Bestseller
Fiction

1. WHILE JUSTICE SLEEPS, by Stacey Abrams. (Doubleday). When Joshua Wyne slips into a coma, his law clerk, Avery Ryan, must unravel the clues of a centennial case. (3)

2. SOOLEY, by John Grisham. (Scribner). Sizemore Legal receives a basketball scholarship to North Carolina Central and determines to bring his family over from a civil war-ravaged South Sudan. (3)

3. THE LAST THING HE TOLD ME, by Laura Dave. (Ecco). Hannah Hall discovers truths about her missing husband and the daughter from a previous relationship. (2)

4. THAT SUMMER, by Jennifer Weiner. (Minx). Daisy Shawmacker receives emails intended for a woman heading to a more glamorous life and finds there was more to this accident, and this summer, than she realized. (1)

5. PEOPLE WE MEET ON VACATION, by Emily Henry. ( Berkley). Opposites Poppy and Alex meet to vacation together—one more time in hopes of saving their relationship. (1)

6. 21ST BIRTHDAY, by Jessica Peterson and Maxine Farrow. (Little, Brown). The 21st book in the Women’s Murder Club series. (2)

7. PROJECT HAIL, MARY, by Andy Min. (Ballantine). Rmeld Grace awakes from a long sleep alone and far from home, and the fate of humanity rests on his shoulders. (2)

8. WHERE THE CRAWHEADS DROWN, by Delia Owens. (Putnam). A young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect. (1)

9. A GAMBLED MAN, by David Baldacci. (Grand Central). Apollo Arche, a World War II veteran, seeks to apprentice with Willie Dash, a private eye, in a corrupt California town. (1)

10. THE FOUR WINDS, by Nicola Yoon. (St. Martin’s). As dust storms roll during the Great Depression, Ellis must choose between saving the family and farm or heading West. (1)

Bestseller
Nonfiction

1. KILLING THE WHIS, by Bill O’Reilly and Martin Dugard. (St. Martin’s). The 10th book in the conservative commentator’s killing series looks at organized crime in the United States during the 20th century. (4)

2. YEARBOOK, by Seth Rogen. (Crown). A collection of personal essays by the actor, writer, producer, director, entrepreneur, and philanthropist. (1)

3. BEAUTIFUL ELEPHANT, by Billie Eilish. (Grand Central). A memoir by the multiple Grammy Award-winning recording artist. (1)

4. THE PREMONITION, by Michael Lewis. (Harper). 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 nicknamed the Wolvershines. (1)

5. WHAT HAPPENED TO YOYO?, by Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey. (Farrar). An approach to dealing with trauma that offers an essential question used to investigate it. (1)

6. THE DETAIL, by Andrew McCarthy. (Grand Central). The travel writer and television director describes coming of age in the New York area and starring in iconic 1980s movie roles. (1)

7. THE ROSSER MAPS, by Malcolm Gladwell. (Little, Brown). A look at the key players and outcomes of precision bombing during World War II. (1)

8. THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE, by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin). How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery. (3)

9. GREENLIGHTS, by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown). The Academy Award-winning actor shares snapshots from the decades he kept over the last 35 years. (1)

10. UNHARMED, by Glennon Doyle. (Dial). The activist and public speaker describes her journey of learning to control her inner voice. (1)

Editors’ Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review

GHOSTS OF NEW YORK, by Jim Lewis. (West Virginia University Press). Lewis’s haunting novel is built of vignettes whose links become gradually clear, involving a dealer in hoodoo artifacts, the Ivy-educated sisters of a West African family, an East Village art critic who has a rare sleeping voice, and a photographer who just back from a decade abroad.

