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OCT 2021

Our Halloween issue features frights galore, from witchy rom-coms to eerie gothics like *The Death of Jane Lawrence* by Caitlin Starling



ALSO INSIDE: Fall blockbusters from Colson Whitehead, Rick Bragg, Susan Orlean, Anthony Doerr, R.J. Palacio, Ruth Ozeki & more

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Cover includes art from **The Death of Jane Lawrence** (St. Martin's), illustrated by Colin Verdi.

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Enter the Phoebeverse

The famously funny author, comedian and actor adds “publisher” to her multihyphenate career.



In her third book, **Please Don't Sit on My Bed in Your Outside Clothes** (Tiny Reparations, \$27, 9780593184905), Phoebe Robinson is as hilarious, smart and honest as ever.

For this book, what essay came to you first? What was on your mind that made you feel like it was time to get to work on this collection? Definitely “Quaranbae.” It was early in quarantine, but I had already started noticing some things both bae and I did that made me laugh or go, “That’s interesting.” Just us being around each other all the time and the ways in which we got in each other’s ways. And I thought, “Huh. Maybe this could be a fun essay collection.” I truly wasn’t planning on writing a book during quarantine. I think I just needed a creative outlet because so much was unknown. And now we’re here!

Does one aspect of your multi-hyphenate career feel most dominant to you, or do you view all of your various jobs as elements of a larger creative whole? Definitely the latter. I’m just curious about and interested in reflecting many sides of my creativity. And each one nourishes a part of me. I

love doing stand-up and getting that immediate feedback from the audience of, “Yes, that is hilarious” or, “Naw, not there yet, but you’re on the right path, so figure it out.” Writing allows me to lean into the side of me that enjoys being alone, where I can be funny or serious. And then all the film and TV stuff is so collaborative, and I enjoy that process of trying to build something that would be impossible for one person to pull off.

You write, “If I can make you laugh and forget your problems for a moment then I did something.” Who or what did that for you during 2020?

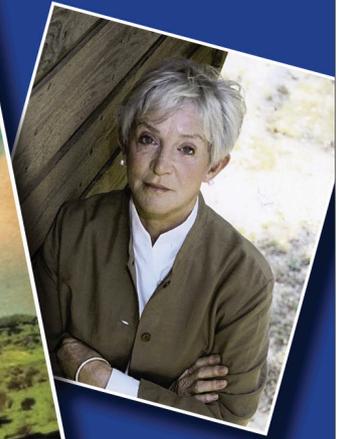
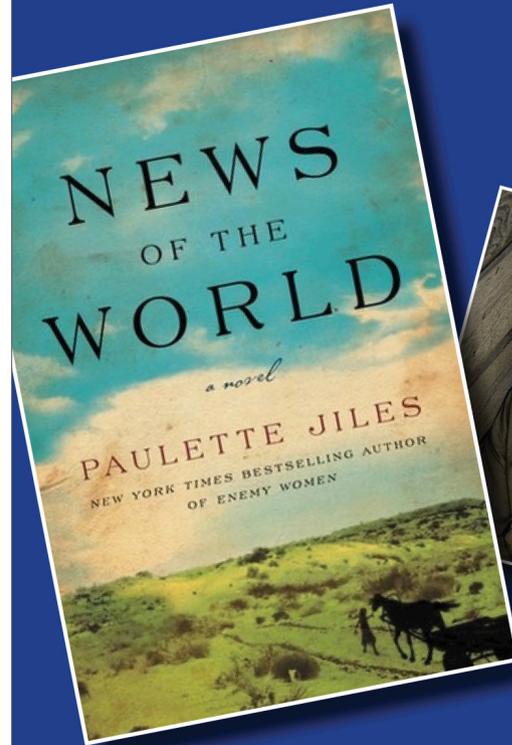
I rewatched “Sex and the City,” and that was great. It is such a formative show for me, and Samantha Jones is so freaking funny. It was great to revisit the show and forget the state of the naysh for a bit.

The latest additions to the Phoebeverse are a production company and a book imprint, both called Tiny Reparations. What does that name mean to you?

It’s been the running theme throughout my career. I’ve always used whatever platform to help uplift other voices and share the wealth. I don’t want to be the token. I don’t want to be the “exceptional one” in a sea of white people in entertainment and publishing. First of all, that is a fallacy. There’s not just one special person of color who is good at this stuff. A whole host of them are, and many of them are ignored, and I don’t want to be the person doing the ignoring. So it’s my responsibility to shine a light on people and help make their paths a bit easier than mine has been. It’s been a wonderful privilege, and I’m always looking for ways to do more. Stay tuned!

—Linda M. Castellitto

Mansfield Reads! One City, One Book



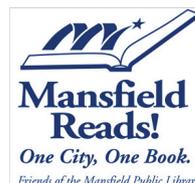
Evening with the Author

Thursday, October 21, 2021, 7 PM
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Performing Arts Center
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Come meet bestselling author Paulette Jiles. Ask questions, enjoy dessert, and get your book signed. To register and RSVP for this event, go to mansfieldlibraryfriends.org.

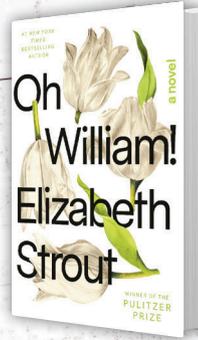
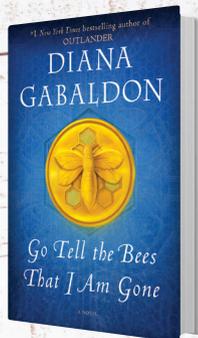
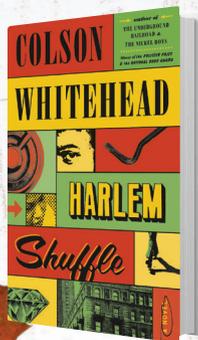


Visit BookPage.com to read an extended version of this Q&A and our review of *Please Don't Sit on My Bed in Your Outside Clothes*.



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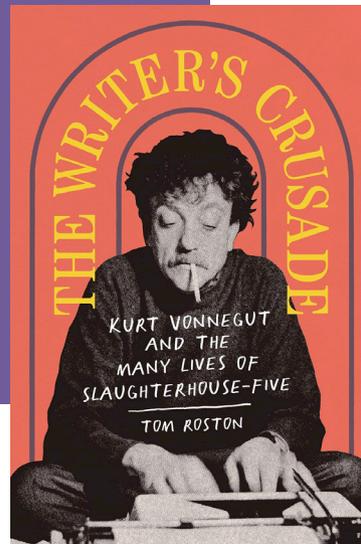
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BORROW. READ. REPEAT.

well read

by robert weibezahl



The Writer's Crusade

When it appeared in 1969, *Slaughterhouse-Five* turned Kurt Vonnegut—until then an admired, if pigeonholed writer—into a best-selling celebrity overnight. The novel, which drew on Vonnegut's wartime experiences as an American soldier during the Battle of the Bulge and, most saliently, the Allied firebombing of Dresden, which occurred while he was held there as a POW, was anything but a straightforward war chronicle. With its darkly humorous tone, time-traveling structure and groundbreaking use

of the author as a character/narrator, the novel hardly seemed mainstream. But its absurdity struck a chord with America in the midst of cultural upheaval, and Vonnegut's unique vision spoke to two generations at once: those who had fought in World War II and those who were coming of age amid the turmoil of the Vietnam War.

In *The Writer's Crusade: Kurt Vonnegut and the Many Lives of Slaughterhouse-Five* (Abrams, \$26, 9781419744891), journalist Tom Roston revisits the story behind the book, which Vonnegut struggled to write for

A journalist outlines the story behind Vonnegut's masterpiece, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and the wartime trauma that inspired it.

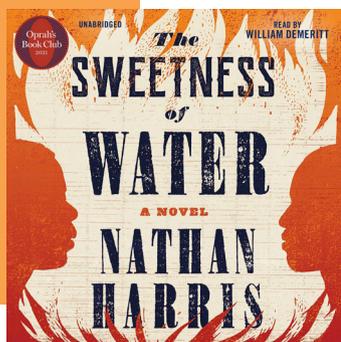
many years until he finally found the right voice to use. The engrossing tale Roston reconstructs is twofold. It begins with an absorbing biographical study

that explores what made Vonnegut Vonnegut, including not only the events of his war years but also traumas from his Indianapolis childhood and early adulthood that shaped his singular blend of pessimism and humor. Famously quirky in his demeanor as well as in his manner of writing, Vonnegut played by his own rules, even if that meant being incorrectly viewed as only a science fiction writer at the start of his career.

Roston ties Vonnegut's sometimes peculiar behavior and outlook to his past, and in the latter part of *The Writer's Crusade* (whose title is an homage to *The Children's Crusade*, the alternate title of *Slaughterhouse-Five*), he contemplates whether Vonnegut suffered from what has come to be called PTSD. To this end, Roston speaks with other novelists whose work focuses on war, such as Tim O'Brien and Matt Gallagher, as well as with a number of veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. He also talks with Vonnegut's three adult children and others who knew him well. The verdict is inconclusive, but Roston does make a strong case that the roots of the novel—and its ultimate message—stem from Vonnegut's attempts to process all he had witnessed in the war. Interestingly, Roston suggests that one of *Slaughterhouse-Five's* legacies may be the role it played in changing public perception of PTSD, helping Americans recognize its existence and causes.

There will always be mysteries surrounding what is truth and what is fiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut himself was cagey and inconsistent when talking about what happened to him or what transgressions he may or may not have committed in Dresden. "So it goes," he enigmatically wrote after each death in the novel. Still, Roston hopes its writing brought the author some closure and that Vonnegut was able to make peace with his past.

Robert Weibezahl is a publishing industry veteran, playwright and novelist. Each month, he takes an in-depth look at a recent book of literary significance.



★ **The Sweetness of Water**

Actor William DeMeritt's deep, measured narration enhances the elegant prose of Nathan Harris' debut novel, **The Sweetness of Water** (Hachette Audio, 12 hours). In the waning days of the Civil War, Georgia farmer George Walker hires formerly enslaved brothers Landry and Prentiss to work his

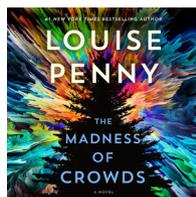
peanut farm—and perhaps to ease his restless soul. When George's Confederate soldier son, Caleb, unexpectedly returns home, and Caleb's romantic relationship with another soldier comes to light, tensions between George's family and the town's disapproving residents boil over. DeMeritt's performance reveals an actor in full control of his range. Amid this world of unbridled change, he illuminates subtle yearnings, quiet dangers and a persistent sense of hope.

—G. Robert Frazier

The Madness of Crowds

Louise Penny tackles social unrest in a post-pandemic world in **The Madness of Crowds** (Macmillan Audio, 15 hours), the 17th novel in the Chief Inspector Armand Gamache series. Robert Bathurst's narration is calm, collected and earnest, reflecting the blend of emotion and professionalism that Gamache embodies as an investigator. It's perfect for listeners seeking both captivating intrigue and insightful reflection.

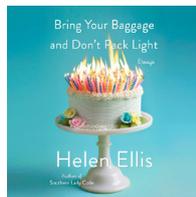
—Tami Orendain



Bring Your Baggage and Don't Pack Light

Helen Ellis unleashes her irreverent outlook on life in a warm and funny collection of essays, **Bring Your Baggage and Don't Pack Light** (Random House Audio, 3 hours). Her exuberant narration is cheeky and comedic, powered by a Southern drawl that adds charm to even her most unabashed discussions of sex and toilet habits. Fans of Leslie Jordan and Mindy Kaling should check it out.

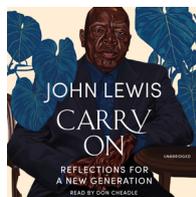
—Maya Fleischmann



★ **Carry On**

You know those motivational posters with simple messages about teamwork, friendship and excellence? **Carry On** (Hachette Audio, 2.5 hours) is like that—only better, because the aphorisms from late, great civil rights icon Representative John Lewis are punchy yet never clichéd. While Lewis was unable to record the audiobook himself, actor Don Cheadle more than succeeds in embodying the congressman's message of hope.

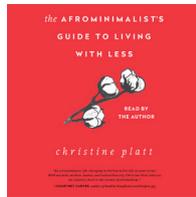
—G. Robert Frazier



The Afrominimalist's Guide to Living With Less

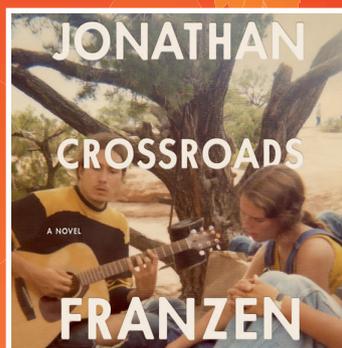
If you think minimalism is a one-size-fits-all lifestyle and aesthetic, you clearly haven't encountered Christine Platt, known as the Afrominimalist. In her approachable guide, **The Afrominimalist's Guide to Living With Less** (Simon & Schuster Audio, 5.5 hours), Platt traces her journey toward deliberately choosing to live with fewer objects. Her calm, careful narration is punctuated by real-life, sometimes humorous anecdotes delivered by a cast of additional narrators.

—Norah Piehl

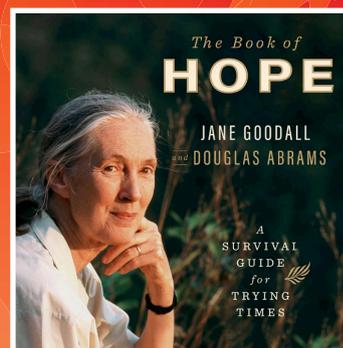


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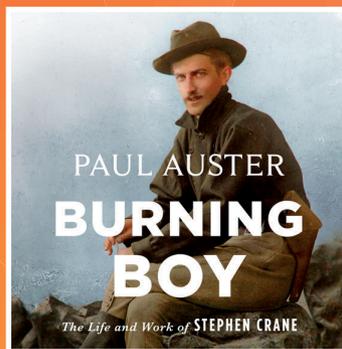
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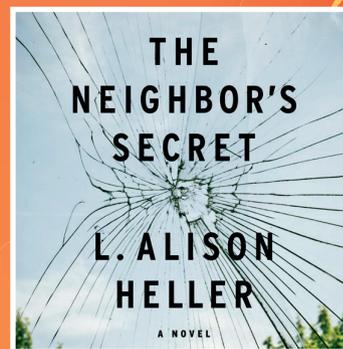
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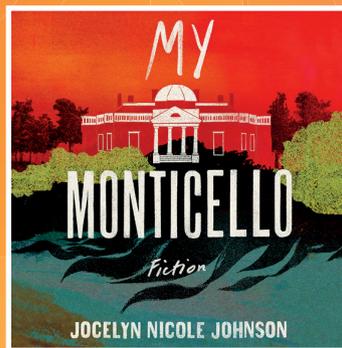
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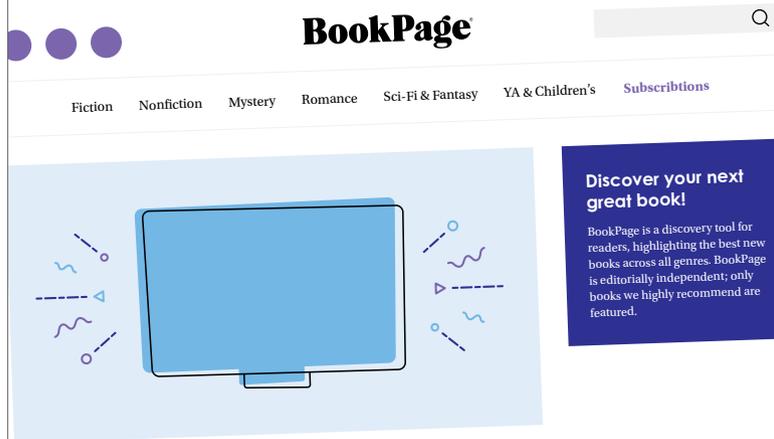


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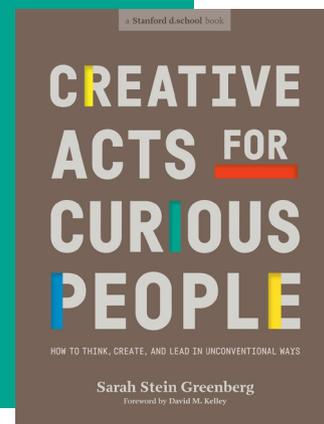
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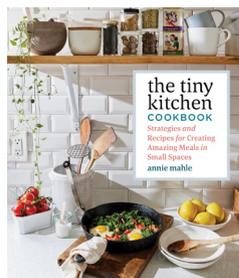
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lifestyles by susannah felts



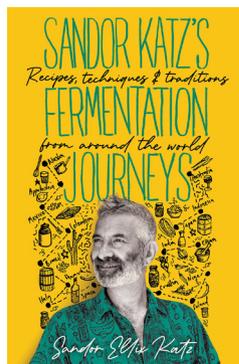
★ Creative Acts for Curious People

Tell the story of your worst first date using only LEGOs. Design an ad campaign for bananas. Describe an ability you'd use to survive a zombie apocalypse. Ask someone to tell you the story of their name. These are but a few of the assignments in **Creative Acts for Curious People: How to Think, Create, and Lead in Unconventional Ways** (Ten Speed, \$28, 9781984858160), developed from the teachings of Stanford University's well-respected design school (known as the d.school), where students collaborate and innovate in fresh, surprising ways for the greater good. Need a change of perspective on a project or an escape hatch from routine thinking? Want to encourage your team to loosen up, give helpful feedback or challenge biases? Look no further. "In the face of current challenges—those here today and those yet to come—we all need ways to prepare to act even when we are uncertain," writes d.school executive director Sarah Stein Greenberg. Whether you're an independent artist seeking new approaches to your work or a leader aiming to mentor and galvanize your people, this book has an experience for you. I plan to put it to use in my own nonprofit leadership and personal creative projects.



The Tiny Kitchen Cookbook

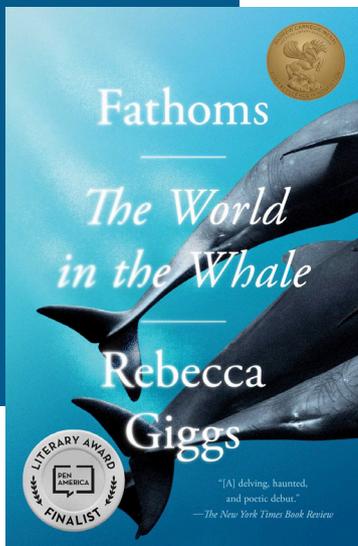
Annie Mahle spent many years cooking for groups of 24 in the galley kitchen of a schooner, so you could say she's earned her small-space stripes. In **The Tiny Kitchen Cookbook: Strategies and Recipes for Creating Amazing Meals in Small Spaces** (Storey, \$19.95, 9781635862874), Mahle gathers recipes requiring little cookware or fuss, including one-pan dinners, toaster oven-friendly bakes and small dishes that can serve as snacks or light entrees. She shares tips for making the best of your (limited) workspace and, in a genius section called "Use It Up," offers ideas for what to do with ingredients that tend to linger, like buttermilk, cauliflower and pumpkin puree. In the tiny (vacation) house of my dream-future, this will be the only cookbook on hand, but for now it will be a welcome addition to my home kitchen, with its charming lack of counter space.



Sandor Katz's Fermentation Journeys

I happen to live in the same state as Sandor Katz, and he's the sort of fellow Tennessean that makes me proud to call this place home. Katz gained an international following with his 2003 bestseller, *The Art of Fermentation*, the success of which took him across the globe. Now he's back with **Sandor Katz's Fermentation Journeys: Recipes, Techniques, and Traditions From Around the World** (Chelsea Green, \$35, 9781645020349), which explores microbial activity in the culinary traditions of China, Peru and other places far, far from Cannon County, Tennessee. Think tepache in Mexico, sour cabbages in Croatia, pickled tea leaves in Burma, koji in Japan and much more. Part travelogue, part cookbook, part chemistry experiment, Katz's new book is a fascinating look at fermented foods the world over, and it aims, always, to be a respectful one.

Susannah Felts is a Nashville-based writer and co-founder of The Porch, a literary arts organization. She enjoys anything paper- or plant-related.



A marvelous menagerie

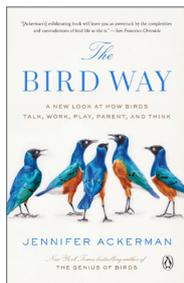
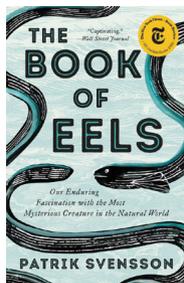
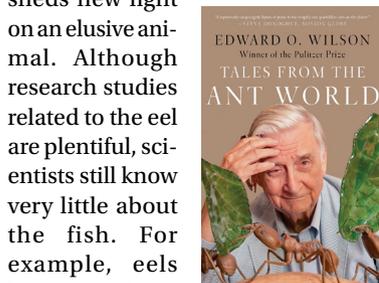
In **Fathoms: The World in the Whale** (Simon & Schuster, \$17, 9781982120702), Rebecca Giggs considers the background and mythology of the mighty whale. Tracking the creature across centuries through a spellbinding survey of history, science and art, Giggs evaluates the whale's enduring importance and shows how its relationship to the environment has altered over time. With stops in Australia and Japan, Giggs' fluid account will captivate readers, and questions related to species' extinction and environmental

degradation will spark inspired dialogue among book clubbers.

