“MANUSCRIPTS DON’T BURN,” says the fiendish Woland in Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel “The Master and Margarita.” This stirring claim is often taken to mean that great art never perishes, but it’s certainly not literally true. Manuscripts are only slightly more robust than the humans who write them. Fire, mildew, carelessness, water, censorship, indifference and a need for cheap paper have annihilated many undoubted masterpieces. A bibliophile in Anthony Doerr’s new novel, “Cloud Cuckoo Land,” reminds us how many of the works of the Greek tragedians have been lost: “We know that at least one thousand of them were written and performed in Greek theaters in the fifth century B.C. You know how many we have left? Thirty-two.”

In fact, there’s a vast notional library of vanished books that includes Aristotle’s treatise on comedy, Shakespeare’s “Cardenio,” Melville’s “The Isle of the Cross,” several books of the Bible, Byron’s memoirs, the second volume of Gogol’s “Dead Souls,” and “Inventio Fortunata,” a 14th-century travel book about the Arctic.

“Cloud Cuckoo Land,” a follow-up to Doerr’s best-selling novel “All the Light We Cannot See,” is, among other things, a paean to the nameless people who have played a role in the transmission of ancient texts and preserved the tales they tell. But it’s also about the conso-
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THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY 2021, edited by David Lehman and Tracy K. Smith. (Scribner, cloth, $35; paper, $20.) “I believe poetry kept me from succumbing to despair in 2020,” Smith writes in her introduction to this annual anthology. Touching on Covid, George Floyd and much else that’s timely and timeless, it has work from Louise Glück, Terrance Hayes, Ada Limón and others.

BOOMERANG: Poetry, by Achy Obejas. (Beacon, paper, $16.) A sense of place and history anchors this bilingual volume, where even seduction might evoke a “layer of the dead” or “the plexus of light, / sound, water.” Obejas moves naturally and exhilaratingly from the personal to the political, from intimacy to activism.

MUTINY, by Phillip B. Williams. (Penguin Poets, paper, $20.) The mutiny that gives Williams’s second collection its title is a wholesale rebellion against a culture that too often erases Black queerness; with punchy lines and formal play, the poems here make equal room for rage and tenderness.

MY DARLING FROM THE LIONS, by Rachel Long. (Tin House, paper, $16.95.) “A diary / isn’t a diary till / you won’t show anyone,” the London-born Long writes in this warm, expansive debut, which plumbs aspects of female identity with verve and aplomb. Love, motherhood, Black culture: She shows it all.

VANDERBILT: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty, by Anderson Cooper and Katherine Howe. (Harper, $30.) The CNN anchor traces his family origins over nearly four centuries to tell the story of how his great-great-great-grandfather Cornelius Vanderbilt built vast shipping and railroad empires and how subsequent generations squandered them.

FLOATING IN THE DEEP END, by Patti Davis. (Liveright, $26.95.) The daughter of Ronald Reagan reveals the challenges of caring for her father and her revelations about his life after his Alzheimer’s diagnosis.

MY LIFE IN FULL: Work, Family, and Our Future, by Indra Nooyi. (Portfolio, $28.) The former PepsiCo chief executive opens up about her upbringing in India, studying at Yale and the sacrifices she made on the way to running a Fortune 50 company.

THINGS ARE AGAINST US, by Lucy Ellmann. (Biblioasis, $24.95.) Ellmann tackles the climate crisis, war and feminism in this collection of 14 searing essays on the beauty industry, ecotourism, crime fiction, Donald Trump and more.
September 30, 1919

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In his review of Paul Sabin’s “Public Citizens: The Attack on Big Government and the Remaking of American Liberalism” (Sept. 5), Timothy Noah agrees with Sabin that it is time to put to rest the notion that Al Gore’s defeat in the 2000 presidential election was due to Ralph Nader’s “spoiler” candidacy.

Not so quick, please. That George W. Bush beat Gore with a “mere 537 Florida votes,” as Noah points out, makes the sizable 97,488 votes that Nader received all the more important. Surely Nader’s name on the ballot pulled some votes away from Gore.

absent Nader’s candidacy, perhaps some of those votes would have been cast for others, or not at all. But it is far from a stretch to think that a significant portion of them, if only a few thousand, would have gone to Gore, giving him Florida’s 25 electoral votes and the national election.

Kenneth Ragland
San Pedro, Calif.

Worlds and Words

To the Editor:
I was both surprised and thrilled to see Amy Kurzweil’s illustrated reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin’s wonderful novel “Always Coming Home” (Aug. 13).

Introduced to the book by a friend when it was first published — accompanied by a cassette of music from the Kesh people — I finally read it recently. It is a feat of world (and word-) building à la Tolkien, and too little known. I am glad that the Book Review has brought its pleasures to a wider audience.

Alan Goldman
University Heights, Ohio

Bright New World

To the Editor:
On Brandon Taylor’s review of Sally Rooney’s third novel, “Beautiful World, Where Are You” (Sept. 12): The book struck me as a satire and a literary tour-de-force, evidence that the novel lives on.

Chapter 12 seemed to me to be Rooney’s modern riposte to Dostoyevsky’s “Grand Inquisitor”; Chapter 14 could be her update and nod to a 19th-century British sense and sensibility. Throughout, the voice of J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield echoed, as did the sentence style of Hemingway — terse, declarative, deadpan descriptive and even masculine! Tolstoy’s inclusion of expository commentary at the end of some chapters of “War and Peace” is mirrored by Rooney at the beginning of most of hers. The clinching clues that this young lady of genius intends a satire to great literature and a satire of current social, political and publishing conventions are the main male characters and the sex scenes: perfect, complete idealizations of contemporary, feminist, politically correct men and sex. Brilliant.

I imagine Rooney might have been urged to hurry her third book, make it longer and freely strut her stuff. She sure did. With earth’s population of eight billion living longer, receiving more education and connecting worldwide, gifted young people are appearing everywhere in every human endeavor: science, business, sports and even literature. I find it encouraging.

Joseph V. Mortillaro Jr.
Binghamton, N.Y.

9/11 Reading

To the Editor:
At the risk of being one of many to point out omissions in Dwight Garner and Jennifer Szalai’s essay “Literature Since 9/11” (Sept. 5), I would like to speak up for the inclusion of “Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close,” by Jonathan Safran Foer.

This novel was published in 2005, shortly after the events themselves by publishing standards. And even then it “metabolized” 9/11 and its aftershocks.” Foer’s focus is not only on how one young boy deals with the event and his own grief, but also on how New Yorkers in each borough and everyone around the world at many stages of life do as well in the context of other events both great and small.

Among other elements, the book deeply examines the mysteries of growing up, parenthood, the presence or absence of God, the struggle of belief, connection, communication, visual culture and the book as physical object. In its motif of duality, so well expressed in its final image of a half-dark and half-light page, it brings into view the paradoxical individuality and interrelationality of all of us and our experiences as well as our ambivalence to this fact, lending additional meaning to the image of the twin towers themselves.

Matthew Kubacki
Staten Island

Letters

TO THE EDITOR:
Garner and Szalai’s list of outstanding recent war novels omits Michael Pitre’s “Fives and Twenty-Fives.”

Narrated in part by an Iraqi interpreter who was working on his master’s thesis (on “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”), it provides insight into those who helped the United States in the war.

Kim Cox
El Cajon, Calif.

The Nader Effect

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In his review of Paul Sabin’s “Public Citizens: The Attack on Big Government and the Remaking of American Liberalism” (Sept. 5), Timothy Noah agrees with Sabin that it is time to put to rest the notion that Al Gore’s defeat in the 2000 presidential election was due to Ralph Nader’s “spoiler” candidacy.

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Kenneth Ragland
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Alan Goldman
University Heights, Ohio
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“A lively tale of growing up lower-middle-class in Brooklyn; a gossipy account of scrambling up the comedy ladder from tabloid gag writer to Oscar winner . . . This memoir is for the most part a pleasure to read and entertaining company. . . . You’d have to be a real sourpuss not to laugh at the fusillade of one-liners, two-liners, three-liners and so on.”
—Peter Biskind, Los Angeles Times

“He has an authentic and easygoing voice on the page.”
—New York Times

“A brisk, vivid, and extremely funny account.”
—Commentary magazine

“An enjoyable excursion into the mind, personality, and delicious whimsy of Woody Allen . . . one of our finest filmmakers and a man of droll wit, who came of age as an artist in the 1970s, just in time for his unique combination of cynicism and romanticism, as old gods died and new ones failed to appear.”
—Jim Delmont, Omaha Dispatch

“It was a laugh a minute.” —The Star-Ledger
Amor Towles

The novelist, whose new book is ‘The Lincoln Highway,’ doesn’t view work as ‘commercial’ or ‘literary.’ ‘I’m more interested in distinguishing books that are well written, rich and multilayered from those that aren’t.’

What books are on your night stand? For the last 16 years, I’ve been reading with three friends. Every month, we meet in a restaurant in New York City to discuss a novel, arriving at 7 and lingering until they close the place. We typically pursue projects. One spring we read Henry James’s “The Portrait of a Lady,” Gustave Flaubert’s “Madame Bovary,” George Eliot’s “Middlemarch” and Leo Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina,” a project we referred to as “19th-Century Wives Under Pressure.” Often, we’ll read five or six works by a single writer chronologically. We’re about to launch into a survey of the Australian Nobel laureate, Patrick White. So, his “The Tree of Man” is at the top of my pile.

What’s the last great book you read? Earlier this year, I was asked to write an introduction for the forthcoming Penguin Classics edition of Ernest Hemingway’s first novel, “The Sun Also Rises.” I enjoyed rereading the book immensely. Hemingway began writing it on his 26th birthday, almost a hundred years ago. At the time, he was still married to the first of his four wives. By trade, he was still a foreign correspondent living in Paris. It was before his trip to Africa to hunt big game. Before his face would adorn the cover of Life magazine — three separate times. Before the compromising effects of fame, wealth and recognition. So, in picking up “The Sun Also Rises” today, we have the opportunity to set aside what we think we know about Hemingway as a man and writer, to set aside what we think we know about his style, to read the book as if it were newly released, and to be amply rewarded for doing so.

Which writers — novelists, playwrights, critics, journalists, poets — working today do you admire most? I admire a lot of my contemporaries as writers. But Ann Patchett is someone I admire not simply as a writer, but as an advocate for independent bookstores and new voices, as half of a grand marriage, as a graceful thinker, a sly humorist, a generous spirit. I could go on.

What do you read when you’re working on a book? And what kind of reading do you avoid while writing? Before I set out on a new project, I like to read a handful of novels written in (and ideally set in) the time period in which I’m about to immerse myself. My new novel, “The Lincoln Highway,” takes place over 10 days in June of 1954, so in anticipation I read a number of American works from the mid-50s including James Baldwin’s “Go Tell It on the Mountain” (1953); Raymond Chandler’s “The Long Goodbye” (1953); Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1955); and Sloan Wilson’s “The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit” (1955). What I love in particular about this list of concurrent classics is how varied they are in terms of geography, tone and theme. In aggregate they provide a snapshot of America’s socioeconomic, regional and racial diversity. They also showcase very different approaches to effective storytelling.

Do you distinguish between “commercial” and “literary” fiction? Where’s that line, for you? Not really. I’m more interested in distinguishing books that are well written, rich and multilayered from those that aren’t (preferring to read the former and skip the latter). If we look back at those books that have survived for more than half a century, they tend to be well written, rich and multilayered, but in their time some were classed as commercial and others as literary.

What kind of reader were you as a child? Which childhood books and authors stick with you most? My discovery of reading as a consuming pleasure began with the Hardy Boys. As a middle-class family in the early 1970s, we didn’t dine out or travel that much. But my father was always willing to buy us a book. The summer I discovered the Hardy Boys mysteries, I would spend the day reading one of them from beginning to end, then make my father take me to the bookstore so that he could buy me the next volume. A few years later, it was the works of Ray Bradbury. Then Tolkien. And so on.

You’re organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite? Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville and Bob Dylan. It would either be the most interesting dinner of my life, or the one with the most awkward silences. Maybe both. □

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

LATELY I’VE FOUND that audiobooks are keeping me up at night. It’s not because I’m devouring them in nocturnal binges, unable to tear myself away. No, I’m losing sleep because I’m thinking about certain audiobooks too much. Like a movie watched just before bed, or a video game played too many times, a good audiobook peppered throughout the day can reverberate long after you have pressed pause. Who’s the murderer? What would I do if I came face to face with a leopard? What must it have been like to be floating in the middle of the Pacific in the 16th century, scurvy-ridden and months from home? These three new audiobooks may provide some answers — but expect a fair share of mental somersaults along the way.

SOMETHING NOTEWORTHY happened about two hours into Paula Hawkins’s A SLOW FIRE BURNING (Penguin Audio, 9 hours, 19 minutes). I realized I no longer needed to hear the attribution after quotes: I could tell who was talking without being told. Yes, this is testament to the writing of Hawkins, of “The Girl on the Train” fame. But it also speaks to the preternatural skills of the audiobook’s narrator, the award-winning actor Rosamund Pike. Her evocative, precise delivery brings a smart whodunit to life in a way my imagination alone could never do. Virtually every character is a suspect and every suspect is fully formed, well beyond the clichés that this genre is prone to. The mystery surrounds the murder of a young man living on a houseboat on a London canal. From there Hawkins unravels a dense web of troubled familial relationships, a meta narrative in the form of another best-selling thriller within the plot, and a relentless series of mounting tragedies. Along the way are flashes of beautiful writing (“walls the yellow of nicotine”) and, in sum, a thought-provoking meditation on envy, love, hatred, vengeance and other feelings that slowly burn.