LOVE IN COLOR: Mythical Tales From Around the World, Retold, by Rob Banville. (Harper). Tales from the Middle East and the Americas, and other regions. (1)

LIVING IN COLOR: Mythical Tales From Around the World, Retold, by Rob Banville. (Harper). Tales from the Middle East and the Americas, and other regions. (1)

THE PREMONITION: A Pandemic Story, by Michael Lewis. (Harper). As the Amazon chef faces an imminent threat of closure and loss, his experiences are echoed in interviews with others who have trained to counter the pandemic. (1)

HOT STEAM, by Fiona Maye. (Penguin). A murder trial featuring a determined schoolteacher and a philosophy professor, this novel by a Brazilian writer is also a spiritual and philosophical treatise on the connection of a tearful 8-year-old and a downcast 69-year-old. (1)


THINK AGAIN: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know, by Adam Grant. (Penguin). A book about how we can be confident in our ability to uncover the truth while acknowledging we may be wrong at present. (1)

The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: nytimes.com/books
Sunny Side Up: Wherever she goes, Sunny Hostin leaves stacks of books in her wake, like a phone interview at the co-host of "The View." Describing her voracious approach: "I read a couple chapters and then I pick up another book and I put that one down. I know I drive my husband a little bit crazy because wherever I end up, there are about five books on side tables." When it came to her occult reading, Hostin noticed a dearth of books centered on women of color. "I don’t get it. If I’m being honest. Is it the trope that Black women aren’t going to pick up these books? Of course we do read, and of course we do read for fun," Hostin said. "I think part of it is some of these Black women have pretty dark. There are a lot of books that reflect that experience, but we also want to read books of Black joy and love, very books with lust and sex. We want that." So Hostin wrote the book she wanted to read—and she has two more in the works. Her debut novel, "Summer on the streets," which recently touched down at No. 1 on the hardcover fiction list, is, in the first in a trilogy of books set in historically Black beach communities. This first installment takes place in Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard; the next two will venture to Long Island’s Sag Harbor and Highland Beach in Maryland.

Hostin said, "When I started writing, I knew that I didn’t want the book to be too light because that is not the experience of women of color in this country. But that doesn’t mean the context can’t be beautiful. Oak Bluffs can be grounded in beauty and fun and allure." The New York City native recalled her inaugural visit to Martha’s Vineyard, where she now rents a house every summer and hopes to buy her own place someday. When she first arrived at the ferry terminal in Woods Hole, she was a teenager with $10 in her pocket. "So, I think it was $100 to spend. Fourth of July weekend with a friend. I couldn’t imagine getting on a ferry in a car even though I had been on the Staten Island Ferry. I remember," Hostin said. "We got out of the car and walked on the top deck and then we see this island approaching, but what was remarkable to me was that we were two people on this boat. When we got off in Oak Bluffs, I said, ‘Do all these people live here?’ It was sort of the first time in my life that I didn’t feel alone; I was in the majority. That’s a very empowering experience for a kid, especially for a Black one."
PAPERBACK

Paperback Trade Fiction

1. A DAY IN THE WILDERNESS, by Dany Laferrière (Random House). A man who had a... 1
2. A STAND-UP MAN, by Dave Eggers (Knopf). A long time ago, in a candle-lit... 3
3. A MISTY PLACE, by Mary Doria Russell (The Free Press). A... 2
4. A LADY IN LOVE, by Edith Wharton (The Modern Library). A... 10
5. A PHANTOM TALE, by John Saul (Grand Central Publishing). A... 7
6. A HUNGER FOR RED, by Sara Shepard (Harlequin Teen). A... 1
7. A HARD DAY'S NIGHT, by Mark Helprin (Doubleday). A... 1
8. A WINTER'S TALE, by Ana María Matute (Talesisliterarias.com). A... 1
9. ASTRONAUT'S DAUGHTER, by Alan E. Nourse (Tor). A... 3
10. A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT, by Hauke Lübeck (Harper Perennial). A... 2
11. A FUGITIVE PLANET, by Robert J. Sawyer (Wildside Books). A... 4
12. A NEW YORKER, by Joseph Roth (The Modern Library). A... 1
13. A MAN WHO LIVED TOO MUCH, by Erle Stanley Gardner (Harlequin). A... 1
14. A REQUIEM FOR AN ANGEL, by Linsey Miller (Dystopian). A... 1
15. A Bittersweet Summer, by Sarah Dessen (Scholastic). A... 1