Beloved naturalist Edward O. Wilson became intrigued by ants as a boy in Mobile, Alabama. That interest developed into a lifelong preoccupation, and in **Tales From the Ant World** (Liveright, \$17.95, 9781324091097), he shares personal anecdotes and scientific insights related to the insect. From the fire ant to the uncommon New Caledonian bull ant, Wilson looks at 25 different species. His book is packed with fascinating ant-inspired trivia and research stories, and Wilson's always absorbing voice makes potentially dry subjects such as biodiversity, the world's ecosystems and scientific methodology endlessly fascinating.

From ants to whales, these inviting nonfiction books offer eye-opening perspectives on animals.

Patrik Svensson's **The Book of Eels: Our Enduring Fascination With the Most Mysterious Creature in the Natural World** (Ecco, \$17.99, 9780062968821) sheds new light on an elusive animal. Although research studies related to the eel are plentiful, scientists still know very little about the fish. For example, eels have never been observed giving birth or mating, and they inexplicably swim back to the ocean near the end of their life, even though they spend the majority of their time in fresh water. Svensson chronicles the eel's remarkable existence through a synthesis of history, science and memoir. Readers will find plenty to talk about in his compelling narrative, such as evolution and the limits of scientific research.



Jennifer Ackerman investigates avian traits in **The Bird Way: A New Look at How Birds Talk, Work, Play, Parent, and Think** (Penguin, \$18, 9780735223035). Providing a fresh take on our fine-feathered friends, Ackerman analyzes recent scientific research into bird habits related to communication, reproduction and feeding practices. She takes a multifaceted approach to her subject, creating a narrative that will cause many readers to revise their perceptions of birds as simple creatures. Book clubs can dig into rich topics such as animal cognition and species development.

BOOK CLUB READS FOR FALL



THE STOLEN LADY

by Laura Morelli

"A beautifully written, must-read story of the incredible journey of the Mona Lisa set amid two turbulent times in history. A well-researched and richly told tale."

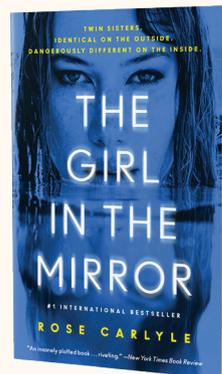
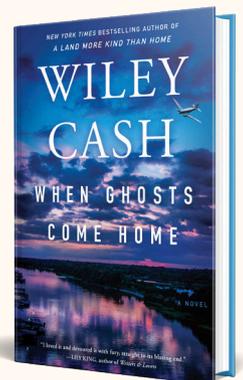
—MADELINE MARTIN, *New York Times* bestselling author

WHEN GHOSTS COME HOME

by Wiley Cash

"Taut, tense, and tender—this novel hits every note. I loved it and devoured it with fury, straight to its blazing end."

—LILY KING, author of *Writers and Lovers*



THE GIRL IN THE MIRROR

by Rose Carlyle

"Cue greed, lust, secrets, and serious suspense. Count us in."

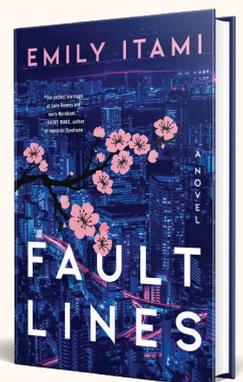
—theSkimm,

FAULT LINES

by Emily Itami

"Fault Lines manages to be clever, wise, and heartbreaking all at once. Absolutely brilliant."

—KATHY WANG, author of *Impostor Syndrome*



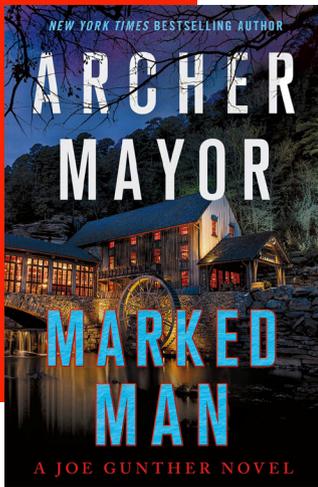
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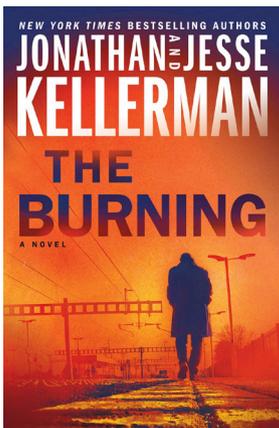
A BookPage reviewer since 2003, Julie Hale recommends the best paperback books to spark discussion in your reading group.



Marked Man

I like Archer Mayor novels for much the same reason that I like Ed McBain novels: Both are populated by cops who are ever so slightly caricatures, with internecine feuds and barbed humor, but who come together as a unit when circumstances demand. In Vermont Bureau of Investigation agent Joe Gunther's 32nd mystery, **Marked Man** (Minotaur, \$28.99, 9781250224163), Joe and his team investigate the murder of a high-rolling restaurateur. The case comes to them in a most unusual way. Nine months back, the decedent passed away, seemingly due to natural causes, and donated his body to medical science. In the middle of a routine anatomical practice procedure, a medical student discovered that the corpse was likely a victim of a careful but very effective suffocation. One murder leads to another, and another, and the extended family of victim number one seems like the place to start looking for the killer or killers. If only it were that simple. Add a couple of bumbling, aging mobsters to the mix, and the fact that seemingly everyone has one

deep dark secret worthy of extreme concealment measures, and it all gets very complicated very quickly. **Marked Man** is an excellent read, with a surprise ending and then one more surprise for good measure.

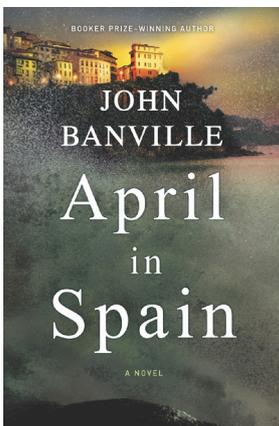


The Burning

I am not usually a fan of author duos, but I make exceptions for Charles Todd, Nicci French and the father/son team of Jonathan and Jesse Kellerman, all of whom have bottled the elusive genie of collaboration. This month, Kellerman père et fils return with **The Burning** (Ballantine, \$28.99, 9780525620112), the latest installment in the saga of Bay Area coroner Clay Edison. In the midst of one of the worst Northern California wildfires in recent memory, Clay is summoned to the scene of a murder. The victim is Rory Vandervelde, an impossibly wealthy businessman, and among his many passions was caring for a garage full of automobile exotica, cars you might have heard of but have likely never seen in person. (Koenigsegg, anyone?) One rather pedestrian gherkin-green Camaro happens to catch Clay's eye. It belongs to his ex-con brother, who, as it happens, has been AWOL for several days. Naturally, this makes Clay's brother a person of interest (read: suspect) in the case. Major ethical dilemmas are posed

for our hero, and let's just say the dilemmas compound faster than loan shark interest. Beyond the mystery, the Kellermans touch on big themes here, from climate change and politics to the sometimes-tenuous yet surprisingly elastic bonds of family.

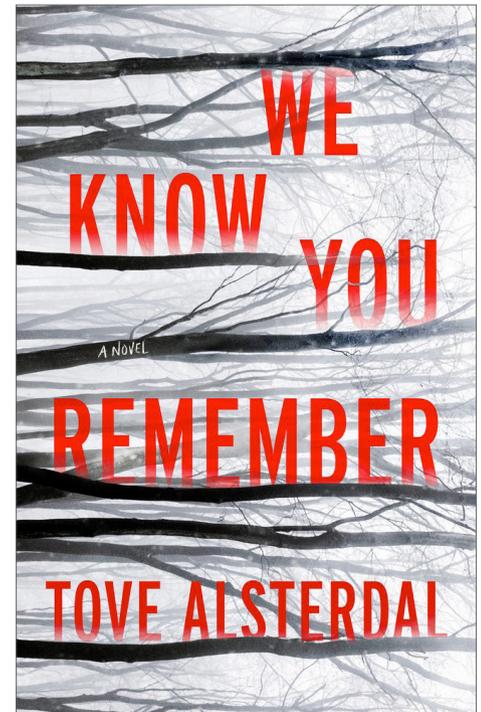
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April in Spain

A criticism sometimes leveled at author John Banville is that his books can be a trifle on the slow side. There is some truth to this, but it is no bad thing. One does not, after all, gulp a fine Bordeaux or gorge on Godiva chocolate truffles. And so it is with **April in Spain** (Hanover Square, \$27.99, 9781335471406), a novel of slowly unfolding suspense. Banville rewards his readers with some of the finest prose in the mystery genre, a protagonist as cranky as Nero Wolfe and villains worthy of Agatha Christie's poisoned pen. While on holiday in San Sebastian, a beach town in the Basque Country region of northern Spain, Dublin coroner Quirke runs into someone he recognizes, but he cannot remember where he knows her from. After some racking of the brain, Quirke arrives at an impossible conclusion: The woman is April Latimer, who was killed in Ireland several years earlier by her brother, who immediately afterward committed suicide by driving Quirke's car over the edge of a high cliff. April's body was never found.

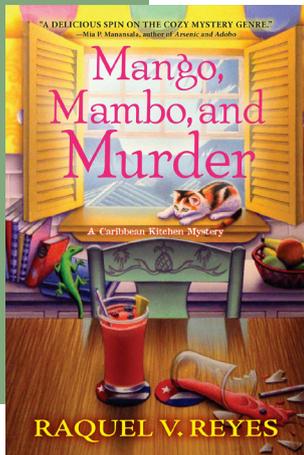
Completely perplexed and unable to let such a bizarre puzzle pass him by, Quirke begins investigating the case. Complicating matters is the psychotic hit man sent to kill this woman in Spain. Whether or not she really is April is of little consequence to those who hired the hit man. And he's not even the worst of the bad guys. . . .



★ We Know You Remember

In the fall of 2020, Tove Alsterdal's **We Know You Remember** (Harper, \$28.99, 9780063115064) was named Best Swedish Crime Novel of the Year by the Svenska Deckarakademin (the Swedish Academy of Crime Fiction). Previous winners of this award include Camilla Grebe, Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson. This month, the English translation hits stateside bookstores, and I predict that it will be one of the most talked-about suspense novels of the year. Twenty-some years ago, 14-year-old Olof Hagström was found guilty of raping and murdering a teenage girl; the circumstantial evidence was damning, but the body was never found. The incident forever changed the character of his small village, and when Olof returns to his familial home in the present day, there is no welcome mat awaiting him. Quite the opposite: just a frantic dog and the dead body of Olof's father, apparently a stabbing victim left to bleed out in the bathroom shower. All fingers point toward Olof, but he provides what seems to be an ironclad alibi. Lead investigator Eira Sjödin was only 9 years old at the time of Olof's consignment to a youthful offenders' facility, but she soon begins to realize there are connections between the cold case and the latest murder. This is a world-class Scandinavian mystery, one that will be mentioned in the same breath with *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, *The Redbreast* or the Millennium trilogy.

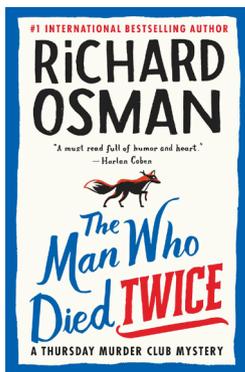
Bruce Tierney lives outside Chiang Mai, Thailand, where he bicycles through the rice paddies daily and reviews the best in mystery and suspense every month.



★ **Mango, Mambo, and Murder**

Miriam Quiñones-Smith has just relocated from New York City to tony Coral Shores in Miami. A former food anthropologist, she lands a gig teaching Caribbean cooking on a morning show and joins a women's club, but at her very first meeting, one of the attendees keels over. **Mango, Mambo, and Murder** (Crooked Lane, \$26.99, 9781643857848) has everything you look for in a cozy mystery but also feels like a breath of fresh air. Author Raquel V. Reyes fills this story with details that make it

feel real, despite there being a character named Sunny Weatherman. Cuban American Miriam and her family, friends and co-workers are well-rounded personalities whom readers will be eager to learn more about. Miriam's attempts to find a killer take her to strip malls filled with incredible restaurants serving Cuban American standards like ropa vieja and pollo a la plancha. Reyes incorporates Spanish into characters' dialogue throughout, adding authenticity, while subtly providing context so that readers who aren't Spanish speakers won't miss a beat. Dig into this inviting, suspenseful feast for the senses.



★ **The Man Who Died Twice**

It's impossible to single out any one feature that makes **The Man Who Died Twice** (Pamela Dorman, \$26, 9781984880994) such an absolute treat. The plot is a crackling mystery: Septuagenarian retiree and amateur sleuth Elizabeth gets a coded message from someone in her past asking for help, as he's stolen a lot of diamonds from some very angry people. When two people are killed, the hunt is on for the killers *and* the diamonds. English TV presenter and comedian Richard Osman creates real magic with his characters. They are frequently laugh-out-loud

hilarious but also entirely real and three-dimensional. There's also dogged police work, tradecraft most devious, a lot of cocaine and those diamonds. If possible, this sequel is even better than the Osman's charmer of a debut, *The Thursday Murder Club*. Don't miss it.



★ **Seven-Year Witch**

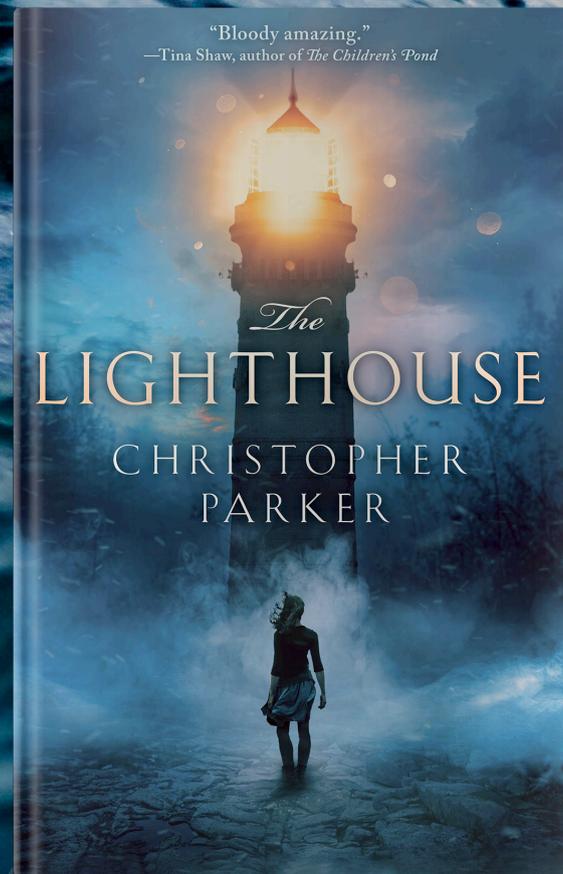
Seven-Year Witch (Kensington, \$8.99, 9781496728760) finds Josie Way settling into life as a librarian in rural Wilfred, Oregon, and deepening her powers as a witch. The old mill in town is set to be turned into a lavish retreat center, but rumors that the site is cursed raise local hackles, especially when the disappearance of one of Wilfred's inhabitants is followed by the discovery of a bloody weapon. Josie's love interest, FBI agent Sam Wilfred, returns to town, but things between them are complicated by the news that he's married with a baby. Author Angela M. Sanders uses the eerie atmosphere to

great effect and also plays with the assumed charms of a small town: The locals lose some of their warmth when there's a killer in their midst. Full of false leads and truly surprising reveals, this terrifically plotted mystery is hard to put down.

Heather Seggel is a longtime bookseller, reviewer and occasional library technician in Ukiah, California.

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From debut author Christopher Parker comes a compelling contemporary novel filled with hope, renewal – and a touch of magic



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PUT IT DOWN.**

Tina Shaw, author of *The Children's Pond*

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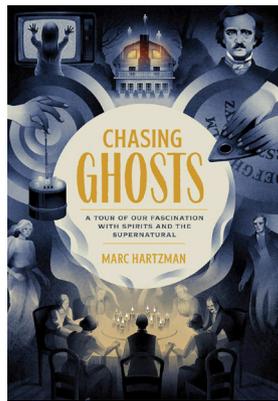
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Paperback \$15.99 | Ebook \$5.99



LEAVE THE LIGHTS ON



We ranked this year's Halloween offerings from slightly spooky to totally terrifying.



CHASING GHOSTS by Marc Hartzman

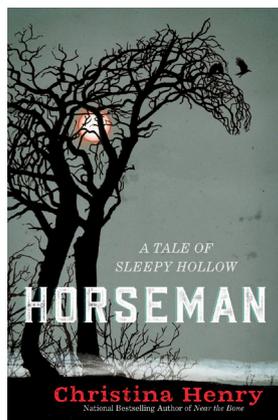
SCARINESS LEVEL:

You can safely read it by flashlight in the middle of a desecrated graveyard.

In **Chasing Ghosts** (Quirk, \$22.99, 9781683692775), Marc Hartzman gives a lighthearted historical account of ghostly legends, haunted houses and other unearthly visits from beyond the grave. Using humor, fun illustrations and interesting anecdotes, Hartzman main focus is on humanity's attempts to reach out to the dead. There are hucksters galore in this entertaining book: mediums, spirit photographers, levitators and automatic writers who used all kinds of gimcrackery and stagecraft to pull off their frauds, separating the susceptible from their healthy skepticism—and money.

So, what *are* ghosts? Mass hysteria or hoaxes? Reactions to invisible environmental factors or the lingering embodiments of souls? **Chasing Ghosts** raises these questions but wisely avoids offering definitive answers. So the next time you walk through a sudden cold spot on a humid evening, you might want to consider the possibility that ghosts are chasing you.

—Deborah Mason



HORSEMAN by Christina Henry

SCARINESS LEVEL:

Strike a match and spark one solitary lantern.

Christina Henry's **Horseman** (Berkley, \$17, 9780593199787) is an atmospheric and haunting reimagining of Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Fourteen-year-old Bente "Ben" Van Brunt is the grandson of Katrina Van Tassel and Brom Bones, whose tale-as-old-as-time romance once sparked rumors of the ghostly Horseman and ran a gangly, awkward schoolmaster named Ichabod Crane out of town. Ben, who is transgender, experiences much frustration with fellow town-folk who insist on repeatedly misgendering him and accusing him of witchcraft. But there is even more that sets him apart: Ben has visions of the Horseman, who says he is there to protect him.

With visceral visions of nightmares, creepy prose and a pace as fast as the rush of horses' hooves, Henry's take on Irving's classic story is a chilling romp into the forest where sometimes the scariest monsters are all too human.

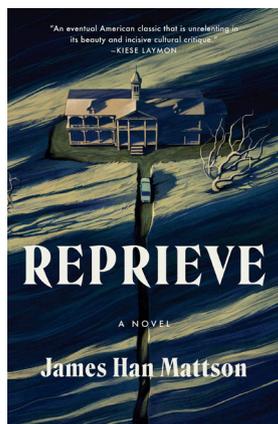
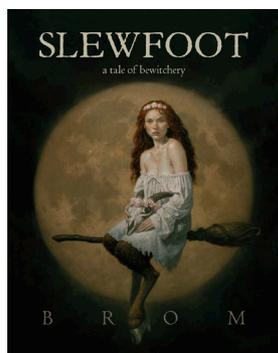
—Stephanie Cohen-Perez

★ SLEWFOOT by Brom

SCARINESS LEVEL:

Light a few candles. It's safe enough to read at home in bed but might cause some goosebumps if you're alone in a cabin in the middle of the woods.

Abitha, a young Englishwoman, marries into the Puritan society of Sutton, Connecticut, and finds herself an outsider



due to her sharp tongue and headstrong manner. When her husband is killed in the woods behind her house, Abitha must decide how to live as a widow in a community that seems to be waiting for her to fail.

If only that were all she had to worry about. Deep in the dark of the forest, something ancient, primal and hungry has awoken. **Slewfoot** (Tor Nightfire, \$29.99, 9781250622006) is creepy, crawly, bloody fun. Author-illustrator Brom wastes no opportunity to turn up the spooky factor, whether in prose or in the deliciously creepy paintings that illustrate his tale. If you're looking for a thrilling ride that also has a philosophical soul, grab a copy of **Slewfoot**—and don't put it down until you've finished it.

—Chris Pickens

REPRIEVE by James Han Mattson

SCARINESS LEVEL:

It's as creepy as sinking into J.R.R. Tolkien's Dead Marshes and lighting one little candle.