THE SCIENCE WRITER Mary Roach has a similar interest in the human condition; though in her books — about death, sex, the digestive system and more — she takes a decidedly less emotional view on who we are and why we do what we do. In FUZZ: When Nature Breaks the Law (Brilliance Audio, 9 hours, 17 minutes), Roach turns her obsessive eye and cheeky humor toward one age-old question: “What is the proper future of turd science is bright”). And the moments of travelogue that interrupt the zoological deep dives offer a personal authenticity to an account that otherwise could have easily been detached and dry.

IF YOU’VE NEVER stared at the ceiling, contemplating the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, well, get ready. CONQUERING THE PACIFIC: An Unknown Mariner and the Final Great Voyage of the Age of Discovery (HarperAudio, 6 hours, 6 minutes), by Andrés Reséndez, chronicles the crowning achievement of a relatively unknown navigator named Lope Martín, who in the middle of the 16th century piloted the first ship on what was known as “la vuelta,” a return to the Americas across the Pacific from the Philippines. If setting into motion centuries of trans-Pacific trade, exploitation and migration weren’t remarkable enough, Reséndez asks us to consider the odds Martín was up against as an Afro-Portuguese pilot working for the Spanish. He writes that while Black seamen were not unheard-of then, Martín was “rare enough to stand out,” especially as he rubbed shoulders with ship captains, viceroys and the clergy. Though the audiobook — narrated in the warm, fuzzy tones of a PBS documentary by the actor Phil Morris — does cover all the deliciously swashbuckling details of Martín’s journey (mutinies, murder and backstabbing abound), listeners hoping solely for tales of adventure may be disappointed. In fact, Reséndez is so intent on offering historical, geological and cultural context that the “vuelta” story really kicks off only an hour and 20 minutes into the narrative. Before, during and after are lengthy explanations of tides and gyres, maritime explorers and early colonizers, territorial disputes and serendipitous deals. It’s appropriate that the book begins with a description of the Pacific as seen from space. As Reséndez makes clear, there is much more to think about here than one person’s ocean voyage.

SEBASTIAN MODAK, The Times’s 52 Places Traveler in 2019, has also written for Condé Nast Traveler and The Washington Post.
On the Bayou
Stories of a New Orleans that’s all but lost.

By JEREMY GORDON

“We Cast A Shadow,” Maurice Carlos Ruffin’s 2019 debut novel, takes place in a future where Blackness is explicitly criminalized. Set in an unnamed city in the American South where the local housing project requires ID for entry, the novel is narrated by an unnamed Black lawyer who becomes obsessed with procuring the money to pay for his mixed-race son to undergo a skin-lightening procedure that will permanently insulate him from the social and legal stigma of being African American. His narrow-deep cynicism is leavened by an ache for the society that once seemed possible, before everything took a sharp turn for the worse: “It sometimes felt like we were the only people in the world who experienced the whiplash and loss of those years, because no one else talked about that era.”

Ruffin’s new collection, “The Ones Who Don’t Say They Love You,” preserves this lost old world — specifically, 21st-century New Orleans — across a series of stories long and short, as a sort of compendium of city life at risk of displacement. Gentrification by Oregonian interlopers; unmitigated post-Katrina rot and neglect; the fact that “the Black and white issue isn’t just a Black and white issue,” as a Black homeowner notes, “it’s a money and power issue, too”: It all threatens to transform New Orleans (which may or may not have been the unnamed city in “We Cast A Shadow”) into an unrecognizable playground for the affluent and bored.

The title story follows a teenage prostitute and his client, Mr. Jellnik, who eagerly wishes to rescue him from a life on the street. Contrary to similarly honeyed promises issued in the wake of such encounters, Jellnik’s lack of sentimentality is what makes him potentially trustworthy. “In all the times you done business with Jellnik, he never say he love you,” Ruffin writes, from the second-person perspective of the prostitute. “That’s the only reason you listen to him at all.” Ruffin’s characters are too smart to fall blindly for sweet nothings; their lives and the New Orleans around them are governed by the ruthless logic of a system that doesn’t even pretend to care about them. After the limits of Jellnik’s promises are revealed, the story cuts off before we glimpse our narrator’s feelings.

The brevity of some of these stories — like “Mercury Forges,” about a prison guard who helps an escaped inmate find his father during Katrina; or “Glamour Work,” about a teenager on juvenile probation working a catering job at the mayor’s Mardi Gras gala — suggests this collection should be consumed in large chucks. In the longer tales, his narrators have more space to draw out their paranoias, which dictate how they move through the city. “The Pie Man” inverts William Faulkner’s story “Dry September,” following a group of Black teenagers who call themselves the Mighty Black Ninja Krew and conspire to avenge their friend’s death at the hands of a Latino mechanic.

But the city Ruffin depicts is characterized less by violence than by community, its adaptability in the face of ongoing change. “Ghetto University” thrums with the mordant wit of its narrator, “a Black man with two advanced degrees, who had once lectured at the Sorbonne, who shook hands with Noam Chomsky and Shirin Ebadi, who prefers Enya to Kanye West, and who will never willingly watch a Tyler Perry film,” who now robs tourists in the French Quarter to pay off his debts. Unsure of how to properly intimidate his victims, he calls one of them “whitey,” while noting its anachronism. “There simply isn’t a word equivalent to the N-bomb when you’re trying to make Caucasians feel uncomfortable,” Ruffin writes, “unless you count the most terrifying noun, my skin.” As we eventually discover, the narrator’s wife, a chemist, has also taken to crime to supplement their finances, and marital love is renewed once they discover this commitment to providing for each other.

Ruffin writes with the clipped motion of the best comic books, and the unsparring tenderness of a poet. Readers enamored with the relentless lyricism of his novel may be surprised to find a gentler voice guiding these stories, without judgment. This softness is exactly what binds these patchwork chronicles into a vibrant and true mosaic of a place. I was occasionally disappointed whenever the lives of these characters moved in the expected direction, but who can truly resist the domineering forces pushing our trajectories along their course?

In the closing story, “Before I Let Go,” a lifelong New Orleanian named Gailya is trying to stop the city from repossessing the home that belonged to her grandmother, her mother, and now her. Gailya’s neighborhood, Treme, is facing unstoppable gentrification, and she herself is stretched thin across the gig economy, renting out a room for tourists and moonlighting as a rideshare and delivery driver between jobs that never seem to pay what she needs to dig herself out of debt. Her life is conditioned for disappointment, and she comes to expect it. A well-paying work opportunity turns out to be a bust; a lover turns out to be a mirage; a white boss turns out to be a racist. But there is joy, too, enough to repel the inner voice saying she should just sell her home to greedy developers, and relocate to Atlanta.

When a group of doe-eyed and irritating white neighbors suggest calling the police on a nearby music teacher who plays a little too loudly, it suddenly strikes her that if the New Orleans she knows is slipping away, it’s her responsibility to hold onto what remains. “Gailya looks at the faces of her new neighbors, most of whom look like people she’s worked for at one point or another,” Ruffin writes, “She knows that if any of her old neighbors were here, they would make them understand. But she realizes it falls on her. It always fell on her. If any of her old neighbors were here, they would realize it falls on her. It always fell on her. If any of her old neighbors were here, they would realize it falls on her. It always fell on her.”

Ruffin writes with the clipped motion of the best comic books, and the tenderness of a poet.
Colson Whitehead’s new novel features a criminal middleman in 1960s Harlem.

By KARAN MAHAJAN

COLSON WHITEHEAD IS on a tear. In the last five years, he has published three novels, two of which have won the Pulitzer Prize. Taken together, these books showcase Whitehead’s mastery over structure, history and atmosphere, not to mention a zest, shown throughout his career, for savvily mixing the palettes of literary and genre fiction. The runaway slave tale “The Underground Railroad” takes inspiration in equal part from “Gulliver’s Travels” and (somewhat to its detriment) children’s books like “Harry Potter.” “The Nickel Boys,” Whitehead’s best book in my estimation, is a boys’ adventure story repurposed for a grim reform facility, a “jail within a jail” of American life, in which the meanings of servitude and segregation are multiplied.

By comparison, the crime caper “Harlem Shuffle” is a much calmer, shifter and warmer book; a book that luxuriates in the seedy spaces of late night, “when the straight world slept and the bent got to work”; and that treats the realm of gangsters with names like Pepper, Chink Montague and Miami Joe as an extended, if dangerous, family. Yet this book too is driven by a serious historical purpose, showing us the micro-changes in the landscape of Harlem and the prospects of Black Americans in the North in the 1960s.

Whitehead’s sweet, sweaty, authoritative, densely peopled portrait of a Harlem in near perpetual summer is the most successful part of the book. Had I not known Whitehead was a talented shape-shifter, I — as an outsider to Harlem — would have believed he had only ever written about this setting. Effortlessly name-dropping local characters and establishments (real and fictional), Whitehead presents a Harlem of “men in undershirts drinking beer” on their stoops while “outrunning some brand of Southern devil”; of professionals jockeying for power in elite clubs; and of sad Chinese restaurants where “the cookies were stale and the fortunes dispensing around.” Equally impressive is Whitehead’s grasp of diverse trades like furniture selling, jewelry retail, electronics repair — and of course petty thievery. Except for a couple of potted histories, Whitehead’s prose in “Harlem Shuffle” feels richly integrated with the story; he knows the people of Harlem in the 1960s; and the people are just that: real people.

KARAN MAHAJAN is the author of the novels “Family Planning” and the National Book Award finalist “The Association of Small Bombs.” He teaches at Brown University.

In the past, Whitehead has shown a deep interest in systems but not always in human psychology (a charge that has also been leveled at earlier systems novelists like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon). This book is a step forward. Ray Carney, the protagonist, is, in some ways, Whitehead’s most fully developed character, for the simple reason that he is a master not just of “fencing” (serving as a middleman for thieves) but also of self-deception. A striving furniture retailer with a sideline in crockery — for a small fee, he will haul your stolen TV or radio or brooch to a respectable retailer downtown — Carney clings to the false assurance that he’s not really a shyster. In some of the best parts of the book, written from a close third-person perspective, Carney protests that he just “facilitated that churn” of stolen objects; and that even if “he got a thrill out of transforming these ill-gotten goods into legit merchandise, a zap-charge in his blood like he’d plugged into a socket, he was in control of it and not the other way around.” As the book progresses, though, Carney loses control. He is made an accessory to a major heist against his will, and his life — and self-image — alters.

The heist, which takes up the first section of the book, is brilliantly executed, both by its participants and by its omniscient author. In describing the (fictional) stickup of the (real) Hotel Theresa — down-on-its-luck “headquarters of the Negro world” — Whitehead’s prose becomes taut, electric and gleeful. “Robbing the Hotel Theresa,” Whitehead writes, was like “slipping Jackie Robinson a Mickey the night before the World Series.” The novel treats the hotel itself as a microcosm of Harlem, and each civilian caught in the heist is tagged with a supple biography. Had Whitehead ended the book after this fierce and funny section, it would stand as one of the few perfect novellas in American literature.

Unfortunately — or fortunately, depending on your taste — Whitehead keeps going; and the rest of the book yields mixed results.

“Harlem Shuffle” is structured as a three-part mini-series set in 1959, 1961 and 1964. As it progresses, anti-police-shooting rebellions roil Harlem; old slick gangsters give way to a new breed of “hotheaded, fever, ever-trifling” hoods; and “the Junkie Shake, that new dance,” becomes “all the rage.” The flavor of each episode varies ever so slightly, but they are linked by Carney and his ne’er-do-well cousin Freddie, who is always pulling Carney into chancy schemes against his will.

If the first episode is a portrait of a reluctant crook, by the second episode, Carney is a contented family man, moving up in the world, expanding his showroom, more at ease with being a fence. He is also smarting with anger over being cheated out of $500 by a sleazy Harlem banker who fails to deliver on the promise of membership to an elite club of Harlem movers and shakers. For the next 100 pages, in an often wobbly plot — “I have to take care of one thing before I can do another thing, and I have to do something else before I can do that,” Carney explains, a bit too aptly — Carney concocts an elaborate revenge against the banker.

Like the heist, though, this revenge goes perfectly, with few consequences for Carney — and the book loses energy as a result. Instead of forcing Carney’s self-image into crisis, Whitehead gives us less-than-original observations about how everyone’s a crook. In fact, after the riveting danger of the first section, Whitehead protects Carney from real harm for much of the novel, and many scenes — peopled with a sitcom-grade angelic wife, evil-in-laws, and criminals marvelously free of misogyny or sexual violence — have the dreamy feel of a comic book. The darkness — of Carney’s lonely childhood, of drug abuse, of violent crime — is pushed to the corners, bursting out only occasionally, as in one character’s superbly depressing and sinister flashback about building a supply line in Burma during World War II. And while I valued Whitehead’s attempt to write a serene character on the verge of success — extremely hard to pull off in fiction — I longed for the taut prose of “The Nickel Boys,” where every sentence, spat out laconically, advances the grim story.