Paperback Nonfiction

1. A WOMAN IN THE Window, by Walter Darby Bannard (Alfred A. Knopf). A woman who... 1
2. A WATERFALL OF STARS, by Peter Guralnick (Hachette). A... 1
3. A HERITAGE OF WAR, by John Kenneth Galbraith (Alfred A. Knopf). A... 1
4. A SUN ON FIRE, by Adam Poss (Simon & Schuster). A... 1
5. A SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION, by John Henry Overton (Hachette). A... 1
7. A HEART OF STONE, by John Grisham (Random House). A... 1
8. A NIGHTMARE AT CRAWFORD, by David Talbot (Hachette). A... 1
9. A MISTRESS OF INSTRUMENTS, by John Keats (The Bodley Head). A... 1
10. A GIRL WHO WALKS ON WIND, by John Ryan (Harper Perennial). A... 1
11. A HUNGER FOR RED, by Sara Shepard (Harlequin Teen). A... 1

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THE KINDEST LIE
By Nancy Jo Johnson
336 pp. Morrow. $27.99.

It’s November 2008 in Chicago, Obama is about to win the presidency, and the Bronzeville resident Ruth Tuttles sexy, stylish, marketing executive husband, Xavier, is eager for her to have a baby. Or 2.3 of them. Ruth is also well employed, if not exactly excelling, as a chemical engineer tinkering with detergent formulas. They are young, successful and Black.

But while Xavier was being “bawdy,” Ruth is from blue-collar Canton, Ind., home to a defense auto parts plant and her deepest secret. At 17, she had a baby, gave him up for adoption and left in her old Pontiac, “still heavy with her burden,” for a scholarship to Yale. Eleven years later, she’s increasingly tormented by dreams of her son, hungry, helpless and stuck in the dead end that is Gunton.

Ruth can’t go forward until she goes back, so she heads home for Christmas, determined to find her son, only to be stonewalled by the grandmother who raised her. She’ll end up spending the entire holiday season piecing together the puzzle of his, and her own, identity.

Johnson delicately in Raceway language (Xavier’s eyes are “as soft and brown as chocolate-covered in bloom”), and employs a few slyly masterful devices, including a Dickensian character called Midnight, a motherless white boy Ruth befriended in Canton. The preternaturally wise Midnight, about the age of her lost 15-year-old, feels like a contrivance, but that doesn’t stop us from getting attached to him.

We get attached to Ruth, too. Driven to achieve but passive and almost prim in her personal life, Ruth is in a mass of contradictions. She believes she’s surrounded in giving up her child, while her grandmother sees her own covert actions as righteous. Johnson’s rich examinations of ambivalences in this moral dilemma take center stage, but institutional racism and its constant, draining impact are the boards these plays stand on. And can’t escape. Right after the joy of Obama’s election, an encounter with a white police officer on a train reminds Ruth of that: “The clarity of a new day trimmed their fears as it always had, making it dumb near impossible to take flight.”

The Kindest Lie is in an easy, accessible novel filled with hard, important truths.

ACTS OF DEEPERATION
By Megan Nolan
288 pp. Little, Brown. $27.

When the unnamed narrator of “Acts of Deepereation” introduces her father to her half-Danish, half-Irish, 100 percent withhold- ing boyfriend, her father is warm and effec- tive while Curian is “passably convivial.”

Over a few pints, as Curian bumblescrams about being a freelance art critic, in Dublin, the narrator chews a hangnail. Wordlessly, Curian moves her hand away from her mouth while continuing to talk about himself.

The young woman, a college dropout with an entry- level job, a drinking problem and little self-es- timation, tells us she might have been slightly pleased with the “crazy acts’ if it weren’t for her father’s attentive eyes. Later he asks her if she and Curian are “always like that, or nice to each other?”