At some point while reading James Han Mattson's **Reprieve** (William Morrow, \$27.99, 9780063079915), you'll think, "This can't be real. This better not be real." Quigley House in Lincoln, Nebraska, is a full-contact escape room, in which staff are allowed to physically engage with contestants. If things get too intense, a member of the group can shout, "Reprieve!" at which point the game and its torment ends, though no one wins the prize money. Quigley House is not a nefarious entity, but something or someone within it is. Is it one of the actors hired to play ghouls and freaks? Maybe it's the folks responsible for the house's ghastly special effects. Or is it someone among the latest group of thrill-seekers who have taken on the challenge of this grisly obstacle course? As the book's horrifying events unfold, **Reprieve** can be read as a commentary on, or even an allegory of, American racism. It's a horror story, certainly, but it's not as scary as it is deeply disturbing.

—Arlene McKanic

NOTHING BUT BLACKENED TEETH

by Cassandra Khaw

SCARINESS LEVEL:

Imagine encountering three Japanese spirits, each holding one flickering lighter.

Cassandra Khaw's horror novella brings readers to Japan, where a wedding of questionable taste is about to unfold. Nadia, who is engaged to Faiz, has decided she wants to be married in a haunted house. The couple's megarich friend Phillip secures a venue for them: a Heian-era mansion in a forest, built on the bones of a bride-to-be and other girls killed to appease her loneliness. **Nothing but Blackened Teeth** (Tor Nightfire, \$19.99, 9781250759412) is a brooding horror story that incorporates Japanese mythology in colorful, excruciating detail, including spirits such as yōkai and bake-danuki in

Illustrations from **Slewfoot** © 2021. Reproduced by permission of Tor Nightfire.

addition to the malicious, ghostly bride. Readers looking for bite-size horror on a stormy night will appreciate Khaw's twisted tale.

—Ralph Harris

★ THE DEATH OF JANE LAWRENCE by Caitlin Starling

SCARINESS LEVEL: 

You'll need most of the lights in your room (and perhaps an extra night light in the bathroom).

A woman in search of a husband finds one with more than his fair share of deadly secrets in the atmospheric, well-plotted **The Death of Jane Lawrence** (St. Martin's, \$27.99, 9781250272584) by Caitlin Starling. In an alternate version of Victorian-era Britain, known as Great Bretlain, Jane Lawrence understands that a married woman is afforded far more freedom than an unmarried maiden. Bachelor Augustine Lawrence, the only doctor in town, seems like a fine option. He agrees, under one simple condition: Jane must never visit his ancestral home. Anyone who has ever read a gothic novel knows exactly where this is going, but Starling does a magnificent job steering clear of the obvious plot beats in this white-knuckle reading experience. For those who crave intense and detailed gothic horror, or those who just want more Guillermo del Toro a la *Crimson Peak* vibes in their life, this is a must-read.

—Amanda Diehl

THIS THING BETWEEN US

by Gus Moreno

SCARINESS LEVEL: 

Keep all the lights in your house on—and maybe unplug your smart devices and toss them into the backyard.

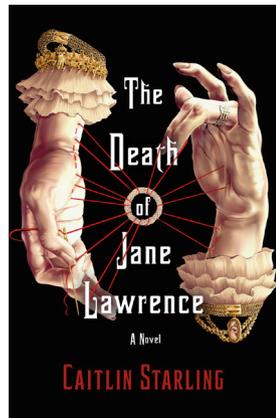
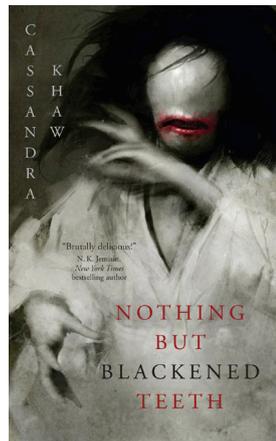
In powerfully immersive first-person prose, Gus Moreno's debut novel provides an inside view of a grief-stricken husband's worst nightmare. **This Thing Between Us** (MCD x FSG Originals, \$17, 9780374539238) feels like a fever dream as Thiago Alvarez, in a one-sided conversation with his late wife, Vera, reexamines the tragic events that led to her death and recounts what's happened since. A few months prior, Thiago and Vera's smart speaker started playing music without their request. Odd packages arrived, even though no orders had been placed. And then an alarm clock didn't go off as it should've, throwing their schedule into chaos and placing Vera in the exact wrong place at the worst possible time. Now Vera's gone, and Thiago is lost. And that's just the beginning.

There's no question that this novel delivers the fright. Bodies drop. Violence springs up seemingly out of nowhere. But the most surprising and challenging aspect of **This Thing Between Us** is that it's as emotionally taxing as it is terrifying—a novel of domestic conflict and suspense as well as horror.

—Carole V. Bell



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Sweltering summers, sliced through with cold terror

Two new novels put their own horrifying spin on the Southern gothic.

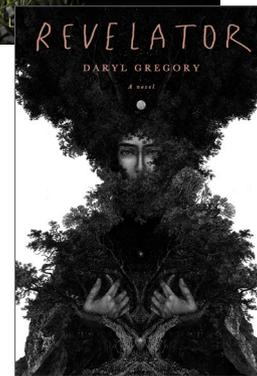
While set in very different worlds and starkly different eras, **Summer Sons** (Tor.com, \$26.99, 9781250790286) and **Revelator** (Knopf, \$27, 9780525657385) are marvelous modern additions to the Southern gothic canon, full of paranoia and the grotesque (as well as the occasional jump scare).

★ Summer Sons

Lee Mandelo's **Summer Sons** opens in tragedy. After the death of his adoptive brother and best friend, Andrew is left with a legacy he never asked for: Eddie's money, Eddie's sports car, Eddie's house, the American Studies graduate program at Vanderbilt in Tennessee that Eddie picked out for the two of them and even Eddie's roommate. Driven by grief and convinced that there is more to Eddie's death than meets the eye, Andrew slides into the life that Eddie prepared for him, discovering all that Eddie had tried to conceal.

As Andrew dives deeper into a world of sun-soaked men, racing and trouble, he is forced to deal with another unwanted legacy. Eddie's revenant won't leave him alone, and neither will Eddie's research into their shared supernatural experience, a topic they had agreed to lie.

Summer Sons is raw and chaotic, driving readers through the disordered grief and anger of its main character. Mandelo's visceral writing tugs at readers' hearts as well as their amygdalas. Alternating between discussions of identity and sexuality, the horror of grief and an actual haunting, it is part *The Fast and the Furious*, part *The Shining* and part *Ninth House*.



★ Revelator

While **Summer Sons** deals in the present, Daryl Gregory's **Revelator** is a story of ancestry and ancient powers. Set in the 1930s and '40s, in the mountainous triangle where Tennessee, North Carolina and Georgia collide, it follows Stella Birch: moonshiner, businesswoman and Revelator and prophet to Ghostdaddy, the god under the mountain. The red splotches across Stella's face signaled this title when she was born. She would be the one to go under the mountain and commune with Ghostdaddy, bringing his word out to be recorded and interpreted by the men of her family. That is, until tragedy and rebellion struck. Stella fled, leaving her role and god behind. But when her grandmother Motty's death calls Stella back to her childhood home and to Motty's adopted daughter, Sonny, she will have to deal with her past if she is to have any hope of a future.

Full of matter-of-fact descriptions of unthinkable horror, **Revelator** is both weird and wonderful. On the one hand, it tells a story familiar to Southern literature: the chaos resulting from the death of a matriarch. And on the other, it tells the story of a creature so alien that it's difficult to wrap your head around. Perfect for fans of *Lovecraft Country*, **Revelator** is full of surprises both fascinating and stomach-clenching.

Both **Summer Sons** and **Revelator** serve a slice of cold terror, paired with a view of humanity that is equal parts revelatory and humbling.

—Laura Hubbard

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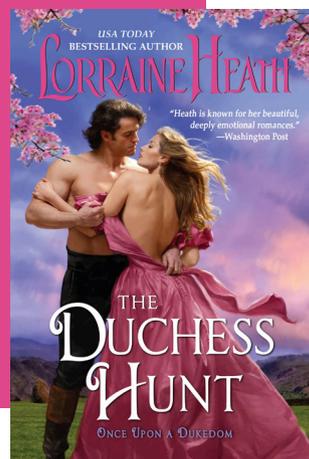


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romance

by christie ridgway



★ The Duchess Hunt

A no-nonsense duke is secretly crushing on his no-nonsense secretary in Lorraine Heath's utterly delicious Victorian romance **The Duchess Hunt** (Avon, \$8.99, 9780062952011). Upon becoming Duke of Kingsland, Hugh Brinsley-Norton built back the family fortune with the help of his trusted and long-serving secretary, Penelope Pettypeace, who has quietly become his best friend. Now he's asked her to find him the perfect duchess, even though he's increasingly fascinated with Penelope. Penelope knows she's in love with Hugh, but her loyalty to him means she will dedicate herself to selecting the wife of his dreams from the eager ladies of high society, despite the fact that it will break her heart. Smart characters with shadowy pasts, great sexual tension and steamy love scenes create a grand romance.



★ Eight Perfect Hours

As **Eight Perfect Hours** (Emily Bestler, \$17, 9781982135942) by Lia Louis begins, Londoner Noelle Butterby is just getting by. She deferred her dreams of becoming a florist in order to take care of her mother after she had a stroke, and now Noelle has also recently ended a serious relationship. Under it all, the loss of her best friend, Daisy, when they were teenagers has troubled her for years. Out of the blue comes a charming meet cute: During a snowy traffic jam, her car is stopped beside that of Sam, an American on his way out of the country. They hit it off, talking for hours until they're free to go their separate ways. Noelle can't stop thinking of him, and then he serendipitously comes back into her life. Again. And again. Louis' sense of place is marvelous, vivid and lived-in, whether the couple is stuck on a road or sharing confidences in a laundromat. Suspend disbelief and just sit back for this tender kisses-only journey from heartache to happily ever after.



Once More Upon a Time

Bestselling YA fantasy author Roshani Chokshi pens her first adult romance in **Once More Upon a Time** (Sourcebooks Casablanca, \$14.99, 9781728239828). Prince Ambrose and Princess Imelda thought they had it all, until Imelda fell ill and Ambrose gave up their love to a witch in order to save Imelda's life. A year and a day later, the same witch offers them a chance to recover their lost love if they'll retrieve a potion for her. Ambrose and Imelda aren't completely convinced they want to fall in love with each other again, but as they team up to fight cannibals and changelings, they come to appreciate things they never really knew about each other. Amusing and imaginative—particular proof is a dry-witted horse of many uses and a walnut that opens to reveal magic dresses—this novella is told from the perspective of the lovers but also that of the witch, who has fabulous taste in handbags and looks great for her age (or so she says). This kisses-only fantasy road trip is lots of fun.

Christie Ridgway is a lifelong romance reader and a published romance novelist of over 60 books.

Toil and (triple) trouble

These witchy rom-coms are whimsical and hilarious, with just a touch of wickedness.

Hop aboard a broomstick and let these fresh, funny, fantastic love stories put you under their spell.

Witch Please

In *Witch Please* (Sourcebooks Casablanca, \$15.99, 9781728240169) by Ann Aguirre, Danica Waterhouse knows the rules: Mundanes are off-limits. She interacts with them as needed to keep her electronic repair business running, but they can never know the truth about her power, and they can *never* be considered romantically. The family curse says falling for a mundane will drain a Waterhouse witch's magic away. Magic binds Danica to her work, her family, her coven—everything that matters. So when she meets the most incredible man and feels the most incredible draw to him, she makes an incredible effort to keep her distance . . . and fails. Because Titus Winnaker is *amazing*: handsome, funny, goofy and smitten with Danica from the start. And he bakes. And he's a volunteer firefighter. And he's absolutely forbidden.

Smart, strong, determined and compassionate, Danica knows how to fix everything except her own heart, and her turmoil is palpable on the page. Endearing, clueless Titus is a beautiful cinnamon roll, too sweet for this world. The most magical moments they share don't involve any witchcraft at all but instead feature two people simply being good to each other, in every imaginable way. Aguirre has concocted an exciting, engaging whirl of a story.

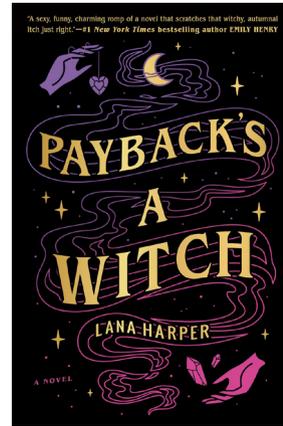
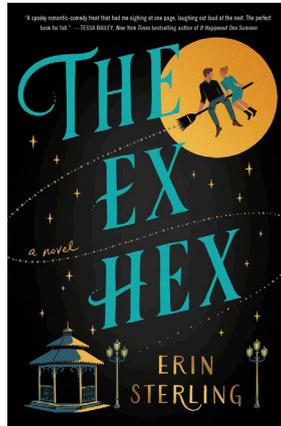
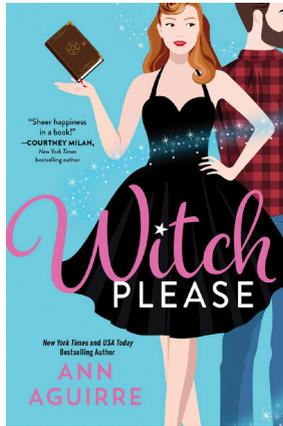
The Ex Hex

Vivienne Jones—spurred on by her broken heart, her loyal, vengeful cousin and way too much vodka—curses her no-good, horrible ex to have bad hair, bad sex and bad luck forever and ever, amen. However, when Rhys Penhallow returns to the small town of Graves Glen, Georgia, nine years later, his hair is still perfect and his sex appeal is still intact. So Vivi concludes, with a little sadness and a little relief, that her momentary whim of a curse didn't take. But then a series of mishaps proves that bad luck has infected the town, potentially leading to disaster if the situation isn't solved by Samhain, which is fast approaching.

While *The Ex Hex* (Avon, \$15.99, 9780063027473) is pure rom-com with its fun tone and witty characters, author Erin Sterling takes things deeper with potent, beautifully portrayed symbolism, especially when it comes to tarot cards and the intriguing, melancholy mystery tangled up with the curse. It's a romance magically enhanced to be more vivid, more daring and more potentially deadly, and it's all the more satisfying for it.

★ Payback's a Witch

In Lana Harper's *Payback's a Witch* (Berkley, \$16, 9780593336069), there's not just one witch scorned. There are three. Emmy Harlow left town as a brokenhearted teen after being used and discarded by Gareth Blackmoore, scion of the richest, most influential family in Thistle Grove. The four witch families that founded the town still run things, but the lion's share of power and influence goes to whichever family wins the Gauntlet, a semicentennial event that the Blackmoores have won pretty much every time. The Thorns and the Avramovs have always lagged behind, and the Harlows have never



stood a chance—which is why Emmy got the whole “It’s not you, it’s how utterly insignificant your family is” brush-off from Gareth years ago. But now she’s back, and she learns that Gareth has since toyed with Emmy’s longtime bestie, Linden Thorn, and also with Emmy’s secret high school crush, the stunning, untouchable Talia Avramov. And thus an alliance is formed as the three women come together with the goal of toppling the ascendancy of the

Blackmoores and putting Gareth firmly in his place.

Harper’s adult debut is gorgeous in every way. It’s hilariously funny, deeply moving, powerfully uplifting and so glue-you-to-the-page engrossing that this reviewer literally did not put it down for the final hundred pages. The love story between Talia and Emmy develops beautifully, but the true romance is with the town and the community. The bonds of both family and friendship shine from start to finish, and Harper balances the different clans and captures how, together, they make Thistle Grove the magical place that it is.

—Elizabeth Mazer

New in the *New York Times* bestselling Practical Magic Series!

Alice Hoffman

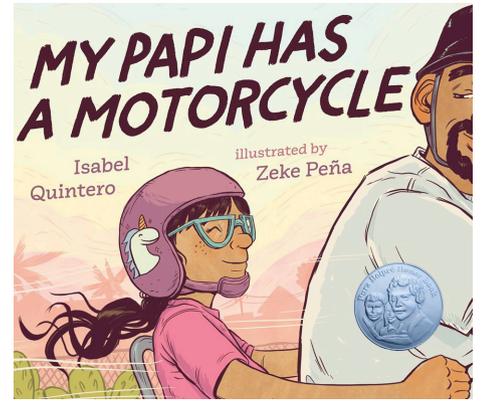
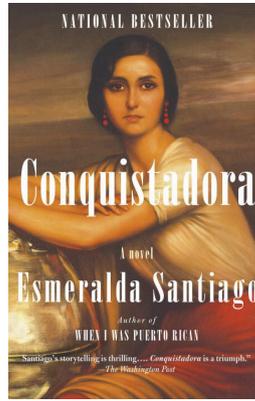
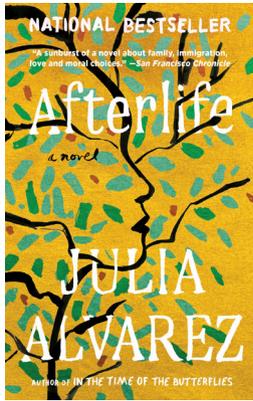
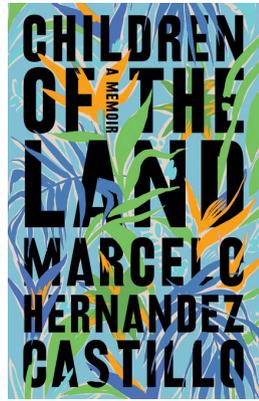
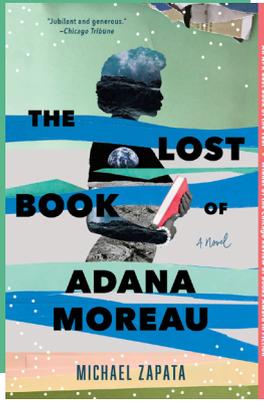
“Full of bewitching and lucid prose and vivid characters... It casts a spell.”

—MATT HAIG, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Midnight Library*

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A NOVEL
ALICE HOFFMAN

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National Hispanic Heritage Month

As we celebrate Hispanic and Latinx history and culture from September 15 to October 15, we're taking special time to reflect on some amazing literary contributions. Here are some of our favorite titles by contemporary Hispanic and Latinx authors.

The Lost Book of Adana Moreau

Being a Latinx author today is incredibly easy and unbearably difficult. It's easy because of the rich tradition of Latinx literature—a tradition with so many facets and dimensions that to clump them together would be a disservice—and difficult because of our culture's confused notions of legacy and inheritance. Within the combustion engine of this tension, great pieces of art are being created, and **The Lost Book of Adana Moreau** is a prime example. Dizzying and dazzling, its intertwined, interdimensional stories culminate into a single epic narrative, perfectly encapsulating the Latinx experience. Author Michael Zapata is funny and profound, often in the same sentence, and his characters have depth in their personalities and in the questions they choose to ask. When I first read this book, I was moved to tears. Someone who looks like me (Zapata and I both have some serious curls) made something like this. With pride, inspiration and hope, this book is a call to all Latinx writers: Adelante!

—Eric, Editorial Intern

Children of the Land

Some memoirs are hard to summarize because the lives they chronicle sprawl out in so many directions. Marcelo Hernandez Castillo's **Children of the Land** is sprawling in this way, almost epic in its scope of experiences. It's a memoir about a man coming into his own as an artist; coming to terms with his marriage to his high school sweetheart and bisexuality; coping with the trauma of living in the United States without documentation; navigating his tricky relationship with his father, who was deported; and rekindling his relationship with Mexico. In each movement, Castillo's writing is urgent in its pursuit of beauty, as if he's trying to capture it before it evaporates—and it often does. This is a story without a happy ending, in which the U.S. inflicts wounds that ripple through a family and multiply over a lifetime. This may sound harrowing, but I promise that it's a transcendent read—as closely acquainted with suffering as it is with splendor.

—Christy, Associate Editor

Afterlife

Amid the literary landscape of the 1990s, Julia Alvarez was a force to be reckoned with, her fierce and tender novels acting like a controlled burn to carve out a space for other Latina writers. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and *In the Time of the Butterflies* encapsulated the rites and roles of sisterhood, as well as what it meant to be a young woman growing up amid Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. **Afterlife**, Alvarez's first novel for adult readers in nearly 15 years, is a triumphant return to the landscape of sisterly relationships, but amid new territory: the nature of privilege. In Vermont, 65-year-old Antonia does her best after the death of her husband. As she sways upright in grief, she ruminates on her privilege as an English-speaking U.S. citizen who can file a police report for her missing sister and provide sanctuary for a girl who has arrived in the U.S. without papers. I don't often think of a novel as *kind*, but Alvarez draws along both her characters and her readers with notable grace.