Happily, Whitehead rights the ship by the third episode, which focuses on another crime to which Carney is an unwilling accomplice, with potentially deadly repercussions for the people he loves. And the crime story, which had become inert, suddenly revs to life, reminding us that Whitehead, beneath all the shambling and high jinks, remains an American master.
Before Simone Loved Sartre, She Loved Zaza

A 1954 novel by the author of ‘The Second Sex’ recounts her relationship with a beloved schoolmate who died young.

By LESLIE CAMHI

“It’s impossible to read about Simone de Beauvoir’s life without thinking of your own,” the biographer Hazel Rowley wrote in her foreword to the English translation of Beauvoir’s “Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter.” How did the image of this turbaned Frenchwoman in a severe, 1940s-style suit, sitting beside Jean-Paul Sartre at a table in the Café de Flore or La Coupole writing all day long, become the avatar of a generation?

For it’s true that, at least for Francophile intellectuals coming of age in the wake of feminism’s second wave, the Beaver — a nickname bestowed on the young Beauvoir by a philosopher friend, because, he said, “beavers like company and they have a constructive bent” — casts a very long shadow. Existentialism may have been out of fashion during my student days (ceding pride of place to post-structuralist theory), and few among my contemporaries may have made it all the way through “The Second Sex,” Beauvoir’s two-volume feminist classic, published in 1949, when French women’s right to vote was scarcely five years old. But the famous opening line of that work’s Book 2 — “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” — with the liberty implicit in that pronouncement, to shape one’s own destiny in response to circumstances, was something we took radically to heart.

And the kinds of women we hoped to become were deeply influenced by her example: a prodigiously industrious novelist, memoirist and philosopher, allied with Sartre but with the courage to live and love in complete independence, an activist for decades in defense of political, social and emotional freedom. We didn’t so much read Beauvoir; we wanted to be her, to share in her extraordinary life, her intellectual and amorous adventures.

Now along comes “Inseparable,” a short, never-before-published, autobiographical novel written by Beauvoir in 1954, the same year that “The Mandarins” — her 600-plus-page epic about French intellectuals in the immediate aftermath of World War II, seeking and often failing to find reasons to continue living, loving and writing — won the prestigious Prix Goncourt.

Apparently, she showed the manuscript of this brief novel to Sartre, who “held his nose” at it, she writes in “Forces of Circumstance,” the third volume of her memoirs. “I couldn’t have agreed more,” she tells us there; “the story seemed to have no inner necessity and failed to hold the reader’s interest.” So she set the manuscript aside.

It is perhaps too easy now to guess what Sartre didn’t like about it. Fluidly translated by Sandra Smith, “Inseparable” makes the case that the defining relationship of Beauvoir’s young life was not with him. Rather, the first of her contemporaries whom she adored, measured herself against, longed for intimacy with and ardently sought to impress was a slight 9-year-old schoolgirl, who sat down next to her one day at the Cours Adeline Désir, a private Catholic establishment for young ladies from “good families” in Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

It’s also possible that Sartre, ever more politically engaged and flirting with Marxism in the 1950s, found in the novel’s up-close-and-personal examination of the yearnings and heartaches of a pair of haute bourgeois French girls, little that would advance the class struggle or the cause of a more just society. If so, he was mistaken.

Beauvoir remained haunted by the story of her childhood friend Élisabeth Laconi, a.k.a. “Zaza,” returning in both her memoirs and her fiction to Zaza’s passionate, nonconformist, her many gifts, her struggle against the familial and societal obligations that hemmed her in on all sides and her tragic destiny. (She died suddenly, at the age of 21.) There is an ethical, and even political, dimension to Beauvoir’s will to remember this friend, through whose mirror she sought to loosen the silken chains binding them both to outdated ideals of femininity.

“Inseparable,” which takes its title from the term teachers at their school bestowed on the pair, as well as from letters Beauvoir wrote from childhood on to her “dear inseparable friend,” is one of several attempts she made to tell the story through the guise of fiction. Andrée, the little girl who sits down in class next to Sylvie, the novel’s narrator, is small for 9. Thin-faced and dark-haired, she comes trailing a whiff of the extraordinaire — she has lost at least a year of instruction, she tells Sylvie, because of an accident in the country during which, while cooking potatoes over an open fire, her dress had caught fire and her right thigh had been “burnt to a crisp.”

“You don’t meet a little girl who was burned alive every day,” Sylvie muses. From the start, Andrée runs hotter than Sylvie — she is more passionate, more a creature of feeling.

Funny, brilliant, a gifted musician, uncowed by the nuns who teach them, she seems to come from another world, one that would advance the class struggle or the cause of a more just society. If so, he was mistaken.

Sylvie — who sits down in class next to Sylvie, the angel-faced, future phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty — an eminently suitable match, even by the constraining standards of their milieu — was thwarted by her family. She was on the verge of being sent off to Berlin to study for a year, when in a matter of days she developed a raging fever and died. Viral encephalitis, the doctors said. But in Simone’s view, Zaza fell victim to a society bent on killing off whatever was uniquely alive and precious in her.

One is reminded of the death of Beth March in “Little Women” (a book Beauvoir read and loved), or of the saintly orphan Helen Burns in “Jane Eyre,” who accepts her fate with quiet dignity, eyes on the prize of the world to come. Beauvoir’s furious determination to create her own rules for living and loving was forged in this cauldron of loss. Without Zaza, one senses, there might have been no “Second Sex,” no infamous, polyamorous “pact” with Sartre. Simone, at least, would not be sacrificed on the altar of convention and domesticity.

“Inseparable” makes the terms of this commitment on her part crushingly clear. And one wonders, at a time when the Taliban are forcing Afghan women back into their homes, how many Andrées/Zazas still exist around the world, their lives stunted or even snuffed out by organized misogyny? Who, in telling their stories, will bring them to life for us?”

PHOTOGRAPH FROM ASSOCIATION ÉLISABETH LACOIN

photo by ÉLISABETH “ZAZA” LACOIN AND SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR IN 1928.
The Uncompromising Moderate

By JOHN McWHORTER

RANDALL KENNEDY DISMISSES claims that American university campuses are racist. He assails the sanctification of Malcolm X, saying that his most prominent biographer, the late Columbia University professor Manning Marable, “accords his hero a stature in memory that he lacked in history.” Kennedy is against taking names off buildings because the person in question was a racist, and questions identity based on race rather than individuality. To those who decry the “respectability politics” of calling for Black people to maintain mainstream standards of behavior, Kennedy replies that this kind of discipline has indeed benefited Black people in the past — there was nothing “street” about most civil rights leaders of yore, for example, and they liked it that way.

Why, then, is Kennedy, a Black professor at Harvard Law School, not typically included on the list of Black conservatives or even “heterodox Black thinkers,” to use the currently fashionable term of art? The anthology “Say It Loud!” teaches us why. This collection of 29 of his essays lends us the fullest portrait between two covers of Kennedy’s thought, and just as much of it fits the mold of Black thought traditionally treated as “authentic” as does not.

Kennedy is pitilessly dismissive of Justice Clarence Thomas, witheringly allowing that “there is reason to think that he would be a nice neighbor” but that he is ultimately a mere “talented comic artist,” underving of his place on the bench. He thinks there is such a thing as a sellout (and not just Thomas) and he dismisses the idea of a “post-Blackness” under which Black identity can take any shape according to the whims and predilections of the individual. For him, one may or may not merit membership in the tribe, and he shares members of that tribe’s despair about Trumpism, disappointed that despite a certain former optimism, “I do not expect in the remainder of my life to glimpse, much less enjoy, a progressive racial promised land.”

The reason for this cocktail of positions is that Kennedy, as a legal scholar and law professor to the nth degree, is uncompromisingly disinclined to partisanship over reflection. His discipline in this regard is rather awesome. He switches among various names for the Black race rather than hewing to “African American,” out of a refusal to give in to passing fashion. After chronicling the unsavoriness of the white Department of Justice lawyer Philip Elman’s dismissive recollections on the abilities of the Black lawyers who led the fight for Brown v. Board of Education, Kennedy goes to the trouble — while maintaining his disdain for Elman’s position — of apologizing for deeming him a racist in earlier writing. His suspicion of race-based pride is not because of any numbness to the visceral feeling himself, but out of, in part, a wariness that such tribalism will lead a group to recapitulate the sins of the oppressor. Here is a book in which “maybe” occurs three times in the final paragraph.

Kennedy is someone who studiously resists feeling over thinking, and in considerable part for that reason “Say It Loud!” is not a book most will be inclined to take on vacation. For example, the history and aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education are seminal matters to any true understanding of America’s racial history — as Kennedy notes, 10 years after the decision in 1954, only a touch more than 1 percent of Black kids in the South were going to school with whites. However, various essays in this book together provide this case with a detail that few beyond historians and legal scholars are likely up for.

Overall, despite the title of the book, Kennedy, unlike James Brown, is not one for saying things “loud.” The one time in the book he even starts to do so is when he surmises how he would feel if he encountered a monument to the unhallowed bigot Woodrow Wilson: “I would smilingly give him the finger and shout with satisfaction, ‘Look at me and my people now!’” But even here there is a certain starchiness in the phraseology — (“smilingly” giving the finger and shouting “with satisfaction”) that brings us back to a deeply temperate writer.

Only in his unhesitatingly acid take on Clarence Thomas does Kennedy even hint at a bit of what some call thunder. Kennedy once wrote a deft critique of the foundations of critical race theory and, predictably, took some heat for it. To be familiar with his oeuvre is to miss that piece here. Technically it appeared too long ago to qualify for the roughly 20-year span of these essays (though one of them is based on a piece that appeared earlier). I can’t help wondering if Kennedy omitted the essay out of a worry that in today’s climate of controversy over “C.R.T.,” certain right-wing elements might find it useful. If this, along with a judgment on that piece Kennedy recounts from the Harvard Law professor Derrick Bell, is what led Kennedy to refrain from anthologizing that essay, then the decision qualifies as (1) considered but (2) by no means “loud.”

Finally, while “Say It Loud!” may not always be exciting reading, Kennedy is the kind of writer who gives you the sense that in the end he’s always just plain right. Race in 2021 differs from race in 1961 solely in matters of politeness? A “new Jim Crow”? Such ideas can seem electric and, combined with the sense they lend of being on the side of justice, they can be as irresistible as they are fantastical. Kennedy does not pretend otherwise: “To adequately address the crises we confront now requires more than habitual incantations of Brown”

This collection gives us the fullest portrait between two covers of Kennedy’s thought.
Mothers and Daughters

David Grossman’s new novel is a multigenerational saga of love and loss.

By DAPHNE MERKIN

LIKE ALADDIN AND his magic lamp, David Grossman rubs ideas, words and incidents together the better to conjure the genie of storytelling. Grossman, one of Israel’s preeminent novelists and thinkers, has written fiction, nonfiction and children’s literature; his work has been widely translated, garnering him numerous international awards, including the 2017 Man Booker International Prize. As a novelist, Grossman has always roamed widely, even promiscuously, in his narratives, straying from the main line of the plot and branching off into side journeys that don’t appear immediately to connect to the tale that is unfolding but eventually, through a sleight of hand, link up with and shed light on what has gone before.

This centrifugal mode of writing gives his novels, from early works like “See Under: Love” to the haunting “To the End of the Land” and the more recent “A Horse Walks Into a Bar,” a slightly shaggy quality that suggests a resistance to formal boundaries — the imposed neatness — of fiction, as does his tendency to shift abruptly between realism, lyricism and surrealism. More than other writers, Grossman demands a willingness on the reader’s part to suspend disbelief over and over again, to follow him blindly, wherever his imagination takes him, even if he hasn’t fully laid the groundwork or the logistical gears click a bit.

Most of the time this fealty pays off because Grossman’s novels have a cumulative power that subsumes mere plausibility. He succeeds in transcending the permutations of his plots and the localness of his settings — indeed, to make deliberate use of the Israeli template — to create themes of loss, the redemptive power of love, the immutable scars of history and the consoling effect of humor that resonate well beyond the world of the kibbutz or the background of the Holocaust. Once in a while the sureness of touch that lies behind his seemingly ad hoc, scattered approach fascinates and this reader, at least, finds herself longing for a bit less inventiveness or a turn of events that didn’t seem to have wandered in because of some passing flicker in Grossman’s mind.

“More Than I Love My Life,” Grossman’s new novel, shows the writer at work in this characteristically expansive style, racing to stuff as much of life as possible into a single framework. This time around, as he explains in the acknowledgments, his book germinated from the real-life story of a Yugoslavian partisan fighter with whom Grossman developed a deep friendship over 20 years and who asked him to write her tale and that of her daughter. The novelist notes that he was granted “the freedom to tell the story but also to imagine and invent in it ways it never existed.”