She’s stated, that they gave off this impression, but her father is probing for the not-so-nice places, of which there are many. Our narrator is particularly vulnerable to Curian. She accommodates to excess, equates partner- ship with “being real” and believes love “validates the rotten moments you would otherwise be wasting while you practice being a person.” Her body looks “more coherent” to her after sex than before. Bruce for impact: This is another smoking, cutting, screwing journey into the love life of an angry Irish-American (remember, Sally Rooney-style is a publishing trend, not a national diagnosis).

It’s agonizing watching our heroine not just endure but welcome Curian’s subjugation to be “real.” Curian keeps his besotted around — as some men do, just in case — while staying in close touch with his ex, Freja, an apparent beacon of worthiness. The narrator reads all their emails, examines every photo. “I made it so that suffering was a kind of work,” she says. What makes it worth it for the reader to stick around? Even if you’ve read this story before or lived it, Nolan’s raw and unam- bitiously insightful writing plumbs in a way that will shed new light onto wounds both healed and open — and possibly save some other nameless woman the suffering. She tells the truth about obsession and drives it of all allure.

THE NORTHERN REACH
By W. S. Winstead
240 pp. Flatiron. $25.95.

Mentally inserting the word “composite” into the phrase “a novel” on the cover of Winslow’s debut, “The Northern Reach,” will ease the reader from desperately trying to get oriented via the family trees sprinkled throughout. These are 10 loosely connected stories (plus an 11th hung on a tenuous thread) spread across four generations of Raines, Martins, Moody’s and others in the fictional community of Welbridge, Maine.

Three hours from Portland, Welbridge sits on the Northern Reach and is home to lobstermen, hardrob- ble farmers and do-no-tucks, the worst of whom live in a swampy part of town known as Moodyville. There are blueberry benners nearby, as well as some thrift stores and “a herd of auto parts stores.” Winslow captures the ambiance of a perennially downtrodden Down East. In her telling it is a joyless place, shabbily rather than gritty; gritty would implypluck we nearly see.

An exception in Victoria Moody, who fetched town for Portland after high school. She describes the home of her Quebecois grandmother, “Frenche” Gagnon Moody, as “a crap plantation of the first order.” Victoria is men- tioned in two other stories, but she’s the star of “Planting Tiger,” in which she reluctantly attends her father Tiger’s funeral on a February day in 1992.

Her faceerfects Victoria has not been transparent with him but is still shocked that Victoria’s father won a fowl and he allegedly dead mother is alive and wearing a red miniskirt. “Still rougher than the back of a ditch,” mores Victoria’s aunt and unofficial foster mother, Ear- los, whose familiar scent, “Jean Nalt toilet water mixed with Niagara spray starch,” fills her niece with warring desires to be a brave and her.

Despite such evocative and regionally true writing, “The Northern Reach” lacks narrative glue. Two genera- tions of Doc Nordens deliver babies and had news, and there are regular appearances of photo and silent film. But that’s not enough. Without a lymph to carry the reader along, someone like Olive Kittridge (top candi- date: Earlos), the reader may feel like Victoria, eyeing an exit out of the misery.
FLOURISHES, CURLICUES, FLOWERS AND SCROLLS

The editors of the Book Review, which was founded in 1898, liked to tinker with its appearance in its early years. Although photos already appeared in other parts of the paper, these came only later to the Book Review. The publication turned instead to typography — some of it quite fanciful — to set its distinctive-looking pages apart. The Book Review’s logo changed as its name did. First it was called The New York Times Saturday Review of Books and Art; then it became The Saturday Review. In 1911, when publication moved from Saturday to Sunday with the hope that it would “be read with more thoughtful attention . . . when the subscriber is free from the cares and demands of week-day vocations,” it was called The New York Times Review of Books. It was only in 1922, when a brief merger with The New York Times Magazine ended, that it became known as The New York Times Book Review.

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

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