—Cat, Deputy Editor

Conquistadora

When it was released in 2011, Esmeralda Santiago's historical novel was billed as a Puerto Rican *Gone With the Wind*, which is both the best and worst comparison to make. Like Margaret Mitchell's Civil War-set blockbuster, **Conquistadora** is the type of book that all but requires you to describe it as "sweeping." Full of passionate love affairs, equally passionate enmities and decidedly soapy twists and turns, the novel follows Ana Cubillas, a Spanish woman in the mid-1800s who is obsessed with following in the footsteps of her conquistador ancestors. After marrying the heir to a Puerto Rican sugar plantation, Ana travels to the island to seize what she thinks of as her destiny. But unlike *Gone With the Wind*, which all but worships its heroine and her privileged past as an enslaver, **Conquistadora** forces the reader to witness all ugliness and pain that must occur to make Ana's dream a reality. The only person who thinks Ana is some sort of romantic, rebellious antiheroine is herself.

—Savanna, Associate Editor

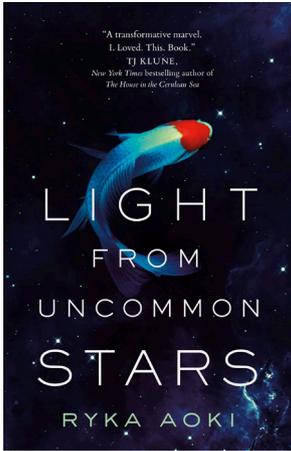
My Papi Has a Motorcycle

In this bighearted picture book, a little girl narrates the ride she takes on her Papi's blue motorcycle after he gets home from work. Author Isabel Quintero's text is full of evocative details that capture the love between father and daughter, from the way he gently tucks her ponytail beneath her helmet to how she can sense him smiling when she wraps her arms more tightly around his waist. As they zoom down the road, the girl imagines that they are a comet, "a spectacular celestial thing soaring on asphalt," the dust from her father's clothes streaming behind them like a tail. Zeke Peña's illustrations are a wonder, and it's easy to see why they received a Pura Belpré Illustrator Honor. As the pair ride through their town, Peña bathes the houses and businesses they pass with a warm glow that could be the evening light or the love and pride the girl feels for her city. **My Papi Has a Motorcycle** is a joyful and beautifully crafted ode to family and community.

—Stephanie, Associate Editor

Bound by otherworldly powers

Discover the magic and malevolence, dangerous legacies and intergalactic secrets in two science fiction and fantasy novels.



★ Light From Uncommon Stars

What is it with the devil and violinists? Seems like his thirst for their souls is never slaked. In the 1700s, he made a deal with Paganini; in the 1970s, he went down to Georgia; and now the unlikely California city of El Monte offers up the latest additions to his infernal collection.

In Ryka Aoki's **Light From Uncommon Stars** (Tor, \$25.99, 9781250789068), violin teacher Shizuka Satomi finds herself on the horns of a dilemma: As the clock ticks down, she needs to deliver one more soul to the Bad Guy Down Below or else prepare to take the hot seat for all eternity. She's already turned over six violin

students, each of whom traded their immortal essence for earthly success beyond their wildest ambitions. Number seven, though, is a problem. Katrina Nguyen, a transgender teen runaway with a broken instrument and a broken psyche, isn't motivated by the typical incentives (recording contract, concert tour, international renown) that made Shizuka's previous students such easy marks.

Katrina isn't the only refugee with a troubled past on Shizuka's date card. Local donut shop owner—and starship captain—Lan Tran is on the intergalactic lam from a civilization-destroying phenomenon known as Endplague. After a meet cute, Shizuka and Lan embark on a friendship in which confidences are shared and mutual assistance is provided.

Without straining the metaphor too much, Aoki gets every element of mis-en-scène note-perfect, and her prose is as exacting and precise as the techniques Shizuka teaches. Readers can feel the steam emanating from the kitchens of Aoki's San Gabriel Valley noodle joints, hear the scrape of a freshly rosined bow across recalcitrant strings and experience the acute anguish of having one foot anchored in one world while the other is desperately trying to move forward.

In addition to the novel's all-the-feels poignancy, **Light From Uncommon Stars** is also very, very funny. It almost makes you wonder if Aoki made a deal with—naaaah. She knows better.

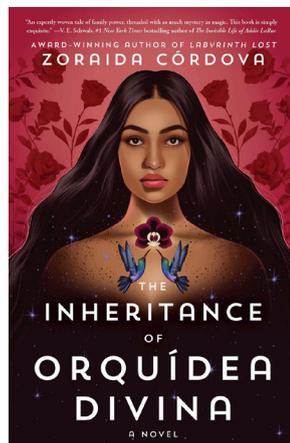
—Thane Tierney

★ The Inheritance of Orquídea Divina

Through an accident of timing and celestial alignment, Orquídea Montoya was born unlucky. But unlike most unlucky children, she knows how to bargain, even with creatures of myth and magic, and how to phrase a wish. Her search for luck leads her from her home in Guayaquil, Ecuador, to the small Midwestern town of Four Rivers, where she finally puts down roots and starts a family.

Decades later, Orquídea's descendants are summoned home to Four Rivers, to the house and verdant valley she conjured. Once there, they discover they have inherited a deadly legacy of ill-used power and festering secrets.

Acclaimed young adult and romance author Zoraida Córdova's first adult fantasy novel, **The Inheritance of Orquídea Divina** (Atria, \$27, 9781982102548), is strongly influenced by the Latin American literary tradition of magical realism. Córdova weaves the story



of Orquídea's childhood with that of her family's struggle in the present, masterfully synchronizing revelations in both timelines. In the process, she successfully casts those who mistrust or are suspicious of magic as irrational and unwilling to believe their own eyes. After all, magic is everywhere in Córdova's enchanted reality, both the endemic sort of magic found coursing through rivers and creeping up trees and more alien varieties. Magic is an absolute cornerstone of this world, and Córdova evokes it beautifully.

Most striking, however, is her careful and deliberate use of language. Córdova's gorgeously compelling prose brings a natural sense of humor and poignancy to even the darkest moments of the story, and the way she uses Spanish to enhance and add depth to her narration is remarkable. Additionally, she has paid extraordinarily close attention to the names of characters and settings. Every single one has meaning to it, and while some are explained in the story, others are left for the reader to discover. This lends a unique sense of purpose to the writing and exemplifies the uncommonly poetic precision of Córdova's prose.

The Inheritance of Orquídea Divina demands to be savored and read with care.

A commandingly propulsive story with a complex writing style that is best enjoyed slowly makes **The Inheritance of Orquídea Divina** a challenge, but one well worth the time.

—Noah Fram



Visit BookPage.com to read our Q&A with Zoraida Córdova.

NOW IN PAPERBACK

“A lovely, deeply moving story of loss and love and memory made real.”

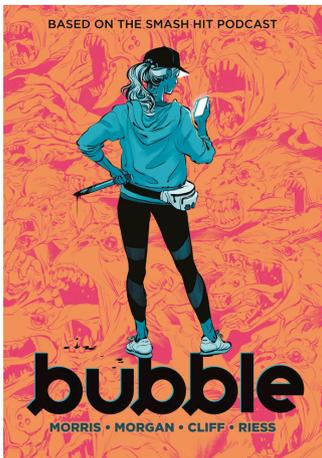
—Diana Gabaldon,
#1 New York Times bestselling author
of *Outlander*

Heartfelt and irresistible, this enchanting debut follows a woman who travels back in time to be reunited with the mother she lost when she was a child.

“Riveting, surprising and deeply touching.”
—Bookreporter

“An unputdownable debut from a writer to watch.”
—Bustle

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A SEASON OF LITERARY ART

A sampling of the year's best graphics and comics includes a neon-bright retelling of a Greek myth and the continued memoirs of a civil rights legend.

The range of comic book storytelling is vast, and this selection of 2021's best graphic novels, memoirs and histories runs the gamut in terms of artistic style and narrative approach, yet all of them have two things in common: a mastery of the form and a unique sense of expression.

Bubble

The stakes of the gig economy have never been higher than in **Bubble** (First Second, \$19.99, 9781250245564), a graphic novel by Jordan Morris and Sarah Morgan with illustrations from Tony Cliff and colors by Natalie Riess. Adapted from the scripted podcast of the same name, **Bubble** is set in a world where corporate-funded cities have sprung up as domes of safety, walling off humanity from a monster-ridden wilderness known as the Brush. Morgan was born in the bubble, she's retained a few of her more useful Brush skills, including the ability to kill pesky mutatedimps. Naturally, her employers have just the thing to help her monetize that ability.

Bubble crackles with wit and biting commentary on piecing together a living one app at a time. Cliff's art enriches the whole wild affair, lending a grounding sense of reality to the reading experience despite the fantastical setting. He's as adept at depicting action-packed scenes as he is at homing in on a character's eyes at a key moment of personal discovery. There's tremendous glee to be found in **Bubble**, but also tremendous heart.

Ballad for Sophie

A young woman talks her way into the mansion of one of the world's most reclusive musicians and convinces him to give her an interview. That's the premise from which **Ballad for Sophie** (Top Shelf, \$24.99, 9781603094986) springs, and with a sense of adversarial yet whimsical tension, we are propelled into a world of bittersweet wonders, tragedy and music.

Written by jazz composer Filipe Melo, illustrated by Juan Cavia and translated from the original Spanish by Gabriela Soares, **Ballad for Sophie** unfolds as the aging pianist tells his story. We meet a lifelong rival, a lost love, a tormented mother, a devilish piano teacher and more, their rich narrative tapestry unfolding against backdrops that range from World War II to the luxury of 1960s Paris.

Through it all, Melo's characters are either constantly growing or constantly resisting growth, while Cavia's art sweeps across the page with lithe figures and elegant depictions of bygone eras. When the story dips into the past, his art grows slightly more magical, turning piano teachers into great horned creatures and piano recitals into dramatically lit clashes of titans.

Emotionally dense, texturally rich and humming with humanity, **Ballad for Sophie** is a moving portrait of the ways in which art can both save and doom us.

Lore Olympus

Some elements of Greek mythology are simply timeless. In **Lore Olympus: Volume One** (Del Rey, \$26.99, 9780593160299), Rachel Smythe reminds us of this using her acclaimed artistic magic. This is the first volume of her web-comic "Lore Olympus," and it's striking to see her work collected in such a lavish tome after its celebrated web release.

As Smythe unveils her retelling of the Hades and Persephone myth, her gorgeous art elevates each scene. She uses precise color and shading to bathe the Greek gods in neon hues of purple and blue, like they're perpetually in some mythic nightclub. Readers will revel in how seamlessly Smythe has adapted this classic story, and in no time at all, they'll find themselves utterly lost in her beautifully dark, often startlingly timely world of sex, lies and immortality.

The Middle Ages

You've probably heard that the Middle Ages wasn't really the period of darkness and ignorance that popular culture has made it out to be, but you've never seen that truth demonstrated quite like in **The Middle Ages: A Graphic History** (Icon, \$19.95, 9781785785917). Medieval historian Eleanor Janega and illustrator Neil Max Emmanuel set out to reveal how this period took shape and why it became so consequential, and they never miss in that mission.

Rather than attempting a strictly linear dissection of centuries of human history, **The Middle Ages** unfolds almost as an illustrated textbook, with sections devoted to everything from the fall of Rome to the rise of Charlemagne to the growth of major European cities. Janega's prose is precise,

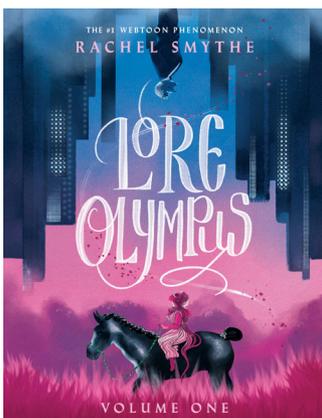
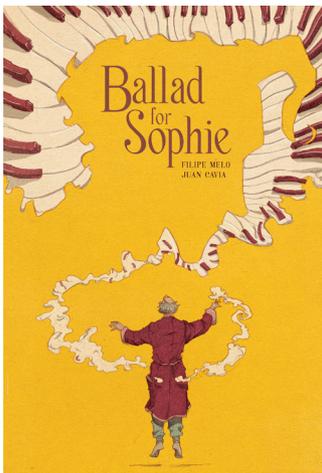


Illustration from *Run: Book One* © 2021. Reproduced by permission of Abrams ComicArts.



Illustration from *Ballad for Sophie* © 2021. Reproduced by permission of Top Shelf.

informative, digestible and witty. Emmanuel's simple but effective black-and-white art carries that same wit through to the visuals, alternating between modern compositions and homages to medieval aesthetics, with amusing revisions to the Bayeux Tapestry and clever representations of church schisms.

It all adds up to an utterly essential volume for history buffs, whether they're diving into the medieval period for the first time or just brushing up on a few things.

★Run

The follow-up to Congressman John Lewis' monumental, award-winning March series, **Run: Book One** (Abrams ComicArts, \$24.99, 9781419730696) kicks off a new graphic trilogy that further establishes Lewis as a fundamental, undeniable force in the mid-1960s American civil rights movement.

Lewis completed work on the script for **Run** before his death in 2020, and illustrator L. Fury joins writer Andrew Aydin and illustrator Nate Powell (both of whom collaborated on the March trilogy) in carefully layering Lewis' recollections with vivid depictions of celebrations and violence, hope and heartbreak, despair and determination. The story picks up after the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act, as Lewis encountered new roadblocks and hurdles in the wake of that legislative victory. Through dramatic composition and movement, Powell and Fury's illustrations capture the same energy as the March trilogy, while also conveying Lewis' maturation as he grows out of his student organizing era and enters the realm of American statesmanship.

Run is another indispensable chronicle of the life and work of one of 20th-century America's most exceptional figures, but it's also a mission statement for the work yet to come.

★Seek You

It might sound like a cliché to say that a book delving into America's loneliness epidemic will make you feel more connected to the world around you, but that's exactly what writer and illustrator Kristen Radtke achieves in this ambitious book.

Part memoir, part sociological study and part cultural history, **Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness** (Pantheon, \$30, 9781524748067) digs deep into the many ways that loneliness affects our daily lives. Through incisive, often disarmingly confessional writing, Radtke gets to the core of what loneliness is and what it does to our bodies and minds, exploring everything from its neurological roots to the impact of the sitcom studio audience laugh track.

Throughout **Seek You**, we are guided by Radtke's beautifully muted art. Some pages are powerful in their simplicity, such as a wide view of a massive apartment complex with a single lit window, while others are effective in their complexity, such as a spread showing a lone figure amid a fog

of words describing their most alienating experiences. **Seek You** is a captivating combination of raw emotional exploration and thoughtful, sophisticated imagination.

The Waiting

A chance encounter with a dog on a city street pulls a character back through decades of memories and serves as the launching point for a stirring graphic novel by author-illustrator Keum Suk Gendry-Kim.

Translated from the Korean by Janet Hong, **The Waiting** (Drawn & Quarterly, \$24.95, 9781770464575) explores a very particular kind of loss on the Korean peninsula. In bold, fluid black-and-white imagery, Gendry-Kim tells a story inspired by her own mother, who lived under Japanese occupation in Korea before World War II, then was forced to migrate during the Korean War and the permanent division of Korea along the 38th parallel. Many Koreans fled their homes amid the fighting, causing a surge of family separations that led to lifetimes of waiting and hoping.

Though **The Waiting** is set amid some of the most consequential events of the 20th century, Gendry-Kim never makes the book's scope wider than it needs to be. **The Waiting** is better for it, succeeding as a deeply intimate portrayal of one woman's struggle to not only survive but also keep some measure of hope and determination alive. It's also about the broader goal of an entire culture to somehow come back together after war, through individual efforts and massive group reunions.

In depicting a people's efforts to find each other, **The Waiting** is one of the most moving graphic novels of the year.

★Wake

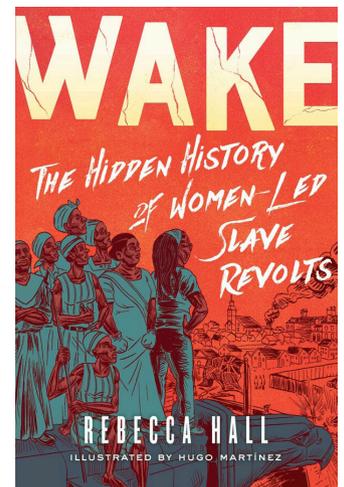
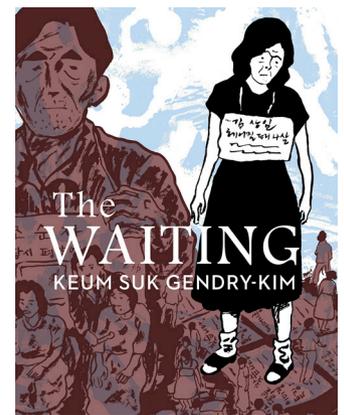
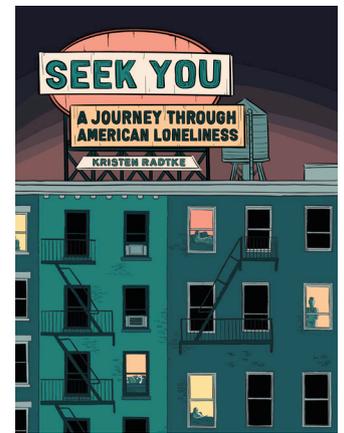
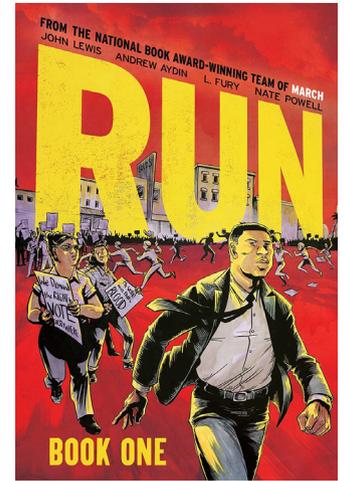
Writer and activist Rebecca Hall and illustrator Hugo Martínez present a powerful meditation on hidden history that transforms into a haunting, necessary statement on exactly why that history has been hidden, and how much of it still lives with us.

In **Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts** (Simon & Schuster, \$29.99, 9781982115180), Hall, whose grandparents were enslaved, recounts her process of researching several 18th-century revolts that were led by enslaved women. Though some of the book's most affecting sequences re-create these revolts, much of **Wake** is a memoir of Hall's search for the brave, rebellious women who led them, the punishments they suffered and what, if anything, they managed to leave behind. In the process of constructing their stories, Hall tells much of her own, laying bare how the echoes of enslavement inform our political world as well as her own daily interactions.

Hall's prose is stunning, and Martínez's art takes it to another level, delivering expressive representations of the history Hall carries with her and of the reminders of slavery's cruelty that are etched into the landscapes we walk now. His artwork bleeds past and present together, depicting the city streets around Hall as shadowy memorials of the slave markets that once stood there. When he projects the images of enslaved men and women onto the facades of skyscrapers, he transforms these feats of architecture into monuments to atrocities.

Wake is as poetic as it is powerful. Readers who adored the March trilogy and the graphic novel adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* will find it to be an essential read.

—Matthew Jackson



★ The Book of Form and Emptiness

By Ruth Ozeki

Literary Fiction

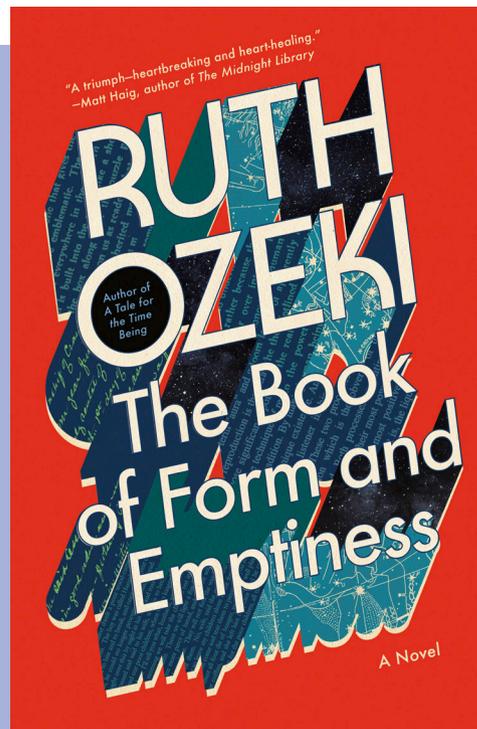
What does it mean to listen? What can you hear if you pay close attention, especially in a moment of grief and questioning? In **The Book of Form and Emptiness** (Viking, \$30, 9780399563645), Ruth Ozeki explores how we find meaning in the world and why each of our voices matter.

As the novel opens, young Benny Oh's father dies suddenly and violently. Benny's loss and confusion is palpable, made all the more difficult by the voices he begins to hear emanating from all the objects around him. These voices are a burden, weighing Benny down with the emotional resonance of all things, from a silver spoon to a pair of scissors. He doesn't know what to do with this information, and neither do the people around him.

As Benny follows these voices and begins to sneak out of school, his mother, Annabelle,

struggles to understand her child, even as she grieves and hoards. Annabelle's job is to monitor the news, and her home bursts with plastic bags full of old newspapers and CDs, as well as her own piles of clothes in need of folding, unfinished craft projects and so much more. Ozeki's brilliance is to never let Annabelle's pile overwhelm the reader, offering glimpses of it only through Annabelle's and Benny's eyes, who in their grief often have trouble registering the tangible reality around them.