And so we are introduced to a multigenerational saga fraught with geopolitical brutality and familial trauma, featuring a vivid and formidable 90-year-old matriarch named Vera, with a “Ben-Gurion-like domineering tone” and “a bladder like the late president Hafez Assad’s.” This “little woman with the sharp green eyes” presides over the novel, indelibly imprinting herself on all its characters. Yet the more we feel we have come to know Vera, whether through her narcissistic investment in her appearance — she is always reapplying red lipstick or wetting down the stray curl on her forehead — or through her portrayal of herself as having sacrificed her freedom and potentially her very life for her husband, Miholjek, a war hero and her great love, the more questionable the reality she puts forward becomes.

At the heart of “More Than I Love My Life,” translated by Jessica Cohen, is Vera’s imprisonment for almost three years on the remote Yugoslavian island of Goli Otok, one of Tito’s gulags, also known as the Adriatic Alcatraz, sometime during the early to mid-1950s (the time period is unclear). She has been sent to the island because of a drastic, life-altering choice she felt compelled to make when being interrogated by Tito’s security agents. Officially set up as a “re-education camp,” Goli Otok is a merciless prison, run by vicious wardens who berate, beat and rape the inmates who have been condemned to meaningless hard labor. Among the most riveting scenes of the novel are the ones in which Vera is made to stand for days on end — 57 in all — on a mountain cliff in the blazing sun so as to provide shade for a sapling one of the commandants has brought to the island.

Grossman’s evocative gifts are in full force: “An hour, another hour. The sun moves across her body like a slow flame thrower. Head, shoulders, neck. Everything is burning. The sweat drips. Her lips are cracked and bleeding. A cloud of flies buzzes above her. The bedbugs are nicely fattened up on her blood. She doesn’t scratch. No longer brushes them off. Lets them drink it all. This body is not hers. Neither it nor its pains. She is no longer human or animal or anything. Since yesterday, since she understood what she was doing here, her limbs and joints have been rigid. Her legs wooden. She walks as if she’s on stilts.”

Grossman has always roamed widely, even promiscuously, in his narratives.

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“More Than I Love My Life” is about the burden of history as it impinges on individual lives and the family ghosts that wreak havoc in its wake. As a result of Vera’s decision, her young daughter, Nina, the child she had with Miholjek, is taken from her. Although mother and daughter are eventually reunited, Nina never overcomes her sense of having been betrayed by Vera. Nina, in turn, will go on to abandon her daughter, Gili, who rejects her mother with a virulence born of equal parts bewilderment and self-hatred.

The family travels from Israel to Goli Otok in an attempt to fill in the missing pieces in Vera’s story and thereby come to some sort of rapprochement. Along the way they stay in “an unattractive coastal town” on the Adriatic coast, “with a row of seaside hotels, and restaurants that are still open, empty but lit up with bright neon, emitting billows of noxious yet slightly tempting smoke from grilled meat, all with long freezers piled with mountains of ice cream in frightening colors.” This quick, synesthetic description reminded me of fiction’s ability to evoke an often intuited but rarely articulated atmospherics of place.

THERE ARE MANY STORIES within stories in the novel, like concentric circles whirling in the air. Some are underdeveloped, such as the state of Gili’s marriage (her husband, Meir, is a cipher); some seem like clanking, superfluous devices rather than intrinsic to the plot (the filmmaking project to document Vera’s account of what happened to her after she was arrested by the Yugoslavian secret police); and yet others are alluded to too belatedly and briefly (the abusive manner in which Vera’s sister and brother-in-law treated Nina after mother and daughter were forcibly separated) to be successfully integrated into the novel.

The result is a certain amount of confusion and unnecessary distraction from the main events, yet such is this writer’s skill and generosity of vision that “More Than I Love My Life” moves beyond its flaws to cast a spell that lingers. Grossman is especially good on women, presenting them as complex and nuanced characters, and his understanding of the opaque ways of love sometimes subterranean, often unexpected or arbitrary — is unmatched. David Grossman is one of our outstanding contemporary writers and I have sometimes thought that, despite all the accolades that have come his way, he hasn’t been given his full due because he happens to be an Israeli, although one who is often deeply critical of his country’s actions and moral quandaries. To read him is to understand that there is a world beyond the political, even in these re-tribalized times, one in which there is room for recognition, however incomplete and often painful, of who we are in our own eyes and in one another’s.

DAPHNE MERKIN is a cultural critic and the author, most recently, of “22 Minutes of Unconditional Love.”
Rogue Warrior
Eddie Gallagher was an out-of-control SEAL who won the protection of Donald Trump.

By ELIOT A. COHEN

This is a book about a man, two events and an institution. The man is Eddie Gallagher, the Navy special operator accused of murdering an Iraqi prisoner of war in Mosul in 2017; the events are the killing itself and the subsequent military trial at which he was acquitted, while attracting the enthusiastic support of President Donald Trump; the institution is the Navy SEALs, the elite special operators of the United States Navy.

Gallagher is, curiously, not that interesting save as a study in the definition of sociopathy. In Philipps’s meticulously assembled and brilliantly written account, he is not a warrior driven mad by the stress of combat, a good guy gone rogue or a victim of a brutalizing culture. Rather, he is a lousy shot (by SEAL standards, that is), a poor planner, a glory hound, a petty thief, a lousy shot (by SEAL standards, that is), a pet popper of tramadol and other opioids when he can get them and a cunningly effective manipulator of those around him. Philipps leaves little reason to doubt his conclusion that Gallagher really did plunge that special knife of his twice into the ISIS prisoner’s neck. But he also reveals that the killing was only the culmination of years of indiscipline, recklessness, tactical incompetence and bragging about, among other things, shooting a girl in order to get a terrorist.

There are other distinctly drawn characters too, including two who deserve calling out by name: Lt. Jacob Portier and Lt. Cmdr. Robert Breisch, superiors who were too intimidated or seduced by Gallagher, or too in awe of the reputation he had cultivated to take seriously accusations raised by his subordinates in Platoon Alpha of SEAL Team 7. In some ways, they are the more disturbing figures here, officers who shirked their duty to maintain good order and discipline.

The killing itself is recounted in the context of the limited but destructive reconquest of Mosul from the Islamic State organization that had seized it from a crumbling Iraqi Army. The Iraqis were to take the city back supported by Special Forces units from the United States and allied countries. In theory, the special operators were to stay a kilometer back from the front lines. In practice, Gallagher ordered his men to turn off the tracking devices that would have allowed his superiors to see that he was taking them to the front and beyond. The fighting was brutal but, in the case of Alpha at least, not about close combat. Instead, it was a matter of bombing, booby traps, sniping and grenade barrages as well as drone attacks on buildings in which ISIS had successfully weaponized their own hobbyist quadcopters. The culminating event was the killing of the prisoner in the presence of Iraqi troops (who did not much care) and Gallagher’s own hardened but horrified subordinates, who had long before concluded that he was dangerous, incompetent and out of control.

The trial, which took place in 2019, is more of a set piece: the dogged N.C.I.S. agent who assembles the evidence, the sinister consigliere whom Gallagher uses to get witnesses to pull back their story, the obnoxious but brilliant defense lawyer, the stumbling prosecutors, the jury, exclusively male, primarily enlisted, including one SEAL who Philipps asserts lied about having no prior relationship with Gallagher.

The trial is followed by a further set piece, in which Donald Trump leaves on the Navy high command to inflict no penalties whatsoever on Gallagher, including reduction in rank and the removal of the prized SEAL Trident pin. Fox News personalities brayed in his defense, and the secretary of the Navy who tried to steer a middle course was eventually dismissed; he was caught between the demands of the service and the rage of a president who knew that his people loved the Gallagher type, and who rather liked murderous thugs who supported him.

But the most interesting part of this remarkable and engaging book examines the SEALs as an institution and as a subculture within the military. The Special Operations community in the United States military consists of many subgroups — Delta, the Army’s elite, which is not the same thing as Special Forces (the Green Berets), as well as Air Force and Marine special units. The SEALs are different in several respects. They grew out of the underwater demolition teams of World War II, a roughneck outfit at odds with Navy orthodoxy shaped by a unique and difficult mission, the special operators are not so special. Think of pedophile priests protected by the Roman Catholic Church.

And yet even though he believes that Gallagher and his immediate superiors escaped justice, Philipps comes to a surprisingly upbeat conclusion. The Navy senior brass are shown as trying to do the right thing while being caught between their duty and the demands of a commander in chief oblivious to military values. One senior officer, Capt. Matt Rosenbloom, is downright heroic. Gallagher and his negligent superior Portier left the Navy shortly after the trial. While some members of Alpha did as well, others, including some of those most vocal about the rogue chief, remained. The eminently sane SEAL leaders — typified by Adm. William McRaven, architect of the raid that killed Osama bin Laden — are still in control. The pirates, in other words, lost, despite the cheering of the Fox News anchors and Mar-a-Lago acolytes who, one may safely assume, have never seen a knife sink into human flesh. If this is the military side of the deep state at work, long may it live.
**Little Friend**

Conversations with a frog help restore a mind in this novel.

*By MICHAEL GREENBERG*

**THE PRESIDENT AND THE FROG**

By Carolina De Robertis

224 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $25.

José Mujica, a former president of Uruguay.

The story of José Mujica, the president of Uruguay from 2010 to 2015, is one of extraordinary political reconciliation. Mujica was a leader of the Marxist guerrilla group known as the Tupamaros, who were adored for their ideological earnestness and fancied themselves the avant-garde of change: Their radical communiqués and Robin Hood-like heroics would, they believed, provoke a popular uprising that would lead to the overthrow of the government and a new Uruguay.

In the late 1960s, when the Tupamaros were the epitome of revolutionary cool, their strategy appeared to be working. But by 1970 the government cracked down, assassinating guerrilleros. They responded in kind and a predictable spiral of violence followed. Mujica was shot six times by the police before they were able to arrest him. Three years later the military took power, unleashing a reign of state terror upon the population, and support for the Tupamaros turned into resentment. It wasn’t until the end of the dictatorship that Mujica was released from prison, in 1985. He entered mainstream politics and 25 years later, having charmed the country with his modest way of living and his bracingly spontaneous campaign style, he was elected Uruguay’s 40th president.

The main character of Carolina De Robertis’s fifth novel, “The President and the Frog,” is a thinly veiled version of this unusual man. When De Robertis picks up the story, he is simply “the ex-president”: retired and in his 80s, living in quiet reflection on his wife’s small farm. He is still an international celebrity — because of his lifestyle rather than the relatively tame progressive policies he promulgated in office. His circumstances are so humble they are almost a form of ostentation. As head of state he refused to reside in the presidential palace and preferred his old Volkswagen Beetle to the usual black limousine. Like Mujica’s, his entire worth was the money in his wallet. In “The President and the Frog” novel opens with a young Norwegian journalist arriving to interview him, one of many reporters he has entertained since leaving office; “the Poorest President in the World” makes for good copy.

The mystery of “The President and the Frog” is how its protagonist survived 13 years of torture, interrogation and extreme solitary confinement before his rise to power, a story he has never fully divulged.

**With a Bang**

The midcentury debate over the origins of the universe.

*By RAMIN SKIBBA*

**FLASHES OF CREATION**

George Gamow, Fred Hoyle, and the Great Big Bang Debate

By Paul Halpern


Paul Halpern chronicles the rise of Gamow and Hoyle into leaders of mostly opposing views of cosmology, as they disputed whether everything began with a Big Bang billions of years ago.

Gamow and Hoyle make for a challenging “joint biography,” Halpern acknowledges, in part because their parallel stories endured as they disputed the intuitive, seat-of-the-pants styles shared by Gamow and Hoyle were absolutely needed in their time,” Halpern writes.

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For years, their dueling theories — a Big Bang origin of matter and energy (championed by Gamow) versus a steady-state universe that created matter and energy through quantum fluctuations (championed by Hoyle) — remained highly speculative. Initially, the Big Bang theory predicted a universe only a couple billion years old, which conflicted with observations of the sun and other stars, known to be much older. Physicists were evenly divided between the two.

But that changed as more evidence emerged, and a key discovery eventually seemed to settle the debate. In 1964, the astronomers Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson noticed a constant signal of radio static with the Holmdel Horn Antenna in New Jersey. After ruling out possible experimental sources of noise, they deduced that the radio hiss had a cosmic origin. Their and their colleagues eventually realized the signal came from relic radiation from the hot fireball of the early universe.

After that, the Big Bang theory quickly became consensus in the field. While Hoyle’s steady-state idea eventually failed, he made many other significant contributions, especially involving stellar processes and supernova explosions.

Hoyle doesn’t shy away from the characters’ flaws. In particular, he shows how Hoyle’s work later in life lay on the fringes of physics, including his controversial “panspermia” hypothesis, that organic material and even life on Earth came from colliding comets, and his unsuccessful attempts to revive steady-state theory. But this shouldn’t cast a pall over his legacy.

At one point in the book, Halpern relates a conversation he had with Geoff Burbidge, a colleague of Hoyle’s who also continued to support a steady-state model. Cosmology needed alternatives, he argued, notlemmings following their leader over a cliff.
Nosedive
Why does every company want to build a ‘platform’?

