

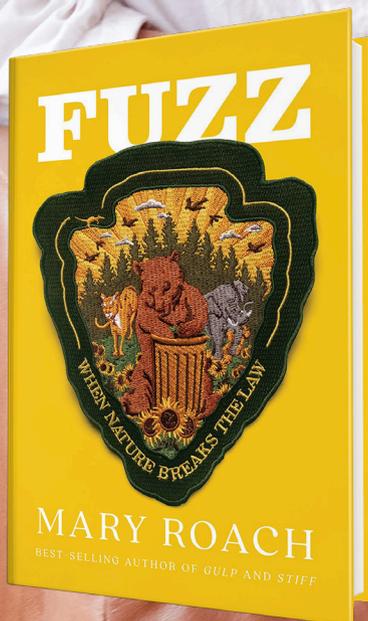
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features

feature | parenting 6
Teaching parents how to have sensitive conversations with their kids

feature | royal romances 8
Couples find love amid the glittering world of modern royalty

feature | inspirational fiction 9
A bounty of hope, love and redemption

q&a | helen hoang 10
Helen Hoang's third book was her hardest to write, but it might be her best yet

feature | romantic suspense 11
Three romantic roller coasters will leave you breathless

feature | killer getaways 13
The trips in these thrillers are anything but relaxing

interview | lauren groff 14
A 12th-century abbess deserves to be your next literary hero

cover story | mary roach 16
The acclaimed nonfiction author is hot on the trail of nature's outlaws

behind the book | matt siegel 22
What you never knew about Patagonian toothfish, Cuban supercows and cinnamon sticks

feature | ya novels in verse 27
Teens narrate their stories in vibrant poetry

q&a | torben kuhlmann 28
How a mouse could have inspired one of the greatest scientific minds to ever live

meet | hudson talbott 31
Meet the author-illustrator of **A Walk in the Words**

reviews

fiction 18

nonfiction 23

young adult 26

children's 30

columns

the hold list 4

audio 5

book clubs 7

romance 8

whodunit 12

lifestyles 13

well read 15

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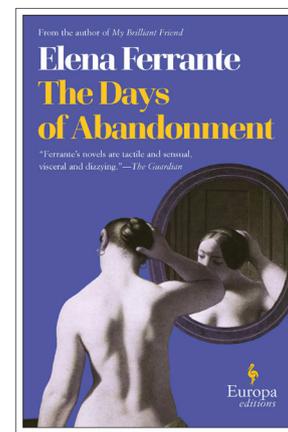
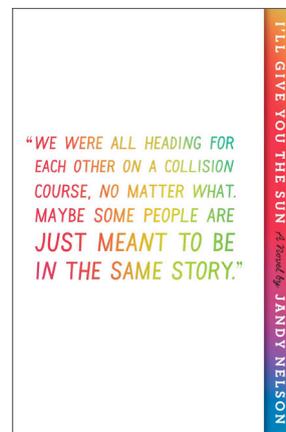
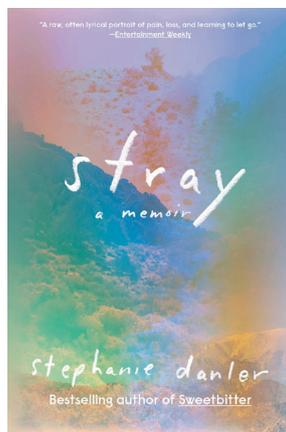
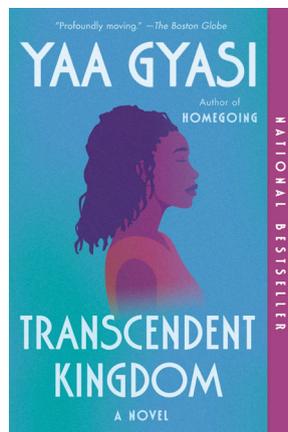
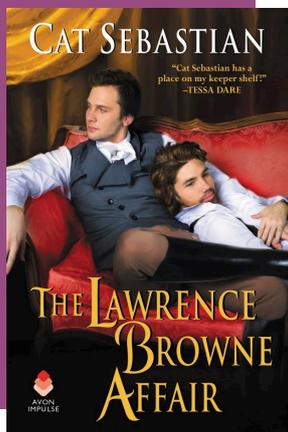
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Sophomore stunners

Last month, we recommended some of our favorite debut books. This month, we turn our attention to successful sophomore titles that soared over the high bars set by their authors' first books.

The Lawrence Browne Affair

Cat Sebastian's first romance novel, *The Soldier's Scoundrel*, had a pitch-perfect sense of the English Regency period and the dangers of being a gay man in that era. But in her second book, **The Lawrence Browne Affair**, Sebastian takes the queerness that has always lurked within gothic fiction and thrusts it fully into the light. Lawrence Browne is convinced that he's going insane due to his family history, his attraction to men and the panic attacks he experiences. When a well-meaning vicar hires him a secretary, Lawrence thinks it will be easy to scare him away with his supposedly "mad" behavior. But Georgie Turner is not a normal secretary: He's a con man looking for a place to lie low, and the only thing that scares him about Lawrence is the horrendous state of his financial accounts. Sebastian's wry wit is on full display, and her ability to make the thrills of initial attraction palpably real gives this romance all the wonder of an unexpected second chance.