As Benny and Annabelle try to find ways to be in and make sense of the world, questions of communication, loss and connection emerge. Ozeki's prose is magnetic as she draws readers along, teasing out



an ethereal and haunting quality through an additional narrator: that of a sentient Book, who speaks with Benny and helps to tell his story. The Book's observations are beyond a human's scope, with a universal objectivity blooming from a communication matrix among all books, like a mycelial network.

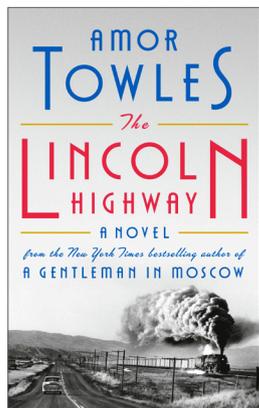
Benny and Annabelle are characters you'll never stop rooting for. They're worthy of readers' love as Ozeki meditates on the nature of objects, compassion and everyday beauty. After reading, you'll be eager for this book to

find its way into other readers' hands.

—Freyja Sachs

★ The Lincoln Highway

By Amor Towles



Historical Fiction

"I guess you haven't had your adventure yet," 18-year-old Emmett Watson tells his 8-year-old brother, Billy, who responds, "I think we're on it now." And indeed they are, having set out in Emmett's powder-blue 1948 Studebaker Land

Cruiser, planning to head west on the Lincoln Highway, America's first transcontinental roadway. In light of their father's recent death, their unlikely goal is to track down their mother—who abandoned them years ago—at a July 4th celebration in San Francisco.

After mesmerizing legions of readers with the story of Count Alexander Rostov, sentenced in 1922 to spend the rest of his life in an attic room of a grand hotel in *A Gentleman in Moscow* (2016), Amor Towles takes to the open road in his superb, sprawling, cross-country saga, **The Lincoln Highway** (Viking, \$30, 9780735222359). Although this great American road trip is quite a change of pace and scenery, Towles immerses readers just as completely in the adventures of the Watson brothers he did in the seemingly claustrophobic lives of Count Rostov and his young sidekick, Nina.

Like Nina, young Billy is a creative, intelligent and essential companion to his older brother, and like Rostov, Emmett has had his own brush with the law. As the novel opens in June 1954, Emmett has just been released from an 18-month sentence in a juvenile work camp, having landed on "the ugly side of luck" in a manslaughter case involving a teenage bully. Soon after the Watson brothers start their quest, however, their grand plans are upended by two friends of Emmett's from the work camp, Duchess and Woolly, who "borrow" the Studebaker and head to New York—forcing Emmett and Billy to stow away on a freight train and head east in hot pursuit.

Packed with drama, **The Lincoln Highway** takes place in just 10 days, with chapters narrated by a variety of characters. Towles' fans will be rewarded with many of the same pleasures they've come to expect from him: a multitude of stories told at a leisurely pace (the novel clocks in at 592 pages); numerous endearing and sometimes maddening characters; and pitch-perfect plotting with surprises at every turn.

As if that weren't enough, the novel is chock-full of literary references: a Ralph Waldo Emerson quotation that sets the brothers off on their journey; allusions to *The Three Musketeers* (Emmett, Duchess and Woolly); a memorable Black World War II veteran named Ulysses; and scenes reminiscent of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Ultimately, **The Lincoln Highway** is Towles' unabashed love letter to books and storytelling.

Late in the novel, a character tells Billy, "There are few things more beautiful to an author's eye . . . than a well-read copy of one of his books." Towles

has created another winning novel whose pages are destined to be turned—and occasionally tattered—by gratified readers.

—Alice Cary

Sankofa

By Chibundu Onuzo



Popular Fiction

While searching through her dead mother's possessions, Anna Bain finds an old journal of her father's, a discovery that she hopes will offer clarity about a person she never really knew. So begins Chibundu Onuzo's third novel, **Sankofa** (Catapult,

\$26, 9781646220830), an enjoyably readable novel that raises questions of belonging and the search for personal roots.

Francis Aggrey's diary offers important clues about his identity. He was a young student from a small West African country, here fictionalized as Bamana but bearing some resemblance to Ghana, and attended college in 1970s London. He boarded with a white Welsh family and began a romantic relationship with the younger daughter, Bronwen—Anna's mother—before becoming involved in radical politics and returning to Bamana.

Anna is shocked to find out that after years of

political activism, Francis became the prime minister of his country under the name Kofi Adjei. Even more amazing, the former leader is still alive. Upon learning this information, Anna finds herself at a crux in her own life, separated from her husband and with no real ties to London, and so she journeys to Bamana to find her father.

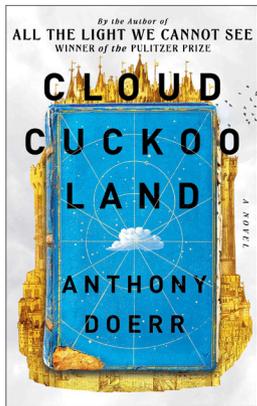
One of the strengths of *Sankofa* is that Anna must consistently confront notions of difference and acceptance. She was never comfortable growing up biracial in 1980s London, and her experience in Bamana is no less disorienting, especially because she passes for white among the local population. It is even more challenging for her to hear reports about her father that aren't positive; as much as he has accomplished for his country, there are rumors that he suppressed free speech and quashed student rebellions. Yet there is no question that for Anna, meeting her father provides a sense of stability and of self that she's never really known.

Onuzo's disarmingly frank novel contends with complex issues of identity and prejudice, and it doesn't sugarcoat its depiction of the fractured history of a developing country. Onuzo sets Anna on a path that can only be completed when she begins to come to terms with her past.

—Lauren Bufferd

★ Cloud Cuckoo Land

By Anthony Doerr



Literary Fiction

Fans of Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer Prize-winning historical novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, have waited seven years for *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (Scribner, \$30, 9781982168438). But where *All the Light We Cannot See* focused on two characters during

a single time period—the lead-up to the bombing of Saint Malo, France, in World War II—*Cloud Cuckoo Land* pings among different eras.

In this multiple-timeline story, the large array of mostly young characters includes 13-year-old Anna, an orphan working in an embroidery workshop in 1453 Constantinople, and Omeir, a farm boy who's conscripted into the sultan's army as it prepares to lay siege to Constantinople in that same year. Moving forward in time, we meet Zeno, son of a Greek immigrant living in post-World War II Lakeport, Idaho; and Seymour, a lonely boy in present-day Lakeport. And in the future, 13-year-old Konstance lives aboard the *Argos*, a spaceship that's left a ravaged Earth for a better planet.

Threaded throughout their stories are sections of an ancient (fictional) Greek text titled "Cloud

Cuckoo Land," which tells the story of Aethon, who wishes he could fly to a city in the clouds "where no one ever suffered and everyone was wise."

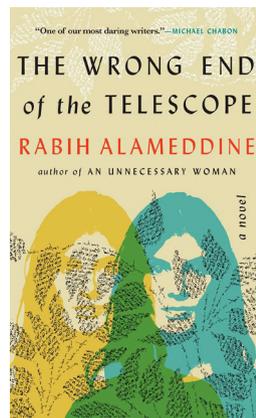
While the changes in points of view can be dizzying at first, Doerr's writing grounds the reader in homely but often beautiful details: Anna's daily rounds in the walled city; Omeir's patient work with his oxen team, Moonlight and Tree; the friendship that Zeno finds with a British soldier when he's a prisoner during the Korean War; the comfort that Seymour takes from the forest behind his trailer; and the stories told by Konstance's dad to keep her occupied on their journey. Anna, Omeir, Zeno, Seymour and Konstance all face great loss and danger, and the reader keeps turning pages to discover not only whether each of them survive but also how they're all linked.

This is an ambitious, genre-busting novel, with climate change as a major undercurrent. And while sorrow and violence play large roles, so does tenderness. Like *All the Light We Cannot See*, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* resolves into a well-connected plot, with threaded connections that are unexpected yet inevitable, offering hope and some surprising acts of redemption.

—Sarah McCraw Crow

The Wrong End of the Telescope

By Rabih Alameddine



Literary Fiction

Rabih Alameddine's sixth novel, *The Wrong End of the Telescope* (Grove, \$27, 9780802157805), is as complex and multifaceted as its narrator. The story is a shape-shifting kaleidoscope, a collection of moments—funny, devastating, absurd—that bear witness to the

violence of war and displacement without sensationalizing it.

Mina Simpson, a transgender Lebanese American doctor, arrives on the Greek island of Lesbos to volunteer at a refugee camp. It's the closest she's been to Lebanon since she left her home country decades ago, and the first time she's seen her brother (who flies in to visit her) in years. On Lesbos, Mina meets a family from Syria and becomes close with the family's mother, who is dying of cancer and whom Mina steps in to help however she can.

As Mina struggles to make sense of the crisis unfolding before her, she recounts the winding path of her life: her Lebanese childhood, her experiences in medical school in the U.S. and her comfortable middle age in Chicago with her

BESTSELLER WATCH

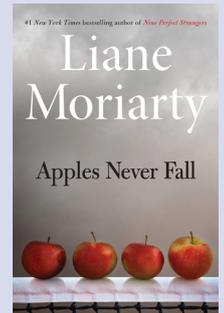
Don't miss these major fall fiction releases!

Apples Never Fall

By Liane Moriarty

Holt, \$28.99
9781250220257

Moriarty, the best-selling author of *Big Little Lies*, *Nine Perfect Strangers* and many other beloved novels, serves another tantalizing, high-tension family mystery: When a tennis-coach mother goes missing, her grown children must dig into long-buried secrets to figure out what happened.

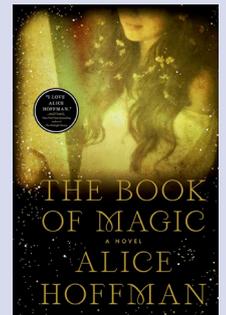


The Book of Magic

By Alice Hoffman

Simon & Schuster, \$27.99
9781982151485

Readers of Hoffman's Practical Magic series are a devoted bunch, and this conclusion to the series is a worthy finale, gathering together three generations of Owens women to break the family curse—once and for all.

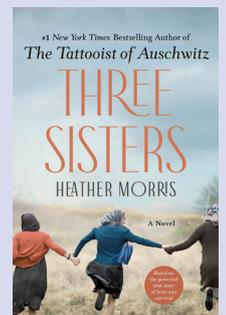


Three Sisters

By Heather Morris

St. Martin's, \$28.99
9781250276896

Completing the World War II trilogy that includes the multimillion-copy bestseller *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and *Cilka's Journey*, *Three Sisters* follows the lives of three Slovakian women who escape the death march from the Auschwitz concentration camp and find a new home in Israel. This standalone novel overlaps with the events of Morris' previous two books, and all three are inspired by true stories.



wife. Moving between past and present, the novel unfolds in short chapters with whimsical titles that perfectly encapsulate Mina's dry humor, wisdom and compassion (e.g., "When You Don't Know What to Say, Have a Cookie").

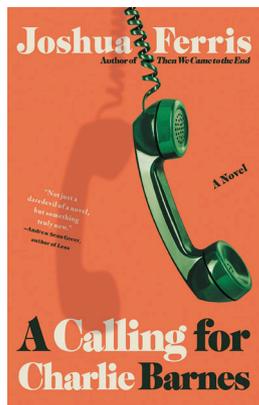
Interspersed with these chapters are sections addressed to a gay Lebanese writer whose work has had a profound impact on Mina's life, and who seems to be a reflection of Alameddine himself. "Writing does not force coherence onto a discordant narrative," Mina tells the unnamed writer in one of these chapters, an unsettling truth that Alameddine embraces in this novel. He refuses to offer easy solutions to impossible situations; his characters do not learn lessons. This is not a novel about transformation. Its strength lies in its slipperiness, its thoughtful engagement with the messy in-betweens and the harsh but revelatory realities of liminality.

Mina, her fellow volunteers and the refugees they meet are all seeking something: safety or wholeness, a new home, old friends, a different narrative through which to understand their lives. **The Wrong End of the Telescope** is a gorgeously written, darkly funny and refreshingly queer witness to that seeking.

—Laura Sackton

★ A Calling for Charlie Barnes

By Joshua Ferris



Family Drama

How does one sum up the arc of a long life? That's the intriguing question Joshua Ferris poses in **A Calling for Charlie Barnes** (Little, Brown, \$28, 9780316333535), a poignant, biting funny exploration of how a life that's riddled with defeat may

turn out, after all, to be profoundly meaningful.

Inspired by the death of Ferris' own father in 2014, the novel tells the story of Charlie Barnes, nicknamed "Steady Boy," an investment adviser struggling in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse whose ambition is matched only by the number and magnitude of his professional and personal debacles. Charlie is a bundle of contradictions—an ethical money manager in a world of charlatans, and someone whose endlessly inventive mind conjures up bizarre moneymaking schemes that are distinctive only for their consistent failures, like a flying toupee called the Original Doolander or the Clown in Your Town, a franchised fleet of party clowns.

But when, at age 68, Charlie is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, he's forced to confront his mortality and come to terms with a chaotic family life

that has included five marriages—four of which ended badly—and has caused the bitter estrangement of his two eldest children. His youngest son, Jake, the only Barnes sibling who remains close to his father, is a novelist who takes on the project of chronicling Charlie's "perfectly failed life." From moments of rollicking humor to episodes of deep pathos, Jake strives to capture his father's utterly ordinary, strikingly tumultuous biography with as much fidelity to the facts as he's able to muster while keeping it "honest, but respectable."

In addition to its autofictional component, **A Calling for Charlie Barnes** contains a strong metafictional element, as Jake comments frequently and incisively on the challenges of storytelling, even assuming the mantle of unreliable narrator almost with a sense of pride: "Like reliability exists anywhere anymore," he writes, "like that's still a thing," reminding the reader of "the power you have when you control the narrative."

Ferris' control of his own narrative is impeccable, but that doesn't mean readers shouldn't be prepared for the frequent wicked curveballs he delivers with evident zest. **A Calling for Charlie Barnes** has plot twists as manifold as its protagonist's cruelly dashed dreams, but when Steady Boy's story reaches its end, it's a reminder of how little we know about the ones we love and the fact that even the humblest life story encompasses unfathomable depths.

—Harvey Freedenberg

★ We Are Not Like Them

By Christine Pride & Jo Piazza



Literary Fiction

"Part of our friendship, of any relationship really, is the tacit agreement to allow a generous latitude for flaws and grievances." These are the words of Riley Wilson, speaking about her lifelong bond with her best friend, Jenny Murphy. But while

this agreement has worked for them in the past, it won't anymore.

In **We Are Not Like Them** (Atria, \$27, 9781982181031), written by co-authors Christine Pride and Jo Piazza, we meet Riley and Jenny as their friendship is tested as never before: Riley is a Black journalist covering the recent murder of a Black teenage boy by a white police officer, who turns out to be Jenny's husband, Kevin.

In chapters that alternate between Riley's and Jenny's points of view, we begin to understand each woman's perspective on events. Through Riley, we see how traumatizing it is for a Black journalist to cover police-involved killings, and we see her

unease in broadcasting other people's trauma in order to further her career. Through Jenny, we understand the private fears of a police officer's spouse and the relentless pressure on cops and their families to "back the blue," no matter what.

While **We Are Not Like Them** is fundamentally about the loyalties and betrayals among their communities—and each other—Riley and Jenny are not caricatures. Pride, a Black writer, editor and publishing veteran, and Piazza, a white journalist and podcast host, have written these women as complex, layered people who do their best to navigate infertility, shame, absent maternal figures and the generational trauma wrought by racist violence.

Hopelessness is certainly a theme in the novel, especially in the epilogue that centers on Tamara, the murdered boy's grieving mother. But **We Are Not Like Them** is ultimately about the inherently hopeful act of having grace when the people we love make mistakes—even terrible ones. This is an excellent book club selection or a starting point for interracial friend groups or families to talk candidly about race.

—Jessica Wakeman

The Morning Star

By Karl Ove Knausgaard

Translated by Martin Aitken



Literary Fiction

The first thing you'll notice about award-winning Norwegian author Karl Ove Knausgaard's **The Morning Star** (Penguin Press, \$30, 9780399563423) is how big it is. At almost 700 pages, it's a book that takes up considerable real estate not just on the nightstand or in a

bag but also within the mind, demanding a particular kind of mental stamina.

It's August on the southern coast of Norway, and a big, bright celestial object has appeared in the sky. No one knows what to make of this new star. There are speculations from scholars and experts on its sudden presence, but could there be more to this phenomenon than just science?

The title's biblical innuendo is on point. Knausgaard not only directly and indirectly philosophizes about Jesus, Satan, purgatory, sin and resurrection but also uses these touchstones to inspire the characters whose various points of view fill these pages. There isn't just one story to follow in **The Morning Star** but several, as the narrative bounces from one captivating, relatable, likable character to another.

Amid these characters' experiences in love, marriage, teenage angst, career disappointments,

mental health and global warming, the novel progresses with an unflinching consideration of the roles and significance of living and dying. In this way, **The Morning Star** feels at once about nothing and everything.

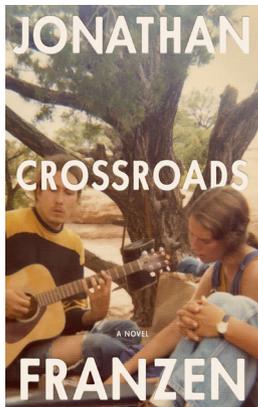
Knausgaard is more interested in using the novel's considerable length to introduce loose ends instead of neatly tying them up. Then again, for those who have read Knausgaard's previous work (such as his six-volume *My Struggle* series), this probably doesn't come as a surprise.

The Morning Star is dark, eerie, mesmerizing and, yes, totally worth its size.

—Chika Gujarathi

★ Crossroads

By Jonathan Franzen



Family Drama

Jonathan Franzen, one of our best chroniclers of suburban family life (*The Corrections*, *Freedom*), does not disappoint with his terrific new novel, **Crossroads** (FSG, \$30, 9780374181178).

The story opens just before Christmas 1971 and centers on

the Hildebrandt family, who live in the “Crappier Parsonage” in New Prospect, a suburb of Chicago. The head of the family, Reverend Russ Hildebrandt, a middle-aged associate pastor, is frustrated that his career has stalled, humiliated that a young, hip minister has snatched away control of the church's youth group that he founded, tired of his wife and marriage, and enamored of a widowed parishioner.

The youth group is called Crossroads, and it's just one of the many crossroads the family arrives at throughout this big, ambitious novel. The good reverend's wife, Marion, is well aware of Russ' infatuations and is filled with anger and self-loathing. Their daughter, Becky, the coolest girl in high school, becomes suddenly unmoored. Their middle son, Perry, is super smart and contemptuous of others; he's also one of the biggest pot dealers in school. Eldest son Clem, the epitome of responsibility, is on his way home from college and seeking a reckoning with the father he has so long admired.

In some ways this family's internal conflicts seem fairly typical. But as the novel progresses, we discover there are deeper histories at work. Some have to do with the basic assumptions of marriage and family life, while others reflect the tumult of the 1970s, when much of society was divided about America's participation in the Vietnam War and young people especially struggled with issues of equality and justice for people of color and Native Americans. It is also no coincidence that the major sections of the novel are titled “Advent”

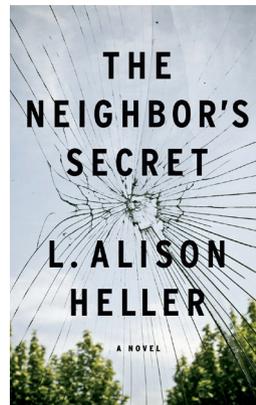
and “Easter.” Each individual Hildebrandt grapples with matters of Christian faith and its place in their lives.

Franzen writes about all of this with penetrating insight delivered through incisive sentences. By turns funny and terrifying, **Crossroads** is promised to be the first novel in a planned trilogy. I can't wait to read what happens next.

—Alden Mudge

★ The Neighbor's Secret

By L. Alison Heller



Thriller

Cottonwood Estates seems like an idyllic neighborhood for raising a family. It's affluent, populated by overworked dads and over-involved moms, and thanks to the gossipy monthly book club, everyone knows everyone else's business.

In **The Neighbor's Secret** (Flatiron, \$27.99, 9781250205810), author L. Alison Heller scratches away at this suburban facade to reveal secrets that are slowly bringing the small community to the verge of collapse.

Through brief, interstitial passages, the reader learns that not only is a murder about to be committed, but also that another one was covered up years ago. The question remains: Who are the killers?

Annie is harboring a secret from 15 years ago and worrying that her eighth grade daughter, Laurel, might be destined to repeat it. Laurel is acting out, getting drunk with friends at the annual Fall Fest and keeping secrets from her ever-vigilant mother. Jen is similarly worried about her young son, Abe, with good reason: Abe has been expelled from school and diagnosed as a sociopath. Jen struggles with fear of her own son and guilt over her abilities as a parent, all while hiding his diagnosis from the teachers at Abe's new school as well as from her friends and neighbors. Finally, there is Lena. A widow and empty nester, Lena watches the neighborhood but keeps apart from it socially. She understands that nothing in their peaceful community is what it seems. When a vandal begins targeting homes, the petty property crimes set off a chain of events that will end in one explosive, deadly night.