By REEVES WIEDEMAN

OVER THE PAST two decades, the world’s hyper-ambitious entrepreneurs — is there now any other kind? — have largely pursued a pair of goals in tandem. First: Become a platform. Second: Take over the world. The former is supposed to lead to the latter, as it seemingly has for the five companies conglomerated under the intimidating acronym FAANG: Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google have taken such a bloodsucking bite (get it?) out of the world economy that in the past half decade alone they have more than tripled in value — at a rate three times faster than the growth of the entire S&P 500 — and are now worth north of $7 trillion. The appeal of building a platform is clear.

But what, exactly, is a platform? In the analog world, a platform is where you catch a train or launch a rocket or give a speech — somewhere you go to do something else. In a digital context, platforms facilitate transactions. Facebook and Google don’t sell much themselves; they make money by connecting advertisers to your eyeballs. Apple profits from selling phones, but a major part of its revenue comes from taking a cut each time you buy something from someone else in their App Store. The promise of the platform business model is its magical self-reinforcement: Once the platform is in place, money is supposed to flow through the system without much extra effort at all.

The sirensong of platformdom has proved irresistible to countless start-ups, with many finding a way to shoehorn the word into their investor pitch decks — WeWork used it 170 times in its ill-fated attempt to go public — as an easy signal of ambition if not always the reality of their business. Peloton, which sells indoor exercise bikes, calls itself an “interactive fitness platform.” Casper, which sells mattresses, is a “platform built for better sleep.” Beyond Meat, which claims its burgers that taste like beef, pork and poultry, insists that these are actually “three core plant-based product platforms.” The world’s most established companies are not immune to the trend. On an episode of a podcast produced by the Boardroom (a “sports business content platform” co-owned by the basketball superstar Kevin Durant), the Goldman Sachs chief executive, David Solomon, said:

that Goldman is not a bank but a company with “three principal platform businesses.”

The word “platform” has been deployed so many times in so many ways that it has lost almost all meaning, a fact that Jonathan Knee, who teaches at Columbia University’s business school, tries to spell out in his new book, “The Platform Delusion.” Knee isn’t rooting for the big platforms, which he describes as “succubus enterprises” that are “sucking all the value, returns and growth out of the companies that actually do things.” But he isn’t arguing for their dissolution either. He is simply offering a warning: Being a platform isn’t all it’s made out to be.

Knee’s book is filled with business school case studies that might be a bit in the weeds for general readers. (One of the successes he identifies is a company that makes software for a very specific financial accounting function.) But for aspiring entrepreneurs these stories offer a primer on the delusion Knee has identified, and show how to avoid the two primary misjudgments that cause it. The first is a belief that platforms emerged with the dawn of the internet. In fact, they’ve been around for decades. Shopping malls are platforms. Movie theaters are platforms. Credit cards are platforms. (Not to blow your mind, but money itself might be the original platform.) Moreover, Knee argues that these analog businesses were often better than the digital ones that replaced them. A sub-urban shopping mall operator will never achieve global scale, but the business comes with built-in competitive advantages: Stores are locked into long-term leases, and shoppers traditionally have no choice unless they drive many miles away. In e-commerce, where it is said that 90 percent of businesses fail in their first four months, these barriers don’t exist. My dog’s preferred food is available for the same price on Amazon or Chewy or many other sites I can reach with a few key-strokes. While much has been made of the mall’s decline, Knee writes that the most successful of them still have operating margins of 70 percent. Amazon manages only about 7 percent.

Knee believes that investors, and many of his students, are fooling themselves into thinking that building a globe-spanning platform is a viable goal. Platforms are successful not because they are platforms, but because they exploit the same kinds of advantages that successful businesses have enjoyed for decades. It’s a boring realization, but one that Knee hopes will give his students not only a pursuing bad ideas, but from ruining their lives. The platform siren song, he writes, “fatally impedes the ability of many to clearly consider what they might actually enjoy.” Not everyone needs to start a company to be happy. And not every company needs to take over the world.

But the crux of Knee’s argument is that “beyond their size and success” — no small feat — there is little the big platforms have in common. This brings us to the delusion’s second symptom, which involves a blind faith in the supernatural powers the digital platforms supposedly possess: “network effects,” “big data” and other buzzwords that have kept audiences nodding at TED talks for years.

Facebook’s growth, for instance, has largely been chalked up to the power of network effects — the more people use your platform, the more beneficial it is to all of them — which Knee acknowledges is perhaps the company’s key differentiator. But Knee points out that Facebook still has to dig a moat around itself in much the same way Warren Buffett would advise any company to do. When rivals come up with a competing product, Facebook spends considerable time and money either copying it or buying it up, lest users make the easy digital switch to another social network.

Knee grants that the breadth and scope of the giant tech platforms is “awe-inspiring,” but he thinks our collective fear of them is overblown. (Aside from a few glancing nods to their impact on the news business, and the state of our informed democracy, Knee doesn’t consider their societal implications.) The platforms have weaknesses just like any business, he argues, and the succubi themselves push the myth of their own invincibility in order to dissuade any potential competition.

But what the myth has mostly done is tempt young entrepreneurs to try to match them. Knee teaches a course on investing at Columbia, where graduates have largely forsaken Wall Street to work at start-ups, often of their own creation. The personal and societal virtues of starting a business are many, in theory, but no top business school graduate is looking to start a mom-and-pop outfit that will restitch the social fabric torn apart by our digital Goliaths. They almost all want to start a small business that becomes a big business, and the venture capital world incentivizes such bets. One start-up founder I spoke to recently had met a prominent venture capitalist who declared, “I’m interested in finding a company that can own the ocean.” Knee believes that investors, and many of his students, are fooling themselves into thinking that building a globe-spanning platform is a viable goal. Platforms are successful not because they are platforms, but because they exploit the same kinds of advantages that successful businesses have enjoyed for decades. It’s a boring realization, but one that Knee hopes will give his students not only a pursuing bad ideas, but from ruining their lives. The platform siren song, he writes, “fatally impedes the ability of many to clearly consider what they might actually enjoy.” Not everyone needs to start a company to be happy. And not every company needs to take over the world.

The promise of the platform business model is its magical self-reinforcement: Once the platform is in place, money is supposed to flow through the system without much extra effort at all.
Gender Identity

A journalist argues that sex is not just a social construct.

By JESSE SINGAL

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BELIEVING IN “trans rights” and believing in “gender-identity ideology.” That’s the subtly important distinction that fuels Helen Joyce’s “Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality,” a book that offers an intelligent, thorough rejoinder to an idea that has swept across much of the liberal world seemingly overnight.

According to Joyce, a longtime staffer at The Economist, most people interpret “trans rights” as meaning “compassionate concessions that enable a suffering minority to live full lives, in safety and dignity.” Joyce endorses this idea. Her bête noire is what she calls gender-identity ideology, which holds that everyone has a “gender identity,” an internal sense of being male or female (or both or neither), that is, in most tellings, innate and immutable, “something like a sexed soul.” When someone’s gender identity conflicts with their body, and/or with how society views their body, that person is transgender. (Disclosure: Joyce and I have corresponded sporadically over the years, and we got dinner when she was in New York City in 2020.)

A primary goal of those who adhere to gender-identity ideology is to enact “gender self-identification,” or the idea “that people should count as men or women according to how they feel and what they declare, instead of their biology,” into norm and law. According to self-ID, as I’ll call it, once an individual reveals their gender identity, that trumps anyone else’s understanding of it. If you say you are a man or a woman, or both or neither, that is exactly what you are.

When followed faithfully, gender-identity ideology has important implications. Take the common trans-rights flash point of communal female locker rooms. According to this view, allowing everyone who identifies as a woman to use such facilities, regardless of their degree of physical transition or any other factors, does not entail any trade-offs worth discussing. The “core mantra” of the belief system, as Joyce puts it, is that “trans women are women.” And why would you not let a woman into a women’s locker room? That’s nonsensical.

It’s not an uncommon or particularly new or historic history of what is used to be called “transsexualism,” Joyce writes in some engaging early pages, transgender people weren’t, for the most part, understood to really be the sex they felt they were. Rare in numbers, they were given hormones or surgery by “maverick clinicians” (if they were lucky enough to find any), and treated “as exceptions, to be accommodated in society with varying degrees of competence and compassion” by the bureaucrats who would sometimes swap out an M for an F or vice versa on some government form.

Since the 1990s and especially in the last decade or so, though, there has been a genuine revolution in the liberal intelligentsia’s understanding of sex and gender, Joyce argues. This was the result of a complex and hard-to-summarize tangle of forces, but the end result has been the entrenchedness of gender-identity ideology and self-ID in many liberal institutions. These ideals are also being written into law, including in the United States — following the lead of certain blue states, the Democrats’ Equality Act, which passed the House in February but which is unlikely to ever get through the filibuster-choked Senate, seeks to expand federal law’s definition of “sex” to include gender identity.

Other countries, like Portugal and Joyce’s native Ireland, have enacted self-ID by making it quite easy for citizens to change their legal sex without requiring signoff from medical or psychological authorities. (Elsewhere around the world doing so remains highly onerous or outright impossible, so it isn’t as though campaigns to liberalize these laws have popped out of thin air or are meritless.)

The zeal for self-ID extends to trusted medical and mental-health organizations, too: The American Medical Association recently called for sex to no longer be listed on publicly available birth certificates in the United States, since (the thinking goes) this unfairly impinges on people’s right to declare it for themselves.

“Trans” is unapologetically opposed to all of this. Now, despite her evident disdain for certain flavors of trans activism, Joyce is no conservative hard-liner and is not seeking a rollback of trans rights — she favorably cites Britain’s status quo on these issues, which balances legally ensnared protections for trans people with exceptions that allow for truly single-sex spaces in some settings, such as rape shelters. She also opposes legislation that would make it easier for males trans people’s access to bathrooms.

But she does believe that biological sex matters, that females have a right to truly sex-segregated spaces (with some compromise-orientated exceptions), and that gender-identity ideology threatens these ideals. Treating transgender people with dignity and respect and accommodation, Joyce says, does not require embracing a worldview she describes as fundamentally anti-scientific. Here she appeals directly to liberal ideals of religious tolerance: “I demand the same freedom to reject and oppose gender-identity ideology, and in return gladly accept that others have the right to preach it and live by it.”

Many of Joyce’s arguments boil down to the idea that trans people aren’t the only people to face official investigations for expressing a gender identity that self-ID reigns, she writes, other vulnerable groups potentially suffer. CASEgender women, for instance, lose full access to truly sex-segregated realms that offer protection and other benefits, such as locker rooms, sports teams and prisons, because the primacy of gender identity within this ideology renders the concept of biological sex fundamentally irrelevant.

Gender-nonconforming children, meanwhile, are told that if their sex or its associated gender roles make them uncomfortable, that’s because they have a “boy brain” or a “girl brain” and that’s who they really are on the inside — and so their only real choice is to transition or to suffer forever. This despite evidence suggesting that gender dysphoria, especially in childhood, can have multiple causes, and often (but by no means always) dissipates over time without transition being necessary.

Joyce offers many troubling examples of what happens when a fundamentalist strain of gender-identity ideology takes hold. In Ireland, England and Canada, notably males convicted of violent sex crimes, but who identify as women, have been housed in women’s prisons. In England, a previously convicted pedophile, in jail on suspicion of having stabbed a neighbor, sexually assaulted multiple female inmates she was housed with. In British Columbia, more than a dozen female beauticians were forced to spend significant time and energy fending off a human rights complaint filed by a trans woman because they refused to wax her penis and testicles. In Spain and Australia, female politicians have faced official investigations for expressing public opposition to self-ID.

Recently, England and Wales considered making it much easier for trans people to obtain a so-called gender-recognition certificate, bringing the process in line with self-ID. The deliberation included a period of “public consultation,” and during it, Joyce says, activists attempting to organize public events opposing self-ID were met with constant threats of venue cancelations, intimidation from protesters, at least one assault (of a 61-year-old woman) and other obstacles. In response, the British government pushed the proposal last year, announcing, as a compromise, a reduction in the cost of obtaining a G.R.C. It is difficult to disagree with Joyce’s assessment that “intimidation and harassment are carried out openly and proudly” against many of those who question the tenets of gender-identity ideology out loud.

So Joyce’s arguments are convincing. But here and there, I found myself wishing for a bit more nuance. For example, she leans heavily on the so-called disentist literature showing that childhood gender dysphoria often abates in time, but she doesn’t explain that some activists and academics have challenged its validity. Things get worse: Joyce frequently falters in explicating the normative of radical activists having nearly routed sober-minded scientists is a bit too tidy, in this case.

“Trans” is also very thin on citations — in a book so focused on in-the-weeds political and scientific controversies of a morally supercharged nature, this isn’t nit-picking. And it’s a small point, but Joyce repeatedly calls Martine Rothblatt, a famous transgender woman and entrepreneur, a “billionaire,” even though she doesn’t appear to be quite so wealthy.

In context, though, these are fairly minor shortcomings. “Trans” is a compelling, overdue argument for viewing self-ID more critically. Even those outraged by Joyce’s positions would benefit from understanding them, since, as she notes, self-ID polls quite poorly when its tenets are fully described to Americans and to the British. The present situation, in which liberal institutions not only embrace these ideas unquestioningly but also, increasingly, penalize dissenters, is unsustainable. Open conversation is the only realistic path forward, and Joyce’s book offers a good, impassioned start.”}

JESSE SINGAL is a co-host of the podcast “Blocked and Reported” and the author of “The Quick Fix: Why Fad Psychology Can’t Cure Our Social Iills.”
Perpetual Sorrow
A memoir about a dead mother and the eccentric nature of grief.

By GAUTRA BAHADUR

Kat Chow’s memoir, “Seeing Ghosts,” is a memorial to her mother delivered in a graceful, captivating voice. Like several acts of tribute to the dead in this book about grief and family, immigration and ancestors, it’s accomplished long after the loss that it marks. Chow’s mother died of cancer 17 years ago, when the author was only 13 years old. The passage of so much time hasn’t dulled the ache. A certain kind of sorrow lingers because a part of us wants it and wills it to persist, and Chow artfully and intelligently maps which kind of grief this is.

It is, of course, the pang of being motherless when still in need of mothering, a feeling she experiences as “injected into my body as if some preserving agent, indistinguishable from my insides.” She makes this observation, hinting at taxidermy, while recounting how she sobbed for her mother, gone four years, during a family visit to her parents’ birthplace, China. The setting for this display — the ancestral homeland — makes sense, since Chow’s cartography of unremitting grief includes immigrant loss and longing. Her father, stepping across the threshold of his childhood home in a Guangdong village during that trip, strikes her as “reeled in, his past a fishing line; deceptive and once hooked, an inevitable and precarious path.”

The fate for those who ruminate on the past, Chow seems to suggest, is doom — a caught fish. In “Seeing Ghosts,” one caught fish meets with an odd kind of doom at the hands of Chow’s widowed father. After going deep-sea fishing off the Connecticut coast, he practices his own taxidermy on a striped bass with the aid of Elmer’s glue and internet tutorials, and Chow finds his botted attempt rotting in his basement months later. This paternal memory unexpectedly echoes a maternal one. When Chow was 9, her mother suddenly announced, as they made faces and watched TV together: When I die, I want you to get me, I want to sit in your apartment and always watch you. In the years of mourning to come, Chow would imagine her taxidermied mother impishly springing like a jack-in-the-box from closets and corners and even from her coffin. This association of images and metaphors — fishing line leading to fish leading to taxidermy leading, inexorably, back to mother — is no doubt eccentric and potentially macabre. But Chow exercises such control that her tone manages ages somehow to be both brooding and affectionately humorous instead.

To the many bereaved by a pandemic that disrupted rituals for saying goodbye and haunted by the guilt of not doing right by the dead, it might feel as if they’re still with us in some unnatural preserved form. “Seeing Ghosts” provides multiple examples of unfulfilled duties to the departed nagging at the consciences of those left behind until finally made good. The Chow family half satisfies their mother’s dying wish, exhuming her son, who lived for less than two hours after birth, and cremating him, but it takes more than a decade and a half to bury the ashes with her in a Connecticut cemetery. Other family bones get moved across borders after decades, from Hong Kong and Havana to Toronto. They travel these routes of the Chinese diaspora in the afterlife, redefining reparation by ultimately resting not where they were born but where their kin have made new homes.

Chow, a journalist who was a founding member of NPR’s Code Switch podcast, tells us that Freud made a distinction between mourning and melancholy. The first has an endpoint and a fixed object; the second is amorphous and ceaseless. Guided by the work of scholars in Asian American studies who have developed a theory of “racial melancholia,” elaborating on Freud, Chow links her own life and species of grief to their explanation of how identi ties are formed in immigrant families who try to preserve the memory of the places they left — in a sense to taxidermy the past. “Seeing Ghosts” goes flesh to this theory, the idea that loss of country and loss of loved ones can hook us with similar perpetual sorrow, through storytelling that brings alive both Chow’s mother and father, drawing their characters tenderly but with unflinching honesty.

Inner Voice
Investigating a 250-year-old poem.

By NINA MACLAUGHLIN

A man is shot in the street. When his wife arrives at his body, she kneels by it and, frantic with love and grief, cups her hands and drinks his blood. She then writes a poem, a keen to her slain husband, and it will echo through the centuries. “Love, your blood was spilling in cascades, / and I couldn’t wipe it away, couldn’t clean it up, no, / no, my palms turned cups and oh, I gulped.”

The poem, written nearly 250 years ago, reaches an 11-year-old Doireann Ni Ghriofa, who will grow up to be an award-winning poet, in the early 1990s in a classroom in Ireland. It stirs her again in high school. And it returns years later, in the clump, exhausted clutch of motherhood, when it takes hold of her entirely.

“A Ghost in the Throat,” Ni Ghriofa’s prose debut, is, in the simplest terms, about her relationship with this poem, “The Keen for Art O Laoghaire,” and its author, Eibhlin Dubh Ni Chonaill. Pregnant with her third child, Ni Ghriofa starts to translate the text, “an evolving record of praise, sorrow, lust and reminiscence,” as she describes it (her translation is included at the end of the book). Ni Chonaill’s voice inhabits her, and she seeks out everything she can about the poet.

The book, a powerful, bewitching blend of memoir and literary investigation, centers on this search, and is as much about what she doesn’t find as what she does. Ni Ghriofa is deeply attuned to the gaps, silences and mysteries in women’s lives, and the book reveals, perhaps above all else, how we absorb what we love — a child, a lover, a poem — and how it changes us from the inside out.

Her sleuthing brings her to libraries, archives and cemeteries, often with babies in tow, and amid a terrifying crisis with her fourth pregnancy. She works in stolen moments, forgoing food and rest to flesh this long-dead poet who lives inside her. She emphasizes her lack of qualifications: she has no scholar, holds no Ph.D. — which has the ring of a student lamenting that she failed each test, only to have inevitably aced it.

What makes this book so heated and alive is precisely this lack of academic expertise. This is not dusty scholarship but a work of passion. “Raw” is not the right word; the book is finely structured, its prose controlled. “Vulnerable” gets closer, in its root force: vulnus, or wound. This book comes from the body, from the “en-twining strands of female voices that were carried in female bodies.”

The sound of the female voice, the aural texture of “A Ghost in the Throat,” is part of its deep pleasure. Hear it: The book is “composed while folding someone else’s clothes. My mind holds it close, and it grows, tender and slow.” As Ni Ghriofa weaves present day with past, she writes of dreams and omens, of places beyond reason and rationality, and returns us to earth with “porridge gloop,” crusted vomit, the humble mess of living. She is part of a chorus, she says, and invites us to join the song, one that began long ago.

Ni Ghriofa nods to John Ashbery when she mentions looking in her rearview mirror, “a convex see” that “lets me peer into the landscape unwinding behind me, but it cannot show what is ahead.” The past lives with us, look-upon-able, but no one knows what happens next. “This past / Is now here,” writes Ashbery in his own convex mirror poem. He writes of the soul, how “it fits / Its hollow perfectly: its room, our room, our moment of attention.”

“Stanza,” Ni Ghriofa points out, is the Italian word for room. In the rooms she tends to, the stanzas she translates, the poet she has re-fleshed, she makes us know: Our moment of attention is the most precious thing we have to give.
The Story Keepers

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

lations of stories and the balm they have provided for millenniums. It’s a wildly inventive novel that teems with life, straddles an enormous range of experience and learning, and embodies the storytelling gifts that it celebrates. It also pulls off a resolution that feels both surprising and inevitable, and that compels you back to the opening of the book with a head-shake of admiration at the Swiss-watchery of its construction.

The novel follows five characters in three different historical epochs, who at first seem like the protagonists of separate books. In present-day Idaho, we meet Zeno Ninis. As the book opens, Zeno is in his 80s and directing a play he’s written for a cast of children at the local library. The rehearsal is jarringly interrupted by the intrusion of Seymour Stuhlman, who’s armed and carrying an explosive device. It’s to Doerr’s credit that he quickly manages to humanize Seymour, a lonely young misfit who has become a radical misanthrope after developers encroached on the wilderness he loves. As events at the library threaten to spin out of control, the scene shifts and we find ourselves 500 years earlier, in 15th-century Thrace, meeting a hare-lipped character named Omeir, whose oxen have been requisitioned for the siege of Constantinople. Separately, inside the besieged city, the orphaned seamstress Anna has developed herself a side hustle as a cat burglar to raise money for her sick sister, Maria.

And just to complicate matters, there’s an additional story line set on a spacecraft in the 22nd century, where a young teenager named Konstance is traveling in search of a man whose oxen have been requisitioned for the siege of Constantinople. Separately, inside the besieged city, the orphaned seamstress Anna has developed herself a side hustle as a cat burglar to raise money for her sick sister, Maria. And just to complicate matters, there’s an additional story line set on a spacecraft in the 22nd century, where a young teenager named Konstance is traveling in search of a man.

Anna has developed herself a side hustle as a cat burglar to raise money for her sick sister, Maria. And just to complicate matters, there’s an additional story line set on a spacecraft in the 22nd century, where a young teenager named Konstance is traveling in search of a man.

What can possibly connect such an odd bunch of people? One minute we’re haggling with Venetian book collectors in a besieged city, the next, a single mother in Idaho is struggling to pay her bills, or someone in a hermetically sealed spaceship is wondering how a beetle got in there. It’s an amazing feat that drawing from such disparate story lines, Doerr manages to keep the book compelling, coherent and moving.

Doerr understands the pulse of changing fortune, the switches of destiny from good to bad and back again. Anna, her awakening comes when she begins learning Greek from a goitrous tutor in Constantinople. For Seymour, it’s an encounter with an owl in the woods behind his house. Konstance’s avocation becomes clear when she learns the true purpose of the spacecraft’s mission in its weird virtual library. Pressed into war, Omeir merely yearns to get back to the family farm. Meanwhile the younger Zeno’s early encounters with myth at the local library feed his belated ambition to be a translator from ancient Greek. To begin with, you have to take it on trust that all these elements somehow form part of a whole. Then bit by bit, the nature of the connections between each story comes tantalizingly into focus.

The play that Zeno is directing in the present day is a work by Diogenes that he’s translated from ancient Greek. Fragments of this book, “Cloud Cuckoo Land,” punctuate the novel. It tells the story of Aethon, whose mishaps and transformations echo the ups and downs of the other characters. Broadly speaking, the story of how this book — itself an invention of the author — narrowly escapes destruction is the thread that links the different narratives. Dioge-nes’ odd little fable owes its material survival to the care of the five main characters, and in return it sprinkles its magic into each of their lives.

Although “Cloud Cuckoo Land” is a thoughtful, learned book, it’s also accessible. This feels like both an aesthetic choice and — in the broadest sense — a political one. Throughout the novel, Diogenes’ story brings comfort to people in hard times. During a spell in Korea serving with the military, Zeno is captured and his closeted sexuality is tested by a passion for a fellow prisoner of war, Rex. “I know why those librarians read the old stories to you,” Rex tells him. “Because if it’s told well enough, for as long as the story lasts, you get to slip the trap.” Zeno ponders this insight later in life as he watches his cast during the rehearsals for his play.

“These are the kids, he realizes, without club volleyball or math tutors or boat slips at the marina.” Finally understanding whom he’s writing for, Zeno is able to let go of the notion that he’s creating art for an abstract audience of patricians. “All those academic commentaries he forced himself to read — was Diogenes writing lowbrow comedy or elaborate metafiction? — in the face of five fifth graders, smelling of chewing gum, sweaty socks and wildfire smoke, those debates flew out the window. Diogene-nes, whoever he was, was primarily trying to make a machine that captured attention, something to slip the trap.”

In fact, Doerr’s is much more than a mechanistic or childish device for passing time. It’s a humane and uplifting book for adults that’s infused with the magic of childhood reading experiences. “Cloud Cuckoo Land” is ultimately a celebration of books, the power and possibilities of reading. Manuscripts do burn, but the fact we have held onto so many and still find continued value in reading them is an aspect of our humanity that this novel justly celebrates. ☞

MARCIAL THEROUX is the author of five novels, the most recent of which is “The Secret Books.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY ULLF ANDERSEN
IT'S NEVER BEEN easy to define the Uruguayan novelist Mario Levrero (1940-2004), who also sold books, took photographs and wrote comics, crosswords and brainteasers. Though he began writing fiction with the Kafkaesque tone of his early Involuntary trilogy, his subsequent work was a joyful helter-skelter through multiple genres. And Anglophone readers now have the opportunity to read Levrero at the dazzling end of this zigzagging progress, with the two metafictional works that closed his career; both in precisely comic and melancholic translations by Annie McDermott: "Empty Words" (1996) and now "The Luminous Novel," which was published posthumously in 2005.

In 2000, Levrero received a Guggenheim grant to complete a project he’d begun back in 1984, which he was calling “the luminous novel”: an account of a “transcendental experience.” He believed that with “Mr. Guggenheim’s dollars” he would finally find the time to complete this novel, with “Mr. Guggenheim’s dollars” he would transcendental experience.” He believed that all the unfinished story lines would somehow or other be resolved. But of course, that wasn’t what happened, and this book, taken as a whole, is a display or even a museum of unfinished stories.