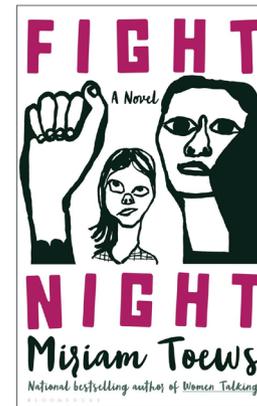
Heller excels at the complex characterization required to engage readers, resulting in a book that's truly impossible to put down. The myriad anxieties her characters feel—fear for their children, their reputation, their community—are entirely relatable. A sense of dread and foreboding permeates the narrative. We know a murder is

coming; Laurel, Abe and Lena all seem on the verge of imploding. With such a wonderful buildup and a truly surprising finish, **The Neighbor's Secret** is a delight to read.

—Elyse Discher

★ Fight Night

By Miriam Toews



Family Drama

Listen to a 9-year-old, and you could learn a lot about the world. That's the benefit that Swiv's absent father would derive if he were to read the letter that constitutes **Fight Night** (Bloomsbury, \$24, 9781635578171), Miriam Toews' brilliant new book, in which she triumphs over a tough assignment: to write an entire novel in the voice of a child.

Assignments are nothing new to Swiv. As she relays to her father in this letter, she's been kicked out of her school near Toronto because of her “*lashing out*” tone” after an incident during Choice Time. Now she's at home with her actor mother and grandmother, and Swiv and Grandma swap homework assignments. For example, Swiv instructs Grandma to compose a letter to Gord, the baby that Mom is carrying.

Toews gives Swiv a voice that is sophisticated, childlike and utterly believable. Readers can see where Swiv gets her pugnaciousness: Mom has been known to rail against capitalism and get into arguments with clerks at tasteful card shops. Mom has reasons to be on edge, however. She's dealing not only with a pregnancy and an absent husband but also with backstage experiences that have instilled distrust in her profession.

Then there's Grandma, a free spirit who speaks in what Swiv calls a secret language and is passionate about Toronto Raptors basketball. Her *joie de vivre*, however, belies a dark history that Toews slowly reveals as the story progresses.

The novel features a supporting cast of men that allows Toews to comment on examples of the patriarchy at work, from Grandma's religious older brothers, who packed her off to Nebraska to get a husband and study the Bible after their father died, to directors who subject Mom to callous treatment. This material could have been strident, but the wonder of **Fight Night** is that it's a warmhearted and inventive portrait of women who have learned to fight against adversity. “You play hard to the end, Swiv,” Grandma tells her as they watch the Raptors on TV. “To the buzzer. There is no alternative.” You could learn a lot from grandmothers, too.

—Michael Magras

FACE VALUE

A playwright with an incredible eye for detail and a searing voice writes her own story of motherhood and facial paralysis.

“The great work of our lives is [figuring out] how to tell the story of our lives,” says Sarah Ruhl, speaking by phone from Chicago. Ruhl, a MacArthur Fellow and two-time Pulitzer finalist for drama, knows about stories. Her eye for detail is on full display in her memoir, **Smile: The Story of a Face**, which explores Ruhl’s experience with Bell’s palsy, a rare condition in which a part of the face becomes paralyzed. “The process of writing the book was cathartic,” Ruhl says, because for the first few years of her paralysis, “I wasn’t able to talk about my face. It was shoved deep under. But astonishingly, it was right on the surface.”

Quick, illuminating turns of phrase like that—shoved under but right on the surface—abound in **Smile**, which examines the paradoxes of illness, especially as experienced by women. The book historicizes the topic, recalling, for instance, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the short story that Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote after enduring bed rest as a medical treatment. The same doctor who prescribed this remedy for Gilman offered a different prescription for men: adventures on the Western frontier. “The 19th-century response is not as far away as we think,” says Ruhl, who was prescribed bed rest herself during her pregnancy, even though the treatment has had mixed results historically.

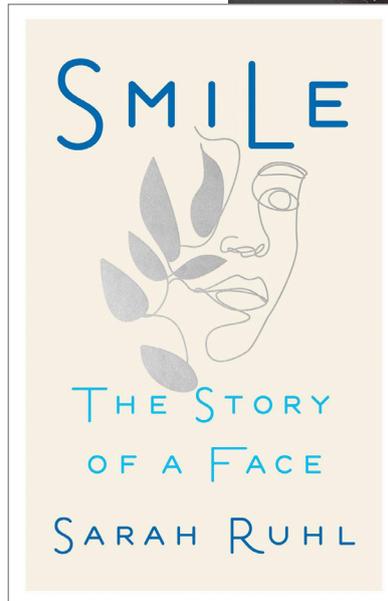
Ruhl spent her time in bed reading the letters of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, thinking idly that they would make a good play (which she later wrote). She also dove unapologetically into the Twilight series. “We can’t predict how our minds will behave in extremis or when we are ill,” Ruhl says, remembering that when her father was sick with cancer, he read books about sea voyages. “Often you need something deeply plot-driven just to get through the stasis. You’re not able to look at the thing directly when you’re really scared about how your body is betraying you.” The epigraph in **Smile**, taken from Virginia Woolf, reiterates this point: “when the lights of health go down, undiscovered countries are then disclosed.”

Ruhl’s experience with Bell’s palsy began the morning after she gave birth to twins. A nurse entered her room and said, “Your eye looks droopy.” When Ruhl looked in the mirror, she writes, “I tried to move my face. Impossible. Puppet face, strings cut.” Bell’s palsy is typically a temporary facial paralysis that clears up completely in a matter of days or weeks—as opposed to Ruhl’s experience, which has lasted for over a decade, though the paralysis has lessened over time. Initially it impacted everything from chewing food to pronouncing words to conveying emotion. Writing about it required self-examination as she searched for ways to frame her experience. These framing lenses, which she calls “thinking lenses,” helped her “really feel what I was feeling about my face.”

For example, Ruhl drew strength from public figures who’ve had facial paralysis, including the poet Allen Ginsburg. The book features a photograph of Ginsburg staring into the camera, forcing viewers to engage what Ruhl describes as “the disturbance” of his asymmetry. She also turned to art history, looking at Mona Lisa’s famous half-smile, a mismatched expression that captured the world’s interest. And, because of her connection to the theater, she examined theories about the link between facial expressions and emotion. “Thank God I



©GREGORY COSTANZO



Smile

Simon & Schuster, \$27, 9781982150945

Memoir

“I wasn’t able to talk about my face. It was shoved deep under. But astonishingly, it was right on the surface.”



Visit [BookPage.com](https://www.bookpage.com) to read our starred review of *Smile*.

am not an actor,” she says. “To have that instrument taken away as an actor would be so demoralizing.”

As Ruhl wrote about her face, she found she had a surprising amount to say—about women caught in ambiguous medical problems, about the face as the part of the body where the soul resides (or not) and about the difficulties of mothering young children while pursuing passionate, consuming work. Often these stories overlap, as in one memorable instance when she chose to breastfeed her child while on a stage in front of 300 people. Gloria Steinem was speaking when the baby began to fuss. Mary Rodgers, who wrote *Freaky Friday*, was seated next to Ruhl, and as Ruhl began to nurse her infant, Rodgers patted Ruhl’s leg and said, “That’s right, that’s right.” Ruhl excels at exploring connections like these, both near and distant, that help pull us through trouble.

For Ruhl, this includes her connection with her husband, Tony. “My editor always wanted more scenes with Tony,” she laughs. And, indeed, when I talk about **Smile** with my friends, it’s a story about Tony that comes to mind: how Ruhl coined the phrase “sexy-cozy” to describe her feeling when he cared for her. “Sexy-cozy,” she writes in the book, “is the opposite of dirty-sexy.” Clearly this is a word that should be in wider circulation, one that would probably resonate with many happily married women, which is how Ruhl gratefully regards herself. “There’s something about the narrative of a happy marriage that we don’t see that much,” she says.

Ruhl also credits her teacher, Pulitzer-winning playwright Paula Vogel, for her support. “I wouldn’t be writing plays without Paula,” she says. “I think that Paula tapping me on the head and saying, ‘You can do this,’ was profoundly important. Sometimes teaching is no more than saying, ‘You can be a writer. Welcome to this secret society.’”

Though Ruhl’s journey with Bell’s palsy is not entirely resolved—she says that she is still thinking through how to live in her body, such as deciding whether she is willing to smile at people with her teeth—this warm-hearted, brave and funny memoir is her way of tapping readers on the head, encouraging us. You can keep going. You are part of the club. You are not alone.

—Kelly Blewett

★ On Animals

By Susan Orlean

Essays

“Well, for heaven’s sake, Susie,” Susan Orlean’s mother once told her. “You and your *animals*.”

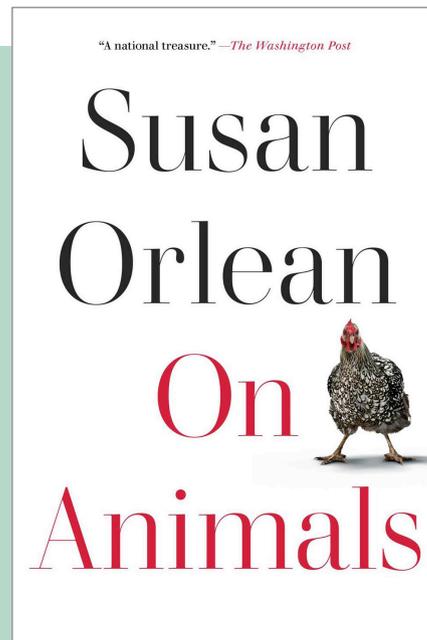
Orlean has garnered well-earned acclaim writing about a slew of unlikely subjects, including orchid lovers, libraries, Saturday nights and more. However, she writes, “somehow or other, in whatever kind of life I happened to be leading, animals have always been my style. They have been a part of my life even when I didn’t have any animals, and when I did have them, they always seemed to elbow their way onto center stage.”

Regardless of whether you’re an animal lover, **On Animals** (Avid Reader, \$28, 9781982181536) is a fabulously fun collection of essays, most of which first appeared in *The New Yorker*, where Orlean is a staff writer. “Lady and the Tiger,” for instance, tells the story of Joan Byron-Marasek, who collected tigers on her Jackson, New Jersey, property—well before Netflix’s “Tiger King.” Tiger hoarding, it seems, is a thing, and Byron-Marasek had lost track of exactly how many she owned when a Bengal

tiger weighing more than 400 pounds was seen walking through the nearby suburbs.

Orlean is such a virtuoso of unexpected joys and delights that she can make even the story of a lost dog read like a thriller, as she does with the unlikely dognapping tale of a border collie in Atlanta. When writing about a champion boxer named Biff in “Show Dog,” her trademark humor shines through right from the start: “If I were a bitch, I’d be in love with Biff Truesdale. Biff is perfect. He’s friendly, good-looking, rich, famous, and in excellent physical condition. He almost never drools.”

In “Lion Whisperer,” Orlean profiles South African Kevin Richardson, who bonds with lions as cubs, cuddling and cultivating relationships through their adulthood, at which point they seem to accept him “on some special terms, as if he were an odd, furless, human-shaped member of their pride.” The essay blossoms into an especially



intriguing tale with serious ethical concerns, which seasoned journalist Orlean duly explores. Her style seems meandering at times, but each essay always returns to its glorious point, even when following an aside about, in this case, a man who befriended a housefly named Freddie.

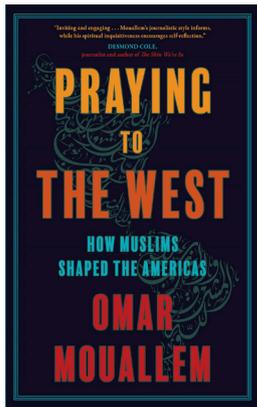
Whether she’s encountering a donkey laden with four televisions in Morocco, or extolling the global appeal of pandas, Orlean’s high-octane enthusiasm never wanes. After all, this is a woman

who admits, “One day, I went to CVS to buy shampoo and came home with four guinea fowl thanks to a ‘For Sale’ sign I passed as I was driving home.” Likewise, Orlean’s readers will find themselves completely diverted by **On Animals’** irresistible menagerie.

—Alice Cary

★ Praying to the West

By Omar Mouallem



Social Science

The structure destined to become the Midnight Sun Mosque in Canada’s Northwest Territories had to be transported 2,800 miles from Winnipeg to Inuvik, much of it by barge. It’s now the worship house for some 100 Muslims, mostly men who were

displaced from conflict zones and now drive taxis among the Inuit. They spend their spare time operating a much-needed community food bank.

On the other end of the North American continent is the Ahmadiyya mosque in Chiapas, Mexico. It’s run by a Mayan Indian, a former evangelical Christian and Zapatista leftist who got involved in Islam via a Sufi imam from an offbeat mosque in Spain founded by a Scottish hippie.

Neither fits the stereotype of a mosque that so many non-Muslim North Americans have. That’s exactly the point of Omar Mouallem’s absorbing **Praying to the West: How Muslims Shaped the Americas** (Simon & Schuster, \$27, 9781501199141), which explores the Muslim population of the Americas in all its staggering diversity.

Mouallem, a Canadian of Lebanese descent who grew up in a Muslim family but whose personal feelings about Islam became complicated as an adult, examines his own inner turmoil as he visits 13 mosques. They’re incredibly varied but fall roughly into two groups: communities founded by Muslim immigrants, like the Islamic Society of Greater Houston, and more idiosyncratic movements begun by non-Muslims, like the Nation of Islam.

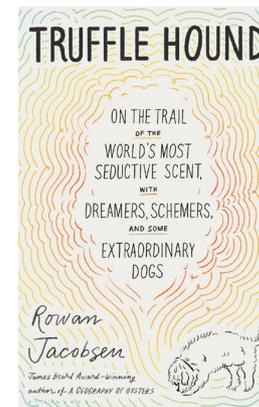
The immigrant experience described by Mouallem will sound familiar to many Americans: the desire by the first generation to assimilate, followed by a rediscovery of roots by their children, then a more eclectic approach by grandchildren. The mosques he visits reflect these different relationships to assimilation. One early Muslim community, founded by Lebanese peddlers in North Dakota, for example, is now nearly indistinguishable from its Christian neighbors. Other, newer mosques have experienced more turbulence as they’ve acclimatized to their communities, such as a Quebec mosque that was the scene of a horrific massacre by a white man in 2017 and still has to employ tight security measures to protect itself.

Mouallem seems most attracted to Unity Mosque, which is open to all traditions and welcomes gay people and female faith leaders. He suspects North America will lead the way as Islam evolves, but regardless of whether that happens, his book has made it impossible not to see this faith tradition’s rich complexity.

—Anne Bartlett

Truffle Hound

By Rowan Jacobsen



Food

A single whiff of a truffle can be nearly intoxicating. Depending on the variety, the inhaler might detect notes of garlic, fried cheese and gym socks (white truffles) or pineapple and banana (a young Oregon black). And one person sniffing

may find those aromas enticing, while another might not understand the fuss.

Those fragrances, and the allure of the fungi that produce them, left James Beard Award-winning food writer Rowan Jacobsen (*A Geography of Oysters*) drunk on truffles and determined to learn all he could. Jacobsen spent two years traversing the globe in pursuit of not only truffles but also the stories of people who hunt and sell them.

The result is **Truffle Hound: On the Trail of the World’s Most Seductive Scent, With Dreamers, Schemers, and Some Extraordinary Dogs** (Bloomsbury, \$28, 9781635575194), an engaging work that blends history with travel and food writing. Jacobsen follows his nose and curiosity across Europe and back to North America, while

considering studies that extend even farther. He meets hunters and farmers whose livelihoods depend on the elusive tubers, and along the way he challenges truffle myths.

Jacobsen delves into the sometimes twisting history of this food, as well as into the science that makes truffle farming possible. Even as he examines the fungi's complex history and analyzes questions about who gets access to truffles, Jacobsen's writing remains accessible, unlike the costly object of his desire.

Truffle Hound is a compelling story, but Jacobsen doesn't leave readers empty-handed when the tale ends. The book also includes a glossary of truffle types, resources for acquiring your own truffles and recipes for after the decadent fungi arrives. It's an appropriate finish to a delicious book.

—Carla Jean Whitley

★ The Right to Sex

By Amia Srinivasan



Social Science

In **The Right to Sex** (FSG, \$28, 9780374248529), Amia Srinivasan, a professor of social and political theory at All Souls College at the University of Oxford, engages with some of the most complex hot-button cultural issues to emerge

around sex and consent in the 21st century. With intelligence and clarity, Srinivasan unpacks the moral and philosophical underpinnings of such topics as false rape accusations, pornography and teacher-student relationships, making her book an invaluable companion for readers interested in nuanced analysis rather than hasty clickbait.

The book emerged from Srinivasan's 2018 essay "The Right to Sex," which considered the case of Elliot Rodger, the killer whose deadly rampage at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 2014 was supposedly motivated by his status as an "incel," or involuntary celibate. Rodger's assumption that he was somehow "owed" sex from women has proven to be a toxic influence on some social media platforms. In considering this case, Srinivasan moves her argument in unexpected directions to ask ever larger and harder philosophical questions: While there is no "right" to demand sex from other people, how should we think about desirability as a concept? Why are some bodies seen as desirable and others aren't? How is desirability a political concept, shaped by popular culture?

In other essays, Srinivasan provides a helpful survey of the history of feminist responses to pornography, which range widely from the anti-porn

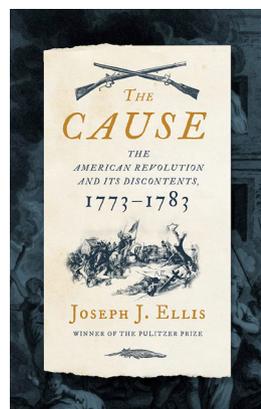
feminism of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon in the 1970s and '80s to the more pro-sex pleasure activists of the 1990s. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Srinivasan opens up these issues beyond their original contexts to engage with them in a contemporary setting. To this end, Srinivasan's classroom of undergraduates at Oxford becomes a kind of testing ground for how young people think about pornography and the influence it has had on them as the first fully digital generation.

With articulate precision, Srinivasan's timely book offers readers a lucid and compelling guide to thinking philosophically about sex and power.

—Catherine Hollis

★ The Cause

By Joseph J. Ellis



American History

No one called it the "American Revolution" while it was happening. The British spoke of the American rebellion. Those protesting in the colonies merely called it "the Cause" and insisted they were not engaged in revolution. Even now,

the question of whether it was a true revolution remains controversial.

Pulitzer Prize-winning and bestselling historian Joseph J. Ellis superbly captures the issues, personalities and events of the American Revolution from the perspectives of both England and the colonists in his eminently readable **The Cause: The American Revolution and Its Discontents, 1773-1783** (Liveright, \$30, 9781631498985). Using rigorous scholarship, Ellis offers vivid portraits of and penetrating insights about this period in history, while challenging our conventional understandings of it.

For the British, Ellis argues, the defining issue was power, not money. Imposing new taxes on the colonies was a way to establish parliamentary sovereignty, not to reduce the debt they accumulated during the Seven Years' War. Trade with the American colonies was lucrative for Britain, after all, and any taxation policy that put their trade relationship at risk would have been too costly.

Also counter to the narrative we usually hear, those early colonial Americans had a conservative character. From their perspective, the British were more revolutionary than they were. Britain was causing revolutionary change by taxing colonists without their consent, and even then, no American delegate to the first Continental Congress advocated for independence.

Likewise, John Trumbull's famous painting, "The Declaration of Independence," depicts an event

that never happened. Thomas Jefferson wrote the original version on his own, then Congress made 85 specific changes to Jefferson's draft, revising or deleting slightly more than 20% of the text. The final version was sent to the printer on July 4, and the printer put that date on the published version. Most delegates actually signed it on August 2, although there was no single signing day.

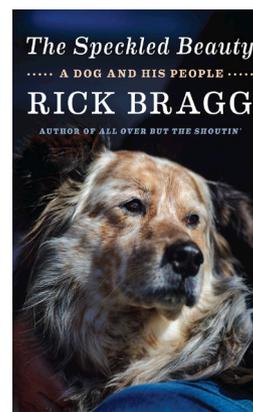
By the end of the war, a majority of Americans felt that the creation of a nation-state was a distortion of the Cause. George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, among others, were outliers, not leaders of the dominant opinion.

This riveting, highly recommended book by one of America's major historians will change how you see the American Revolution.

—Roger Bishop

★ The Speckled Beauty

By Rick Bragg



Memoir

Sit down, pull up a chair (or pick a spot under your favorite tree) and smile as Rick Bragg spins his mesmerizing tales of life down South with characteristically wry humor and wisdom. A paean to his terrible good dog, Speck, **The Speckled Beauty: A**

Dog and His People (Knopf, \$26, 9780525658818) offers a knowing and humane meditation on the devotion of a man to his dog and a dog to his man.

Bragg first found Speck among a pack of strays eating trash in the middle of the road; when he approached the pack, the other dogs scattered, but Speck lingered, and so Bragg took him in. Speck's mismatched eyes—a light brown left eye and an almost solid blue-black right eye—"did not ruin his face; they just made him look like the pirate he is." Bragg wasn't looking for a dog when he found Speck, and even if he had been, this isn't the one he might have expected. "I had in mind a fat dog," he writes, "a gentle plodder that only slobbered an acceptable amount and would not chase a car even if the trunk was packed with pork chops."

Yet, *this dog*—who chases cars, drinks from the toilet and rounds up jackasses—has a story, and Bragg tells it with all the "exaggeration and adjustment" of a rattling good storyteller. Bragg weaves his own stories of health challenges and his brother's cancer diagnosis throughout Speck's journey, as the two take care of each other in the wilds of rural Alabama. Bragg concludes that Speck "just wants some people of his own, and some snacks, because a dog gets used to things like that. . . . And, when the weather turns bad, he wants someone to come let him in, when the thunder shakes the

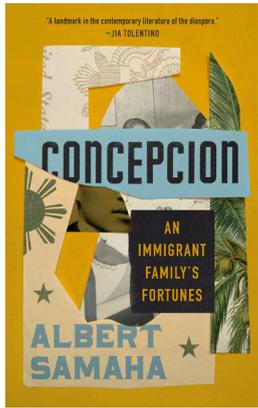
mountain, when the lightning flash reveals that he was just a dog all this time.”

The Speckled Beauty takes its place beside Willie Morris’ *My Dog Skip*, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings’ animal narratives and William Faulkner’s dog stories—as well as all those short tales of devoted dogs in *Field & Stream*—confirming once more Bragg’s enduring artfulness and cracking good ability to spin memorable, affectionate tales.

—Henry L. Carrigan Jr.

Concepcion

By Albert Samaha



Family History

A diligent reader might begin this absorbing journey into an immigrant family’s fortunes, made and lost, by seeking the meaning of its title, **Concepcion** (Riverhead, \$28, 9780593086087). They would discover that, like the generations

revealed in Albert Samaha’s probing account, the answer isn’t simple. **Concepcion** is the surname of Samaha’s ancestors, the name of one of Ferdinand Magellan’s ships, a city in the Philippines and a word that aptly suggests a beginning.

Now nearing the same age as his mother, Lucy, when she first arrived in California, Samaha wants to understand what led her there. If Lucy was initially blinded by the promises of a country that held sway over her comfortable middle-class life in the Philippines, he wonders, how does she feel now? How have his other family members fared within the diaspora in the U.S., and how do they regard their ties to their homeland? Their answers are surprising and complex.

Samaha writes from the perspective of a successful, educated and skeptical American adult, declaring, “I found it easier to see what my elders could not: the height of the climb and the length of the fall.” Applying his skills as an investigative journalist to his family’s far-reaching saga, he filters their experiences as immigrants through the Philippines’ tumultuous history and the effects of their acquired American culture. It’s a deftly executed back-and-forth, and he shares his own enlightenments—and criticisms—as he goes. The role of race in the history of the National Football League and the influence of religion on political preferences are among his targets.

Samaha’s deep dive into Philippine history begins with Magellan’s colonization of the Philippines in the 1500s, flows through the centuries to Ferdinand Marcos’ long, controversial reign as the 10th president of the Philippines, and ends with Rodrigo Duterte’s current iron grip. Japan’s

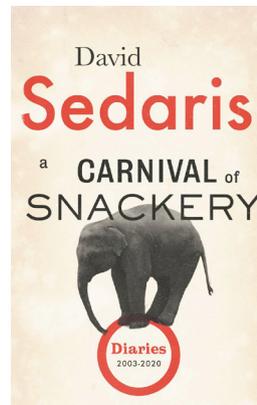
brutal occupation during World War II led to a U.S. takeover (the spoils of victory), and America has loomed large as a land of opportunity ever since. When U.S. immigration rules relaxed in 1965, Filipinos knew where to go.

Now, having benefited from his mother’s years of devotion and hard work, his absent father’s money and the support of their larger family in the Bay Area, Samaha is sensitive to their struggles amid what he sees as the failed promises, economic inequities and racial injustices of their adopted country. From the disadvantages of their lower paying jobs—such as his uncle’s work as an airport baggage handler after abandoning his career as a rock star in the Philippines—to their resilient, steadfast beliefs in democracy’s ideals despite its failings, Samaha plants their stories alongside his own and grows a remarkable family tree.

—Priscilla Kipp

★ A Carnival of Snackery

By David Sedaris



Memoir

It’s a curious prospect, reviewing a book composed of journal entries. A journal is typically a writer’s innermost private thoughts, which should be beyond a critic’s purview. Many lives have mundane periods, so it seems unfair to deduct points

for lack of action. And when the author of the journal is humor writer David Sedaris, the book critic wonders how many of these tales are actually real. All this is to say that **A Carnival of Snackery** (Little, Brown, \$32, 9780316558792) is a difficult book to review. Sedaris shares nearly 600 pages of his diary entries from 2003 to 2020, and the emotions they provoke run the entire gamut.

Sedaris’ political musings span from post-9/11 to the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a globe-trotting author, he brings an outsider’s perspective to many historical moments. But his personal entries are the more touching ones. Sedaris is best known for his humor essays, in which his eccentric Greek American family members often appear. But **A Carnival of Snackery** invites the reader to share his family’s heartbreak and losses, too. Sedaris’ thoughts about his estrangement from his sister Tiffany, her eventual suicide and his difficult relationship with his conservative and judgmental father (complicated by Donald Trump’s presidency) are woven among his lighter entries.

There are plenty of laughs to be had as well; one of the reasons readers love Sedaris is that he’s the first person to laugh at himself. This remains true in **A Carnival of Snackery**, especially as the

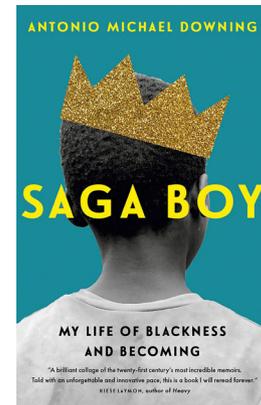
bestselling author comes to grips with his late-in-life wealth. Sedaris tours constantly to promote his books, and several entries recount jokes that audience members have shared at book signings. A few of these jokes may be considered tasteless, but many will have you giggling in spite of yourself.

There is plenty in **A Carnival of Snackery** that longtime Sedaris fans will love.

—Jessica Wakeman

Saga Boy

By Antonio Michael Downing



Memoir

Hurling down the blind curves and treacherous twists and turns of family dysfunction and social displacement, Antonio Michael Downing searches for himself among the cultural clutter of sports, religion and music.

Combining staccato prose and singsong storytelling, Downing’s **Saga Boy: My Life of Blackness and Becoming** (Milkweed, \$25, 9781571311917) navigates loneliness, uncertainty, fear, hopelessness and hunger.

Downing grew up in Trinidad with his grandmother, Miss Excellly, dreaming of mango season. She taught him two important things: how to sing and “the magic of the Queen’s English.” While his childhood was not idyllic, Downing felt safe with his grandmother and her love. When Miss Excellly died, however, he and his brother were shipped off to Canada to live with an aunt, and thus began a peripatetic lifestyle marked by a lack of security or family love.

Downing was shuttled between aunts in Canada. He never quite fit in at any particular place, though he valiantly threw himself into basketball and music in high school. He eventually recovered his love for language and writing at the University of Waterloo and put together a show with an artist friend who painted scenes from a short story Downing wrote. That experience gave birth to DJ Mic Dainjay, Downing’s alter ego that he used as a performer during a time when he was also working at Blackberry as a sales representative. Today he performs music as John Orpheus.

Downing’s heart-wrenching memoir chronicles his saga of trying on and casting off many masks, learning the dimensions of the face through which he sees the world and the world sees him. As he writes, “This is a story about unbelonging, about placeness, about leaving everything behind. This is a story about metamorphosis: death and rebirth. . . . This is a story about family and forgiveness. About becoming what you always were.”

—Henry L. Carrigan Jr.

★ Squad

By Maggie Tokuda-Hall
Illustrated by Lisa Sterle

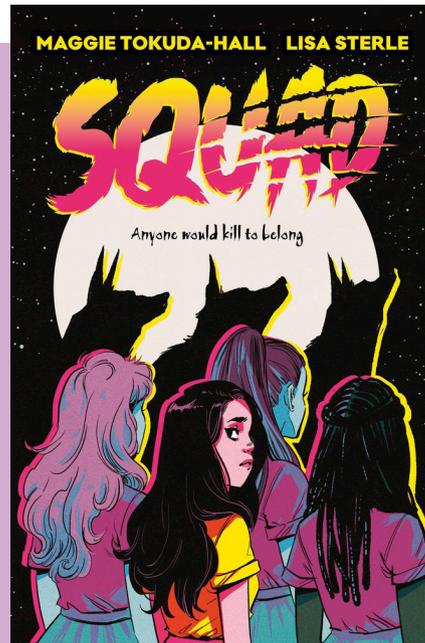
Graphic Novel

High school junior Becca has always been bookish and smart, the kind of girl no one really notices. So on her very first day at Piedmont High School, she's surprised when she draws the attention of beautiful Marley and her megacool friends, and she can't quite believe their interest in her is authentic. Granted, Arianna can be a little blunt, and Amanda and Marley make not-so-subtle attempts to tweak Becca's personal style to match their own, but they all seem to genuinely enjoy spending time with her. But when they take her to a party, Becca realizes in the most disconcerting way possible that Marley's clique isn't a squad—it's more like a pack.

Author Maggie Tokuda-Hall upends many classic werewolf tropes in **Squad** (Greenwillow, \$14.99, 9780062943149), her first graphic novel. Werewolves are typically hairy and muscular,

but they're also governed by the full moon, and Tokuda-Hall imbues them with feminine power. **Squad** is a revenge narrative and a quasi fable about consent, but beneath its supernatural premise, it's also a classic teen drama that will disrupt readers' assumptions about fashion-conscious teenage girls.

Illustrator Lisa Sterle's bold, energetic artwork perfectly complements the novel's themes of friendship, loyalty, betrayal and the possibility of love. Her palette ranges from muted jewel tones in nighttime scenes to rich reds as bright and bold as blood. Her depictions of the werewolves are particularly skillful, as she uses color and shape to connect each girl's human and wolf forms. The book's layouts are varied and dynamic, with small panel groupings occasionally interrupted by spreads that highlight moments



might not be precisely what they seem.

—Norah Piehl



Visit BookPage.com to read our Q&A with Maggie Tokuda-Hall and Lisa Sterle.

★ Black Birds in the Sky

By Brandy Colbert



History

On June 1, 1921, a mob of white people descended on the Greenwood district of Tulsa, Oklahoma, known as “Black Wall Street.” They killed hundreds of Black residents and bombed, burned and otherwise laid waste to a neighborhood that spanned

35 blocks. In **Black Birds in the Sky: The Story and Legacy of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre** (Balzer + Bray, \$19.99, 9780063056664), author Brandy Colbert recounts this history for teen readers and shows how its echoes continue to reverberate today.

As she does in her middle grade and young adult fiction, Colbert draws readers into Greenwood with vibrant, richly detailed imagery. Its Black residents built their own economy from the ground up. They could not freely choose where to spend their money in the wider region, but as it recirculated within Greenwood, it created a booming business community. Colbert captures a sense of lively growth that makes the neighborhood's eventual destruction hit home with visceral impact.

Poor white Tulsans' feelings of grievance and jealousy were factors that led to the massacre, and some local media outlets escalated tensions

through false, inflammatory reporting. As the violence spread, the police and the National Guard aided white vigilantes by imprisoning Black residents in internment camps. A grand jury investigation later blamed Black men for inciting violence when they had actually been trying to stop it.

Colbert's meticulous research holds the book together. Informative sidebars add vital context and will help readers make sense of an almost incomprehensible crime that was driven by white supremacy. A chilling postscript explores efforts to bury this history and the ongoing resistance to its revival. **Black Birds in the Sky** tells the truth about an event that every American should know about. It's a horrifying account told with great care.

—Heather Seggel

All These Bodies

By Kendare Blake



Mystery

It's 1958, and a serial killer is targeting the Midwest. Their crimes are dubbed the Bloodless Murders, because the victims are all found exsanguinated. When the Carlson family is murdered in a small Minnesota town, local police find a teenage girl, Marie Catherine Hale, in the Carlson home,

drenched in their blood. They charge her as an accomplice, certain that she couldn't have carried out the murders on her own. But Marie refuses to talk to anyone but the sheriff's son. Michael Jensen is an aspiring reporter and a receptive ear for the tale Marie has to tell, even if the townsfolk resent him for it. As Michael falls for Marie, he struggles to be both her confessor and her savior.

All These Bodies (Quill Tree, \$18.99, 9780062977168) is narrated by Michael, so readers only see Marie through his eyes. Her confession is rife with deflections and uncertainty. It's clear that she has experienced trauma, though she is sparing with information about herself. Readers will more readily connect with Michael's best friend, Percy, who supports Michael's dream of escaping their small town. The two share a deep bond, and Percy is vehemently protective of Michael, sometimes at a great personal cost.

Author Kendare Blake is best known for her paranormal horror novel *Anna Dressed in Blood* and her dark fantasy series, *Three Dark Crowns*. **All These Bodies**, a historical mystery with touches of gothic fiction, crime and the paranormal, is a notable departure for her. Blake is sparse with historical details, which keeps the story moving but can also make its 1950s setting seem arbitrary. However, her depiction of Marie's misogynist treatment by the press feels both accurate to the period and ripped from contemporary headlines. Readers who enjoy mysteries heavy with ambiguity and light on spelled-out solutions should plan for Blake to keep them reading well past bedtime.

—Kimberly Giarratano

SOMETHING WITCHY THIS WAY COMES

The curses of adolescence are no match for the girl power on display in these YA novels.

Coming-of-age goes supernatural in three spellbinding YA books featuring teen witches with amazing abilities and major magic.

In Laura Sibson's **Edie in Between** (Viking, \$18.99, 9780451481146), Edie Mitchell treasures the silver acorn pendant her mother gave her, but she avoids nearly every other aspect of her heritage. Edie comes from a long line of witches, but the 17-year-old considers magic something to be avoided rather than embraced.

Since her mother's recent death, Edie has been living with her grandmother, GG, in the small town of Cedar Branch, where she refuses to touch the herbs and small bones hanging in the kitchen or interact with the inquisitive ghosts of her ancestors who like to float around the houseboat they share with a cat named Temperance. Her mother is a ghostly presence, too, but Edie won't chat with her like GG does; she's "a constant reminder of what I've lost."

Edie manages her longing for her former Baltimore home and her uncertainty about the future by going on daily runs with her new friend, Tess. But when a threatening force is accidentally roused, Edie's reluctance to embrace magic becomes a liability. She must get up to speed on her powers before something terrible befalls her and those she cares about—including the beautiful and appealing Rhia, an aspiring witch who's delighted to share with Edie what she's learned about magic thus far.

The discovery of her mom's old journal proves pivotal to Edie's rushed education. Each entry hints at something Edie must find or do and opens a window into her mother's life before she became pregnant with Edie. Sibson (*The Art of Breaking Things*) draws the past into the present with empathy and skill, respecting the pain of Edie's grief while allowing her to know her mother in a way she might not have otherwise. **Edie in Between** is a winning portrait of a girl's evolution from embarrassment to openly embracing what makes her different, including celebrating her magical kinship with the witches who came before her.

When 17-year-old seamstress Frances Hallowell discovers her powers in **The Witch Haven** (Simon & Schuster, \$19.99, 9781534454385), she is horrified, relieved and hopeful. It's 1911 in New York City, and after a violent attack on her life, Frances is appalled to realize she may have killed her attacker with her emotions. Thankfully, two nurses suddenly appear and whisk her away to Haxahaven Sanitarium, helping her avoid police suspicion and catapulting her into an astonishing new chapter of her life.

That's because the nurses are witches and Haxahaven isn't a medical facility. Instead, it's a 200-year-old school for the magical, complete with dramatic architecture, noisy dining hall and imperious headmistress. Now that Frances' powers have been awakened, Haxahaven will help her use them for good.

And that's where the hopefulness comes in, as magic holds both the promise of a better future and the solution to a more immediate problem: Can Frances' new powers help her find out what happened to her brother, William, who was found dead in the East River four months ago?

Her grief is ever-present—"like a punch to the gut fifty times a day"—as is her desire to solve his murder and prevent others from suffering as he did.

Debut author Sasha Peyton Smith has created a compelling character in Frances. She's smart and often funny, impulsive and occasionally frustrating as she makes decisions born of naivete and desperation, often with new friends Maxine and Lena in tow. The arrival of William's friend Finn offers a way for Frances to learn meaningful magic (disappointingly, *Haxahaven* focuses on house-keeping-centric spells) and to investigate William's death. There's romantic potential between them, too, but Finn belongs to a gentlemen's club full of power-hungry wizards. Should she judge him by the company he keeps?

The Witch Haven is an immersive excursion into early 20th-century New York City. Beneath the grit and darkness of the period, Smith layers in a supernatural underworld that intrigues Frances as much as it endangers her. The result is an atmospheric and mystical adventure that offers a realistic exploration of grief and a memorable take on coming-of-age tropes.

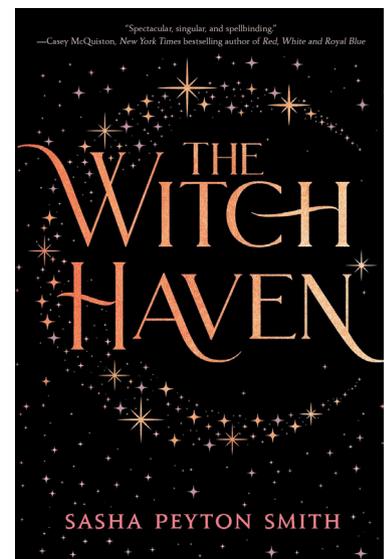
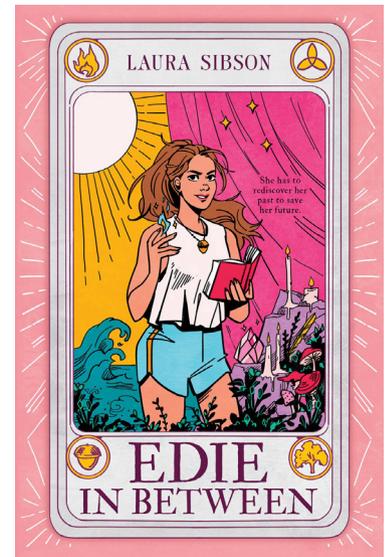
Katrell Davis suffers greatly in debut author Jessica Lewis' **Bad Witch Burning** (Delacorte, \$17.99, 9780593177389), enduring wrenching emotional pain, violent beatings and overwhelming exhaustion. Even so, the 16-year-old stubbornly insists on survival even when her options are meager and dangerous. She works 30 hours a week at a burger joint, trying to pay the rent and bills for the decrepit townhouse where she lives with her neglectful mother and her mother's abusive boyfriend, Gerald. She has a side gig, too: Using her magical powers, she conjures up her clients' dead relatives, even though it causes her physical pain.

Her best friend, Will, loves to chat with her late grandma Clara, who warns Katrell that she must stop her seances: "You'll burn down not only yourself, but everyone and everything around you." Katrell pays Clara no mind; she's got work to do. But when her hours at the burger joint are cut and Gerald kills her dog, Katrell's anguish and rage burn hotter than ever, leading her to discover an even more powerful ability than merely communing with the dead. So what if people are crawling out of their graves and walking around? It's a huge risk, but Katrell will figure it out, and she'll monetize it.

A series of resurrections earns her more cash than she's ever had—but more attention, too. As threatening types close in and Katrell realizes her powers aren't completely under her control, Lewis' story becomes an even wilder ride, its horror tinged with the darkest of humor as Katrell's life hangs in the balance.

Bad Witch Burning is a powerful debut, a moving gift of a story from a writer who, per an author's note included with advance editions of the book, worked through her own valid anger and emerged stronger on the other side to create a book "for girls who need to scream but smile instead." It's an exciting, harrowing supernatural tale filled with thrills, poignancy and heart.

—Linda M. Castelletto



R.J. Palacio is learning to embrace life's mysteries

The bestselling author of *Wonder* reveals why she had to throw her new novel away (literally) in order to unlock the key to writing it.

It's difficult to think of a bigger children's literature success story from the past decade than R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*. The emotional tale about the importance of kindness has sold more than 12 million copies since it was published in 2012 and still regularly earns a spot on bestseller lists. In *Pony*, Palacio creates a very different tale: a slim, taut odyssey set in the American Midwest in 1860, anchored by a young boy named Silas, whom readers will find as irresistible as Auggie.

Could you start by introducing us to Silas and Pa?