Everything is blockage, interruption: the comedy of infinite loops and recursion. “I started taking the antidepressants a month ago,” Levrero writes, “not because I thought I needed to take antidepressants, but because they were widely advertised as a major help with giving up smoking. I haven’t stopped smoking, at least not yet, but I have discovered that I needed to take antidepressants because I was depressed and didn’t realize it.” And maybe the comedy of that little riff can be an emblem for this novel’s strange charm. Once you’re inside this patient record of daily existence, with all its interruptions and exhausting errands, you start to see corresponding hints of unexpected triumphs and illuminations. The diary may be a museum of unfinished stories, but a story, this book shows, doesn’t need to be finished to have its own meanings — the largest of which may be that the transcendental experience Levrero is after has been visible all along, in this diary of everyday disaster.

Yes, the diary is a novel, after all — one that leads the reader to two surprisingly optimistic conclusions. As you read “The Luminous Novel,” it becomes possible to believe that people can be defined by their attempts at self-sabotage, just as a novel can be defined by a record of its failure — while finding a luminous beauty in the patient presentation of its own mutilation.

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**The Luminous Novel**

**By Mario Levrero**  
Translated by Annie McDermott  

**The diary of a doomed project.**

**By ADAM THIRLWELL**  

---

**Rise and Resist**

A novel tracks Egypt’s 2011 revolution and its bloody crackdown.

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**By ROBYN CRESWELL**

ALAA AL ASWANY’S LATEST NOVEL begins with an Egyptian general waking up perceptually, with “no need of an alarm clock,” for the dawn prayer, which he performs with feelings of “deep and genuine humility.” He spends the rest of the morning overseeing the torture of a political prisoner, though his heart isn’t really in it. He’s worried about his daughter, a medical student who has been posting videos on Facebook that show the police brutalizing civilians.

Aswany’s opening is a clever riff on the Egyptian police brutality. “You did well to send it via the secret email like, ‘I sent your Excellency Plan 2000.’” But it’s a risky move too, since all allusions invite comparisons and these aren’t always in Aswany’s favor.

Like Mahfouz’s novel — and like Aswany’s best-known work, “The Yacoubian Building” — “The Republic of False Truths” is a panoramic fiction with a large cast of characters: generals and schoolteachers, factory managers and chauffeurs. Both novels take aim at the hypocrisies of power, especially the patriarchal kind, and show how political crises can divide families along generational lines. The climax of Mahfouz’s story is the 1919 revolution against the British, while Aswany’s novel centers on the occupation of Tahrir Square in 2011.

For Aswany, this was the year Egyptians awoke to their own agency. The most sensitively drawn character in the novel, capably translated by S. R. Fellowes, is Ashraf Wissa, a former movie actor, embittered by the industry’s corruption, who has retreated into hashish-smoking and canoodling with the maid (he’s an update of the aging sybarite, Zaki Bey el Dessouki, in “The Yacoubian Building”). Though skeptical at first of the struggle in the square, he comes to acknowledge that the young people represent “a different kind of Egyptian,” and joins their movement.

Wissa’s transformation is finely traced and points to an important truth about the 2011 revolts. It was the young people, acting outside established parties, who taught their elders how to rise up and remove a dictator.

This is, of course, only half the story. The second half of Aswany’s novel charts the opening phase of Egypt’s counterrevolution, in which the army, after ushering Hosni Mubarak of stage, began shoring up the status quo ante. It is here that Aswany’s basically melodramatic approach to storytelling becomes a handicap. In his novel, the deep state’s response to the revolution is masterminded by the general of the opening scene (whose piety recalls that of the current Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi). He effortlessly marshals Egypt’s media elite to turn the protesters, branding them as foreign agents who can be shot down in the streets.

Rather than the messy, unscripted drama of fallible characters colliding with one another in the midst of a historical crisis, we have a soap opera — in Egyptian terms, a Ramadan _musalsal_ — in which a monolithic state apparatus batters its noble and self-sacrificing youth.

This doesn’t leave much room for novelistic complication. (And it leads to dialogue like, “I sent your Excellency Plan 2000.” “You did well to send it via the secret email without the ministry’s stamp.”) It is also unsatisfying as history. What about the Egyptian students who didn’t fall into either camp? Aswany treats the Muslim Brotherhood as an object of crude satire — like many Egyptian leftists, he regards Islamism as merely a mask for venality — and shows little interest in ordinary citizens who don’t support the revolution.

Aswany often mocks the conspiracy theories of sheikhs and army officers, who painted the revolution as a foreign plot. But his own novel ends up suggesting that the Egyptian state is exactly the sort of all-powerful and farseeing entity that its ideologues make it out to be — a myth the revolutionaryaries of 2011 spent so much blood to expose.
**Children’s Books / Language Arts**

**Word Play**

Names, palindromes, figures of speech and the pure poetry of language.

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**By NAOMI SHIHAB NYE**

**WORDS HAVE RESCUED US.** During these strange seasons, amid the silences of public spaces, they’ve provided consolation, helped us stay tuned. We’ve broken quietude in new ways, re-examined what we thought we knew, carried phrases as mot-toes, or leverage. Four new books (three picture books and a graphic novel) examine the curiosities of our playful word-life in four very different ways.

In exquisite collaged art mixed with photographs, and text that’s both drawn and printed, “Thao,” by Thao Lam (of Vietnam and Toronto), considers a very simple name and Toronto), considers a very simple

**STHAO**

*Written and illustrated by Thao Lam*  
24 pp. Owlkids. $17.95.  
(Ages 4 to 8)

**MY MONSTER MOOFY**

*Written by Annie Watson*  
Illustrated by Eric Zelz  
36 pp. Tilbury House. $18.95.  
(Ages 6 to 8)

**THE WORDY BOOK**

*Written and illustrated by Julie Paschkis*  
48 pp. Enchanted Lion. $18.95.  
(Ages 5 to 10)

four-letter name that is hard for some people to pronounce. “It’s not easy being Thao.” In school, she’s called everything from “Tofu” to “Towel,” and sometimes answers “Here.” For half a day, she switches to “Jennifer” — until she pops open her lunchbox to find her favorite food with a name more unusual than hers. Any child who has suffered mispronunciations or schoolyard rebranding will embrace this book. If you think about it, all names are strange. Some words even have mysterious silent letters. “Not that kind of lamb!”

This book could be a perfect launchpad for classroom explorations of everybody’s names — histories, linkages, other words living inside them — as its yearbook-style endpapers suggest. Nothing is “foreign” if you take time to know it, and the deeply touching “Thao” soars through its eloquent understatement of this truth.

**Word Play**

In Jon Agee’s spectacular “palindrama,” “Otto,” a daydreaming boy travels far looking for his mischievous pup, Pip, who has dashed off from a beach. An utterly wacky graphic novel written entirely in palindromes — words or phrases that read the same forward and backward — is packed with oddball characters, startling dialogue and surprising settings. We witness a valiant boy hitchhiking by himself, jumping into vehicles with eccentricities and wandering a big city solo. In this book it somehow feels OK. Otto’s brave! He never complains! The pup must be found! A man on the street holds a sign: “Do geese see God?” An elderly lady in a boat hands Otto an oar and announces, “No word, row on.” Even the modern art museum (with its “Koons Nook” and “Moore Room”) and the cemetery (with gravestones such as “Tori Wong — Now I Rot”) are funny.

What’s particularly charming is that, kooky and far-fetched as Otto’s journey may seem, the gripping tale reminds us of daily life — especially the peculiar lives we’ve been leading recently. One thing whips into another; one trouble explodes into three. And 200 palindromes in quick succession turn the brain a bit inside out. It was a relief to learn, at the end, that Agee didn’t dream up all the palindromes himself. News of a real-life World Palindrome Championship was its own surprise. Even a reader who has never before thought of palindromes will emerge from this triumphant book exhilarated, looking for them everywhere (and dream of having a conversation with Agee). No matter that the ending is a wee bit of a letdown — Otto must be exhausted after all that action.

“My Monster Moofy,” written by Annie Watson, with fanciful pictures by Eric Zelz, attempts to teach figures of speech through descriptions of a nondescript cat, Moofy. Children may be confused by the ending is a wee bit of a letdown — Otto must be exhausted after all that action.

“After a storm, a jump into a sinkhole. A fish jumps out of the water and a frog jumps into the air,” Watson says in the author’s note. Unfortunately, the language here also tends toward the clunky. For *oxymoron* (“two words that make sense side by side though they have opposite meanings”): “He may be a tiny monster, but he causes predictable chaos and beautiful destruction on every adventure.” So many syllables in each of the examples!

For *paradox*: “The only thing that’s the same about Moofy’s many disguises is that they’re all different.” The little girl writing in a big beautiful notebook on the cover is a positive vote for trying things out, not being stuck with single descriptions. Third or fourth graders, already deep into writing, may appreciate this book most.

Some children’s books feel like classics the first time one encounters them. “What does a word think about?” the artist and writer Julie Paschkis asks on the first double-page spread of “The Wordy Book.” This and other evocative questions — such as out in a teaching way encourage or hinder them?

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“Words have rescued us.” During these strange seasons, amid the silences of public spaces, they’ve provided consolation, helped us stay tuned. We’ve broken quietude in new ways, re-examined what we thought we knew, carried phrases as mot-toes, or leverage. Four new books (three picture books and a graphic novel) examine the curiosities of our playful word-life in four very different ways.

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### COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

**SALES PERIOD OF SEPTEMBER 5-11**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Fiction</th>
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<th>Nonfiction</th>
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<td>FORGOTTEN IN DEATH, by J. D. Robb. (St. Martin's) The 53rd book of the In Death series. The property where a decades-old crime occurred belongs to the homicide detective Eve Dallas's husband.</td>
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<td>AMERICAN MARXISM, by Mark R. Levin. (Threshold Editions) The Fox News host gives his take on the Green New Deal, critical race theory and social activism.</td>
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<td>BEAUTIFUL WORLD, WHERE ARE YOU, by Sally Rooney. (Farrar, Straus &amp; Giroux) A novelist, a warehouse worker, an editorial assistant and an political adviser deal with changes.</td>
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<td>COUNTDOWN BIN LADEN, by Chris Wallace with Mitch Weiss. (Avid Reader/Simon &amp; Schuster) The intelligence gathering, security strategizing and military planning during the final eight months of the pursuit of Osama bin Laden.</td>
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<td>IT ENDS WITH US, by Colleen Hoover. (Atria) A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE, by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.</td>
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<td>BILLY SUMMERS, by Stephen King. ( Scribner) A killer for hire who only takes out bad guys seeks redemption as he does one final job.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY, by Qian Julie Wang. (Doubleday) A 7-year-old girl and her parents encounter difficulties in New York City when they leave China in the 1990s.</td>
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<td>A SLOW FIRE BURNING, by Paula Hawkins. (Riverhead) Three women come under scrutiny when a young man is found gruesomely murdered in a London houseboat.</td>
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<td>THIS BRIGHT FUTURE, by Bobby Hall. (Simon &amp; Schuster) The hip-hop recording artist known as Logic tells his life story.</td>
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<td>THE LAST THING HE TOLD ME, by Laura Dave. (Simon &amp; Schuster) Hannah Hall discovers truths about her missing husband and bonds with his daughter from a previous relationship.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>THE SISTERS OF AUSCHWITZ, by Roxane van Iperen. (Harper) Janny and Lien Brilleslijper from Amsterdam were sent by train to Auschwitz when the Jewish safehouse they created in the woods was discovered.</td>
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<td>THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO, by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square/ Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>FOREVER YOUNG, by Hayley Mills. (Grand Central) The Disney child star of the 1960s and daughter of an acclaimed British actor shares some of her experiences in Hollywood.</td>
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<td>THE MADNESS OF CROWDS, by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Washington Square/ Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?, by Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey. (Flatiron) An approach to dealing with trauma that shifts an essential question used to investigate it.</td>
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<td>THE HEROIN'S CRY, by Ann Cleeves. (Minotaur) The second book in the Two Rivers series. Detective Matthew Venn finds a staged murder at the home of a group of artists.</td>
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<td>GREENLIGHTS, by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.</td>
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The New York Times best sellers are compiled and archived by the best-sellers-lists desk of the New York Times news department, and are separate from the editorial, culture, advertising and business sides of The New York Times Company. Rankings reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors offering a wide range of general interest titles published in the United States. For the complete best-seller lists, visit nytimes.com/books/best-sellers. **ON-LINE:** For complete lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers.

**Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review**

THE MAGICIAN, by Colm Toibin. ( Scribner, $28.) In this novel of huge imaginative sympathy, Toibin delves into the rich interiority of the German novelist Thomas Mann. From childhood to early success to exile abroad, we follow Mann through personal challenges and political turmoil as he turns the complexities of life into art.

I LIVE A LIFE LIKE YOURS: A Memoir, by Jan Grue. Translated by B.L. Crook. (FSG Originals, paper, $17.) Grue, a professor at the University of Oslo, writes of living with a rare form of spinal muscular atrophy and his efforts to fit his extraordinary shape into an ordinary world, to reveal a person who is much more than what others see.

ON FREEDOM: Four Songs of Care and Constraint, by Maggie Nelson. (Graywolf, $27.) Nelson's brainy, affecting, genre-crossing books have earned her a deserved reputation as a sui generis amalgam of poet, memoirist, theorist and critic. This provocative meditation on the ethics of freedom as a source of constraint, as well as liberation, shows her at her most original and brilliant.