Silas is a 12-year-old boy growing up in an isolated house on the American frontier. He's being lovingly raised by his widowed father, Martin, who's an inventor and something of a genius, with only 16-year-old Mittenwool, whom no one else can see or hear, for a companion. Silas, it turns out, can see ghosts.

The story opens when three horsemen storm their little house in the middle of the night and take Pa away. Silas is left alone and quite shaken, so when the white-faced pony that one of the men had been leading shows up on his doorstep the next day, Silas takes it as a sign from the universe that he has to ride the pony in search of his father. Mittenwool, who is very protective of Silas, tries to talk him out of it, but Silas is determined to go.

The book is called *Pony*, so I have to ask: Do you ride? Do you like horses?

I love horses! When I was little, I used to draw them all the time. I would doodle them in my notebooks. I was obsessed—so much so that my parents got me horseback riding lessons when I was about 8 years old. Imagine two Colombian immigrants shelling out money they didn't have so they could give their daughter weekly riding lessons in Flushing, New York. It was kind of crazy, but they did it. I only took lessons for a few years, and no, I don't have a horse now or ride. I can still draw horses, though!

Family history, revealed in pieces over time, is such an important motif in *Pony*. Did any of your family's stories inspire Silas' story?

The whole story of *Pony* was sparked by a scary dream my older son had when he was young. The events of the dream are different, but the imagery was taken right out of his head.

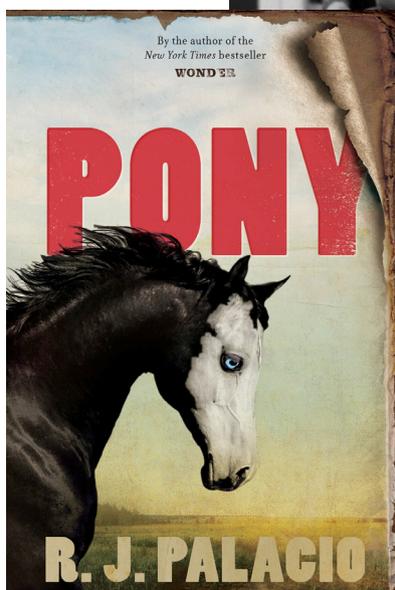
I had my father in my mind when describing Martin. My dad was easily the most brilliant person I've ever known, an encyclopedia of knowledge. He could build anything, make anything, remember everything. He was the kind of father who would wake me up in the middle of the night so we could go up to the roof of our building to watch a meteor shower.

And of course, my mother is someone I speak with every day, even though she's been gone for almost 20 years. We hold the people we love close to us, no matter where they are. I think of this book as a love letter to my mom and dad.

How did you develop the rules for the novel's ghosts?

Silas sees and experiences the ghosts in *Pony* as they see and experience themselves. If they wear the wounds of their deaths, that's how he sees them. If they don't know they're dead, Silas also doesn't know they're dead.

As to why some people stay behind and some don't, Silas doesn't know, and neither do they. He guesses that some people are more ready to go than



Pony
Knopf, \$17.99, 9780553508116
Ages 10 and up

Middle Grade



Visit [BookPage.com](https://www.bookpage.com) to read our starred review of *Pony*.

others. Some people may have things they still want to see through. But in time, when they're ready, they pass on. Everyone does eventually. Which is what I wanted to say: People leave us, but not forever.

Do you believe in ghosts? Have you ever had an encounter with something you couldn't explain?

I've never seen a ghost, but I've experienced a sense of connection with loved ones who are no longer here. Whether that's internal or external, whether there's a science to it or it's just wishful thinking, I can't tell you. I don't know.

That's part of the mystery of life, which is what this book is about. Silas learns to embrace the mysteries.

Pony features incredible old photographs throughout the book. You discuss these in your author's note, but can you tell us a little bit about them here?

This book takes place during the dawn of early photography. New processes were being invented all over the world. People were experimenting with the incredible notion of being able to use sunlight and a mix of chemicals to freeze an image onto glass or paper. It's pretty extraordinary! Silas' father is one of those early tinkerers and invents a new form of photography.

I've had a daguerreotype collection for years, long before I wrote this book. I've always been drawn to old cameras and photographs in flea markets and antiques shops. As I was writing, faces from my collection would come to me. They helped form the characters in my mind. Ultimately, as I designed the book, I decided to use the images that literally inspired the characters as chapter openers.

In addition to your passion for old photographs, do you enjoy photography yourself?

I was a photographer for my school yearbook in middle school, which is when I got my first Pentax K1000 camera, and I've been hooked ever since. I love taking

photographs on film, but I shoot digitally now, though I do miss the feeling of processing a latent image in a darkroom.

Your author's note begins, "I spent many years researching this book, and I hope none of it shows." Authors are often asked to discuss their research process, but instead, I want to ask you: Can you tell us about the work you did to hide all that research?

I was 400 pages into the first draft of **Pony**, which represented about two years of work, when I realized it wasn't the book I wanted to write. I had so many notes, so much information. I knew how many miles and hours an Arabian horse could ride in a day. I knew their provenance, the name of the Bedouin tribe that Pony had come from. I knew the different photographic processes, what kind of lanterns were used, the names of real counterfeiters, the types of horse carts that were driven. I had topographic maps of the woods and the ravines and, well, so much!

I had a vision in my mind about the kind of novel I wanted **Pony** to be: a "quick epic." That first draft, had I continued it, would have turned into a James Michener novel! So I literally threw it away. And I do mean that literally. But the story stayed with me, even as I worked on other projects. I knew I'd figure out a way to write it with the minimalism I had in my head for it.

"If you answer every question, you ruin the mystery for the reader. We can't see everything in the dark. We see only what we shine a light on."

After years had passed, I suddenly had a vision for how to approach it. I realized that I'd remembered all the essential parts of the research I'd done and forgotten what wasn't important. The research had settled into the recesses of my mind, and that's what made its way into the book. The woods became the Woods. The ravine was the Ravine. The only map of the world I needed was the one in Silas' mind. That's not to say the world wasn't built, because it was—utterly and completely—but it didn't need to be fully described.

The world is full of mysterious pockets and unexplainable and unfathomable crevices. That's the kind of world I wanted to build. If you answer every question, you ruin the mystery for the reader. We can't see everything in the dark. We see only what we shine a light on. That's what I was trying to do here.

I kept saying I wanted to write **Pony** almost like it was a radio play, just voices in the dark, and then during lockdown, it started flowing out of me one day. It was a remarkable writing experience.

Your note also says, "Historical novels can be seen as road maps through history, but this book is more like a river running through it." I love this metaphor. What were the challenges of telling a story with such a tight focus? What was rewarding about it?

It was really challenging to tell a story with as few words as you can. I kept trying to strip every sentence of words. Paragraphs. Pages. I wanted to get everything down to the bare minimum: enough to deliver an idea of the world, describe a linear sequence of events, and let the story almost tell itself. In that way, the narrative felt more like a river. It's just barreling through. Going in one direction. And that's all the reader gets.

Now, as the river passes through, we get the idea that it's passing through other stories. We know there's a lot going on with the other characters. The picaresque adventures of Chalfont and Beautyman, two characters Silas meets along his journey, could fill their own novel! But, see, that would have been part of that original epic I had started to write. It's not the epic I wanted to write, though.

The final version of **Pony** really is the closest I could get to the image in my head of what I wanted to do. Good or bad, right or wrong: It's faithful to the image.

—Jill Ratzan

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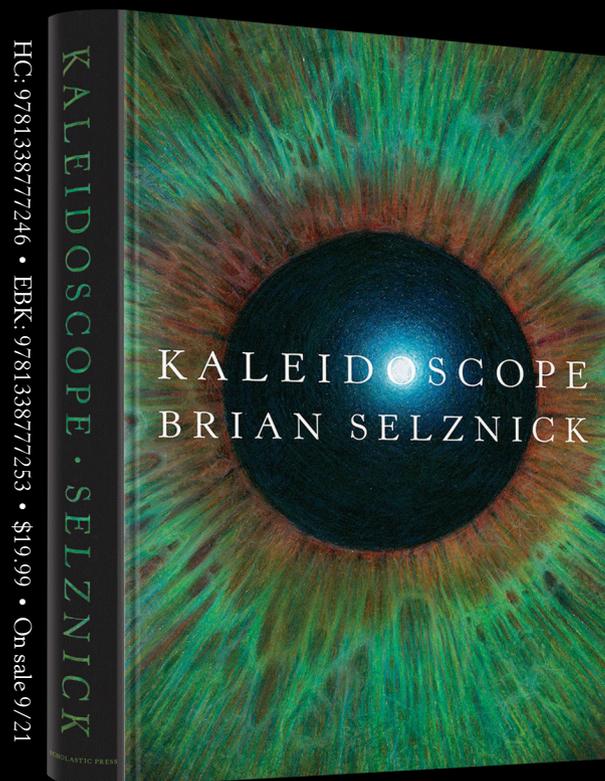
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★ The Beatryce Prophecy

By Kate DiCamillo

Illustrated by Sophie Blackall

Middle Grade

In a return to the fantasy genre of her Newbery Medal-winning *The Tale of Despereaux*, author Kate DiCamillo spins the tale of a young girl named Beatryce, who is discovered in a monastery barn in the company of an unlikely source of comfort: a frighteningly ornery goat named Answelica.

Feverish and crying, Beatryce is found by a kind-hearted monk named Brother Edik, who has foretold that a child “will unseat a king.” Because the prophecy specifies that the child will be a girl, the message “has long been ignored.” So begins the marvelous story of Beatryce, Answelica, Brother Edik and Jack Dory, a lively and illiterate orphan. Brother Edik learns that Beatryce’s mother taught her to read and write, a rarity at a time when even boys aren’t often taught such skills. Meanwhile, the king and his henchmen are trying to track down Beatryce. The story quickly becomes a suspenseful, fast-moving

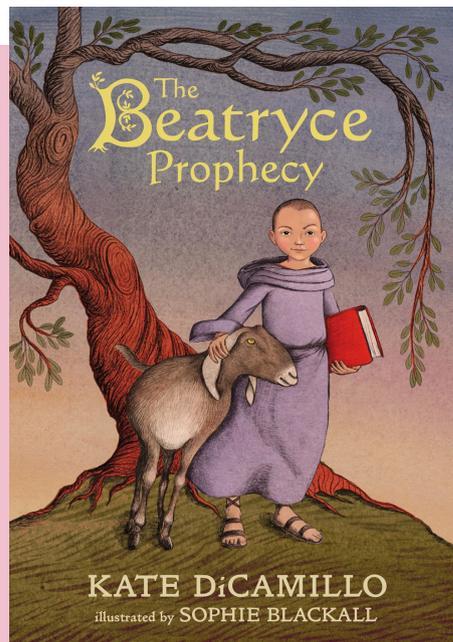
tale of female empowerment and an ode to the written word and the power of love, all told in DiCamillo’s signature heartfelt style.

DiCamillo is often at her best when writing about animals, and Answelica is an unforgettable wonder as memorable as Winn-Dixie the dog and Ulysses the squirrel. In the beautifully spare prose that has become one of her hallmarks, DiCamillo poses big questions, such as “What does it mean to be brave?” and invites readers to discover their own answers.

The Beatryce Prophecy

(Candlewick, \$19.99, 9781536213614, ages 8 to 12) is full of dark forces, but hope and love prevail, and Beatryce comes to understand that the world is “filled with marvel upon marvel, too many marvels to ever count.”

Two-time Caldecott Medalist Sophie Blackall brings DiCamillo’s ragtag band of characters to life



in joyful, energetic black-and-white illustrations. She establishes the powerful bond between Beatryce and Answelica from the start in a radiant mangerlike scene that wouldn’t be out of place on a holiday greeting card. The book’s medieval atmosphere is underscored by a series of illuminated letters that begin each chapter, and additional decorative flourishes throughout remind readers that this is indeed a special tale with a distinctive setting.

The Beatryce Prophecy is certain to be cherished.

“What does, then, change the world?” DiCamillo’s omniscient narrator asks. The answer is as masterful as DiCamillo and Blackall’s creation: “Love, and also stories.”

—Alice Cary



Visit BookPage.com to read our Q&A with Kate DiCamillo and Sophie Blackall.

Little Witch Hazel

By Phoebe Wahl



Picture Book

Author-illustrator Phoebe Wahl’s fourth picture book, **Little Witch Hazel: A Year in the Forest** (Tundra, \$19.99, 9780735264892, ages 4 to 8), has a charming woodsy setting that

readers will find enchanting.

Four vignettes follow Little Witch Hazel, a minuscule witch who wears a pointy red hat and lives in Mosswood Forest. With a determined spirit, Hazel tends to her fellow inhabitants of the forest in any way that she can, be that inspecting the source of a mysterious wailing tree stump, caring for an abandoned bird egg or taking some well-deserved time to unwind with her friends on a hot summer day.

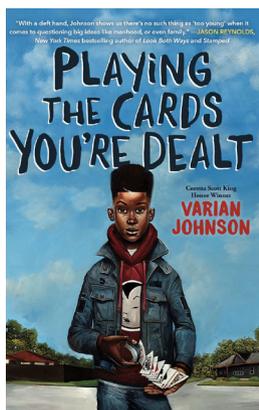
Each story unfolds in a different season and opens with a title page depicting Hazel dressed for the weather and surrounded by the season’s flora—daffodils in spring, acorns in the fall and so on. Hazel’s can-do attitude and willingness to pitch in make her an appealing heroine. Using earthy shades of brown, green, red and blue, Wahl expertly captures Mosswood Forest and populates it with all sorts of quirky creatures whose interactions make a wonderful backdrop for Hazel’s adventures.

These sweet stories are an ode to the calm and peaceful magic of nature. **Little Witch Hazel** will make you feel as if you have journeyed deep into Mosswood Forest alongside Hazel and her friends. It will also make you long to seek out your own forest, to be immersed in nature and to discover (or rediscover) your own kinship to it, so that you too can enjoy what Hazel finds there: serenity, connection and fulfillment.

—Hannah Lamb

Playing the Cards You’re Dealt

By Varian Johnson



Middle Grade

It’s day one of fifth grade, and Anthony “Ant” Joplin is playing it cool. He surrenders to lots of photos and kisses from his parents but insists on walking to school on his own, as befits the 10-year-old he has become.

He wants to get there early so he can

play with the deck of cards he has secreted away in his backpack. The annual spades tournament kicks off soon, and Ant really wants to win. His attempt last year didn’t go well, which is especially embarrassing since his older brother, their dad and their

grandfather have all won in the past. So Ant is planning to practice, stay strong and stoic like his dad is always telling him to be, and uphold the Joplin men’s tradition. As the warm and witty omniscient narrator observes, “bragging rights are more valuable than a packet of hot sauce at a fish fry.”

But in Varian Johnson’s winningly affecting **Playing the Cards You’re Dealt** (Scholastic, \$16.99, 9781338348538, ages 8 to 12), Ant realizes that wanting something and trying hard to get it isn’t always enough—whether it’s winning a game, gaining approval from a parent or keeping everything the same.

Instead, in the suspenseful lead-up to the tournament, one thing after another goes awry. Ant’s spades partner, Jamal, gets grounded, and Ant’s father acts increasingly strange. He used to have a drinking problem but promised to stop, so that can’t be the reason, right? The arrival of new girl Shirley also throws Ant for a loop. Shirley is smart, won’t tolerate Jamal’s bullying and is comfortable talking about feelings. Ant is drawn to her not just because she’d be a great new spades partner but also because she’s an example of how to live life sans toxic masculinity. (He thinks she’s pretty cute, too.)

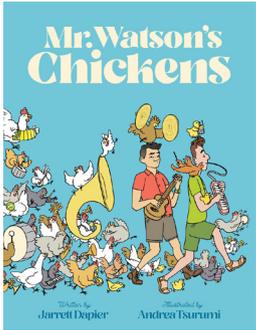
Readers will root for the good-hearted Ant as he learns about trust, teamwork and true strength, with some sweet hints of romance thrown in as well. They might learn a new skill, too, thanks to Johnson’s beginner-friendly explanations of the strategies—and fun!—of playing spades.

—Linda M. Castelltito

★ Mr. Watson's Chickens

By Jarrett Dapier

Illustrated by Andrea Tsurumi



Picture Book

Mr. Watson and Mr. Nelson live together in a “big, honking house with a teeny-tiny yard in a big, honking city.” Though Mr. Watson only acquires three chickens, before the couple knows it, there are 456 chickens

wreaking havoc in their home.

As author Jarrett Dapier’s perfectly paced storyline and illustrator Andrea Tsurumi’s colorful, clean-lined artwork show, **Mr. Watson’s Chickens** (Chronicle, \$17.99, 9781452177144, ages 4 to 7) take over the house, and the snowball effect of nearly 500 chickens in one small abode is very funny. Tiny chicks stage a play in the breadbox, chickens in bathing suits practice synchronized swimming in

the bathtub, and there’s even a musically inclined chicken named Aunt Agnes who belts out a lively song (“Shooby-doo, wonky-pow, bawka-bawka in da chow-chow.”) at all hours. A cross-sectional view in one dynamic spread makes it clear that the home is “teeming with birds.”

Mr. Watson's Chickens is one of the year's most entertaining and bighearted picture books. You might even say it's in fine feather.

Mr. Nelson eventually gives Mr. Watson an ultimatum: Either the chickens go, or he does. The two set off for the county fair to find new homes for the chickens, but when Mr. Watson trips and knocks over the cages, chickens scatter everywhere. Eventually there’s a happy ending for all the birds, especially Aunt Agnes, who finds a place in the spotlight.

Dapier’s prose is tender and spunky. When Mr. Nelson tells Mr. Watson he might leave, Dapier

writes that Mr. Watson knows “his heart would be a broken egg” without Mr. Nelson. Depictions of gay couples are still uncommon in children’s literature, particularly in picture books, so the depiction of Mr. Watson and Mr. Nelson’s lovingly quirky and (mostly) harmonious relationship is commendable, as is the inclusion of a cheesemonger at the fair who is referred to by a nonbinary pronoun.

Tsurumi’s illustrations playfully extend the story. At the fair, all chickens but one (Aunt Agnes, of course) are accounted for. The page turn reveals a *Where’s Waldo?*-esque spread of the fair from an aerial perspective. But good luck spotting Aunt Agnes, as Tsurumi fills the spread with decoy chickens—chicken-shaped balloons, an information kiosk topped with a giant chicken, a person in a chicken costume handing out flyers, even a sand chicken in the sandbox. Choices like these make **Mr. Watson’s Chickens** an enjoyable and exuberant read.

This is one of the year’s most entertaining and bighearted picture books. You might even say it’s in fine feather.

—Julie Danielson

meet GRIS GRIMLY

How would you describe your book?

A brave Trick-or-Treater, the magic of Halloween, all while counting down from

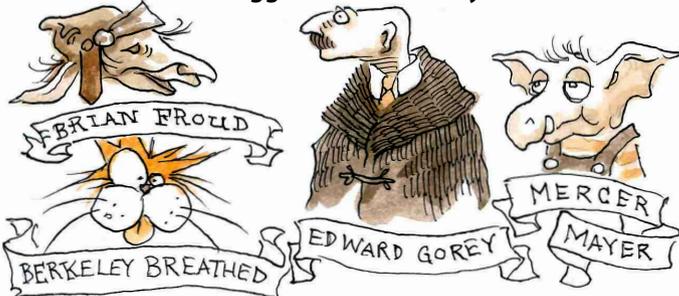


What books did you enjoy as a child?



COMICS, MAD, BUT AS A WEE CHILD, A LOTTA Dr. Seuss

Who has been the biggest influence on your work?



What one thing would you like to learn to do?



Learn to play a unique instrument like a Sitar.

Who was your childhood hero?



JIM HENSON (I MADE A LOT OF PUPPETS AS A KID.)

What message would you like to send to young readers?

We are all magical BEINGS



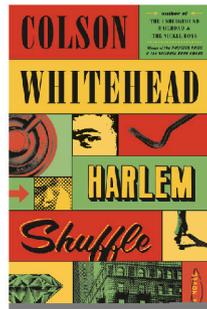
A little girl in a jaunty clown costume encounters a host of autumnal sights, from pumpkins and black cats to scarecrows and bats, in Gris Grimly’s atmospheric Halloween countdown, **10 Spooky Pumpkins** (Orchard, \$17.99, 9781338112443, ages 4 to 8). Grimly has illustrated books by contemporary authors such as Neil Gaiman and Jon Scieszka, as well as classic works by Edgar Allan Poe, Mary Shelley and Washington Irving. Grimly and his family recently moved from Los Angeles back to his home state of Nebraska, where the golden cornfields and his own children inspired him to create **10 Spooky Pumpkins**.

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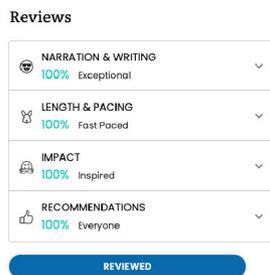
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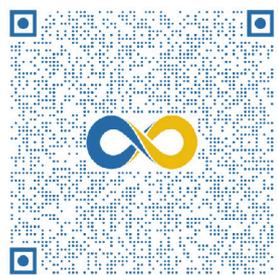
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