SHUTDOWN: How Covid Shook the World’s Economy, by Adam Tooze. (Viking, $28.) Tooze’s account of the twin health and economic crises of 2020 is actually a warning that American institutions and systems, and the assumptions, positions and divisions that undergird them, leave us ill prepared to deal with the next large-scale challenge, whatever it turns out to be.

MADE IN CHINA: A Memoir of Love and Labor, by Anna Qu. (Liveright, $26.) In a narrative laced with bitterness and aching, Qu recounts trimming loose threads off sleeves in her immigrant family’s sweatshop in Queens and honors the complexity of her mother, a daunting figure who often comes across as domineering, capricious and dismissive.

THE MADNESS OF CROWDS, by Taylor Jenkins Reid. (Atria) A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and career to a struggling magazine writer. A novelist, a warehouse worker, an editorial assistant and an political adviser deal with changes.

HOW TO WRESTLE A GIRL: Stories, by Venita Blackburn. (MCD/FSG Originals, paper, $16.) These 30 stories, many of them set in Southern California, explore grief, the body, queerness and the political and societal forces that shape the lives of young women in particular. The book shines in its propensity to magnify small moments and challenge our presumptions.

PRESUMED GUILTY: How the Supreme Court Empowered the Police and Subverted Civil Rights, by Erwin Chemerinsky. (Liveright, $27.95.) This book is a damning indictment of the modern Supreme Court, demonstrating in case after case that in matters of criminal law, “the police almost always win.”


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

**Elisabeth Egan**

#### Silver Linings Playbook

In her memoir, “Forever Young,” Hayley Mills writes about the pressures of being born into an acting family and starring in a string of box office hits as an adolescent. Mills was only 12 when she filmed her first movie, “Tiger Bay,” alongside her father, Sir John Mills; on Dec. 15, 1959, The Times described her as “one of the most composed little performers we have seen in a long time.” A year later, she played the title role in the film version of Eleanor H. Porter’s novel “Pollyanna.”

“The news is that only an unregenerate cynic with an abiding dislike of kids, good or bad, Technicolor and a gentle legend spun in standard, obvious style would fail to see this picture-postcard remembrance of improbable things past,” our reviewer wrote. “The blond, pixieish Miss Mills gives a restrained, natural and gratifyingly mature performance. She is a likable youngster whose mannerisms and speech are unaffected and convincing.” Mills won a special Academy Award, presented by Shirley Temple, for her role. “Forever Young” appears at No. 9 in its first week on the hardcover nonfiction list.

#### Beauty Queens

There are many reasons to weep and gnash your teeth right now, but if you take a look at this week’s best-seller list, you’ll find glimmers of hope in two similarly titled newcomers: “Beautiful World, Where Are You,” by Sally Rooney, and “The Last Thing He Told Me,” by Laura Dave. (Simon & Schuster) Hannah Hall discovers truths about her missing husband and bonds with his daughter from a previous relationship. (Riverhead) Three women come under scrutiny when a young man is found gruesomely murdered in a London houseboat.

#### Inside the List

**Elisabeth Egan**

#### Paperback Row

**Jennifer Krauss**

#### MAGIC LESSONS

“Hoffman’s book swept me away during a time I most needed it,” our reviewer, Edan Lepucki, wrote of the third installment (and second prequel) in the Practical Magic fantasy series. While the plot here is darker than in the other novels, Hoffman returns to prove the gift intact,” our reviewer, Seth Mnookin.

#### THE DEVIL YOU KNOW: A Black Power Manifesto

By Charles M. Blow. (Harper Perennial, 256 pp., $17.99.) While questioning the historical underpinnings of Blow’s argument that African Americans’ best bet for dismantling white supremacy is to reverse-migrate south, our reviewer, Tanisha C. Ford, called his book a “helpful introduction” to the fractious debates about voting rights.

#### THE LIVING LIFE OF ADULTS

By Elena Ferrante. Translated by Ann Goldstein. (Europa Editions, 324 pp., $18.) “What a relief it is when an author who has written a masterpiece returns to prove the gift intact,” Dayna Tortoreci began her review of the pseudonymous Italian writer’s first novel since her Neapolitan quartet. By placing her latest young heroine in the 1990s, Ferrante “shyly asks how decades of feminism have changed the world.”

#### WAGNERISM: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music

By Alex Ross. (Picador, 784 pp., $22.99.) Rather than focus on Wagner’s music itself, our reviewer, John Adams, noted, Ross sees the composer as an “aural source out of which spring a multitude of artistic, social and political movements.” Exhibiting “its own ‘Wagnerian’ heft,” this work of “enormous intellectual range” is “not less than a history of ideas.”

#### IF THEN: How the Simulacra Corporation Invented the Future

By Jill Lepore. (Liveright, 432 pp., $17.95.) This “fascinating but flawed” book by the Harvard history professor and New Yorker staff writer, about a “robot campaign strategist” (a.k.a. the “People Machine”) that came to light after John F. Kennedy’s narrow 1960 presidential victory, has an important story to tell, according to our reviewer, Seth Mnookin.
A battered wife raised in a violent home attempts to halt the cycle of abuse.

A movie icon recounts stories of her loves and careers to a struggling magazine writer.

A young woman who survived alone in the marsh becomes a murder suspect.

Opponents Poppy and Alex meet to vacation together one more time in a quiet town on the North Carolina coast in 1969, in a novel about a casual sexual relationship between Tate and Miles.

A romantic writer becomes fascinated by the owner and director of a health resort.

A doctor serving in the Navy in Afghanistan goes back to North Carolina where two women change his life.

A memoir-exposé of the restaurant world.

A collection of humorist’s essays including “Me Talk Pretty One Day” and “A Guy Walks Into a Bar Car.”

The history and appreciation of plants and animals.

A memoir by the host of “The Daily Show.”

The story of Henrietta Lacks and her family.

A collection of declassified documents and interviews.

An oral history of the events that occurred on Sept. 11, 2001, based on transcripts, declassified documents and interviews.

A therapist who specializes in trauma, body-centered psychotherapy and violence prevention explains racism’s effect on the body.

The story of a woman whose cancer cells were cultured without her permission in 1951.
THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT
A Memoir of Life After Brain Damage
By Drew Magary
288 pp. Harmony. $27.

When Magary woke up in a hospital on Dec. 19, 2018, tubes everywhere, he figured he had lost a fistfight. In truth, though, he’d had an accident in a New York bar, either caused by or resulting in a brain hemorrhage. After two weeks in an induced coma, he was lucky to be alive.

Magary’s memoir, “The Night the Lights Went Out,” focuses on what he’s lost: initially, the ability to walk unassisted, his senses of taste and smell, the hearing in one ear. He’s impatient to be himself again and, for both financial and identity reasons, to get back to work as a writer. (At the time a columnist for Deadspin, he now writes for Defector.) Magary is known for a wit so caustic it can almost make you pity his targets. Like his journalism, this memoir is barstool-banter friendly (“gonna” appears 70 times by my count) and reaches for laughs.

It’s not until the end of the book that Magary, realizing he’s still barking at his wife and three kids, decides to see a therapist for his anger issues. “You’ve probably been screaming SEE A SHRINK since the prologue,” he writes. (More like murmuring, but yes.) This emotional work enables him to put a sweet bow on the story. While Magary delivers a detailed description of the inner workings of cochlear implants, he doesn’t examine himself all that closely. The most moving part of this memoir is an oral history, a debriefing of friends and family who were with him throughout his hospital stay. Incongruously, that’s where you feel you get to know Magary best.

SMILE
The Story of a Face
By Sarah Ruhl
256 pp. Simon & Schuster. $27.

After a high-risk second pregnancy, complete with months of bed rest and a bout with a liver disease that could kill the twins she’s carrying, Ruhl (a well-known playwright) successfully gives birth to a girl, Hope, and a boy, William. Then her lactation consultant notices that her left eye looks droopy.

Ruhl looks in the mirror and sees that the left side of her face has fallen. She’s diagnosed with Bell’s palsy, which could right itself within months, or longer, or perhaps never. In the meantime, her smile is gone. “This is the story of my asking it to come back,” she writes.

Although Ruhl tries everything from physical therapy to acupuncture to dietary changes, including giving up gluten when she learns she has celiac disease, “Smile” is not a play-by-play of treatments so much as it is a rumination about faces and specifically smiles, including what they mean across cultures, and for her particularly. Like so many women, she is accustomed to ingratiating herself with a smile — for a year in high school she made a point of grinning at everyone in the halls to see if they’d smile back. Without it, Ruhl’s face feels “frozen.” She has other ways to express herself — Ruhl has been a finalist for the Pulitzer twice and received a MacArthur grant — but art and words are not enough.

Ruhl recognizes her miracle-free narrative as a hard sell: “A woman slowly gets better. What kind of a story is that?” She takes detours into theology and her life in the theater, including confronting a sense that the Bell’s palsy marked a dividing line between her early success and later work. Some sections of this slim book may feel padded (unless you’re riveted by the subject of gluten), and Ruhl’s detective work into her family medical history is speculative enough to feel tangential.

But there’s something pleasing about the memoir’s deliberately slow pace, mimicking Ruhl’s recovery over 10 years. A partial recovery, she realizes, is very much like life itself: “Who, after all, is fully recovered from life?”

RUNNING IS A KIND OF DREAMING
By J. M. Thompson

Ultrarunners have baffling capabilities, in much the same way those migratory birds that stay aloft for weeks and even months do. You know they can do it and have done it and will do it again — but still, it hardly seems possible.

Introducing himself as he is setting out on the Tahoe 200, a 205-mile race around the mountains that ring Lake Tahoe, Thompson acknowledges how insane such races and those who participate in them can seem. “Am I out of my mind?” His answer to the reader is tinged with an assurance that also poses a fresh puzzle: “Not anymore.”

Like Magary and Ruhl, Thompson is a person in midlife, recovering, but his cure lies in the intentional self-in infliction of a kind of trauma on the body. While trying to maintain sobriety, he decided to rebuild himself through running. To become “bionic.” Running cleanses or heals or replaces the internal trauma and mental health issues that led him to his drug and alcohol addictions and suicidal ideation in his 30s. Today he’s the father of two and a clinical psychologist, one who clearly relishes breaking what he believes to be an unspoken, and mistaken, code not to share personal mental health issues.

The Tahoe 200, broken up into increasingly exhausted stages, provides a framework for the narrative of his earlier, traumatized life. It’s a promising approach, but Thompson is coy about the details of what happened to him, interspersed in a nonlinear fashion. Sometimes that’s his only choice, since his memory is imperfect. Other times it feels like a deliberate vagueness, meant to tease us until he gets over the next ridge.

Ultimately the memoir, like the race itself, is an erratic slog. There’s rhapsodizing about Burning Man, some stream of consciousness (including cutey conversations with “Charlie,” Thompson’s code for cocaine), philosophy (Plato pops up) and the supremely mundane matter of refueling at food and aid stations: “I sip the soda. yum.” Memoirs are by nature the stuff of self-indulgence. But that’s for the first and second drafts, not the one the reader receives.
PAST PRESIDENTS AND SOON-TO-BE PRESIDENTS have long written for the Book Review — Herbert Hoover, Bill Clinton, John F. Kennedy. The very first one to do so, though, was Theodore Roosevelt, on Oct. 13, 1918. It was clearly quite a coup for the Book Review, then just over two decades old, to persuade the former president to review “Jungle Peace,” a new volume from the explorer and naturalist William Beebe about the jungles of Guyana.

To say that Roosevelt loved the book is an understatement. “Mr. Beebe’s volume is one of the rare books which represent a positive addition to the sum total of genuine literature,” he wrote. “It is not merely a book of the moment; it will stand on the shelves of civilized people, of people who feel that their time is too precious to waste on trash. It is reading to both wise and good, as long as we are wise and good; and the children of now and hereafter will wish that they had been born in a time when the reading of such volumes was as common as the reading of the newspapers of today.”

Writing like the type of book one writes and reads within the last century and a half, books of this kind only can be produced to a million or something comparable today. In these sentences there may be many expressions of private life, much more of their own. There is a feeling of youth, of the zest of life, of the joy of living. The book is a rare book in every sense of the word. And its language is language which has all the charm of an essay of Robert Louis Stevenson. He tells of bird and beast and plant and insect. Whatever he touches he turns into the gold of truth rightly interpreted and vividly set forth — as witness his extraordinary account of the sleeping parlor of certain gorgeous tropical butterflies.”

The “Jungle Peace” review appeared in the Book Review’s annual fall preview issue. According to an editor’s note, paper shortages and “the great change, since the war, of publishers’ output” forced the Book Review to sharply curtail the number of titles featured — only 100, instead of the customary 300 or 500. Space was at such a premium in the issue that even the former president was apparently given a word count; his review ended on the front page instead of continuing inside, as might have been expected.

“If I had space I would like to give an abstract of the whole book,” Roosevelt wrote in a somewhat hasty, tacked-on conclusion. “As it is I merely advise all those who love good books, very good books, at once to get this book of Mr. Beebe’s.”

WHEN A PRESIDENT WROTE FOR THE BOOK REVIEW

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