—Savanna, Associate Editor

Transcendent Kingdom

As a book review editor, to admit that you haven't read *that novel* that everyone else and their mother have raved about—well, it doesn't feel great. For a time, Yaa Gyasi's bestselling, universally heralded 2016 debut novel, *Homegoing*, was the source of one of my primary shame spirals. But then September 2020 rolled around and with it her follow-up, **Transcendent Kingdom**, a tremendous novel of heart, mind and soul. It's about Gifty, the daughter of Ghanaian immigrants. Gifty grows up in an all-white evangelical Christian community in Alabama and grapples with her family's complexities alongside her own experience of moving from the mysteries of faith to the vast, limitless discourse of her career as a neuroscientist. As widely as these questions range, the novel is extremely tight, even tidy, and that kind of storytelling is precisely the way to my heart. It sent me hurrying to *Homegoing*, finally ready for anything and everything Gyasi has to offer.

—Cat, Deputy Editor

Stray

Stephanie Danler's debut novel, *Sweetbitter*, became a bestseller and was adapted into a television series, launching her career into the stratosphere. Her second book, **Stray: A Memoir**, published in May 2020, after the U.S. had gone into lockdown but before the publishing world had pivoted to remote book events, so it didn't receive the same attention as *Sweetbitter*—despite being emotionally potent, beautifully written and gripping to boot. As **Stray** opens, Danler has moved back to California, where she grew up with parents who were beautiful, unstable addicts. The treacherous landscape of Laurel Canyon kicks up memories of her painful past while an affair dissolves in the present, and as she weaves between the two, trauma takes on a dreamy, phantasmagoric quality, as ubiquitous as the heat. As far as second books go, this one is a mature achievement. And if you have a thing for devastating dysfunctional family memoirs, **Stray** can hang with the best of them.

—Christy, Associate Editor

I'll Give You the Sun

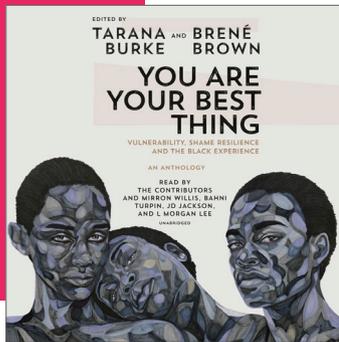
The first thing to know about **I'll Give You the Sun** is that it was published four years after Jandy Nelson's debut, which is an eternity in YA publishing, where authors typically write a book a year. The second is that, perhaps because Nelson took that time, it's extraordinary on every level. It's full of sentences that seem as though Nelson came to an intersection while writing and instead of deciding to turn or go straight, she levitated her car and flew to the moon. And then there's its structure: two narrators, twins Noah and Jude, and two timelines, when they're 13 and when they're 16, before and after a tragedy that altered the paths of their lives. *Breathtaking* is a word critics like, and it comes close to describing the experience of reading this book. But it's more like the way a roller coaster feels once your stomach is back where your stomach belongs and you're careening down the track, relieved and ecstatic to still be alive, nearly weightless, almost in flight.

—Stephanie, Associate Editor

The Days of Abandonment

In the decade between Elena Ferrante's first and second novels, her debut was made into a movie, and still no one knew her identity. During that time, certain literary circles obsessed over knowing who Ferrante really was, but perhaps if they gave **The Days of Abandonment** a closer reading, they would discover how irrelevant and destructive such a question is. Following a woman, Olga, in the aftermath of her husband's desertion and infidelity, the book shows how closely and precariously identity and reality are linked. We see Olga's life crumble until she finally reaches a nadir from which the only way forward is up. Being confined inside a narrator's thoughts during a time of such catastrophe and despair is a specialty of Ferrante's, and here her powers reach a goosebump-inducing, worldview-shattering peak. While the Neapolitan novels might be considered her masterpiece, **The Days of Abandonment** has everything one could get from Ferrante.

—Eric, Editorial Intern



★ You Are Your Best Thing

In *You Are Your Best Thing* (Random House Audio, 6.5 hours), Tarana Burke (creator of the #MeToo movement) and Dr. Brené Brown curate a collection of essays by Black writers and activists in an effort to apply Brown's work on shame, resilience and vulnerability to the Black experience in America. The

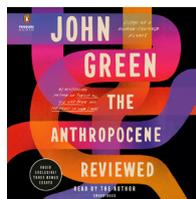
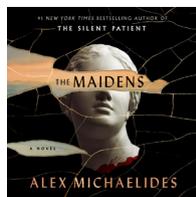
contributors, who include Jason Reynolds, Austin Channing Brown and Kiese Laymon, read their own essays, and these performances require the listener to reckon with poignant, often painful experiences that speak to the ways in which white supremacy adds an extra barrier to the process of overcoming shame.

—Autumn Allen

★ The Maidens

In *The Maidens* (Macmillan Audio, 9.5 hours), Alex Michaelides draws heavily upon Greek mythology to create an absorbing thriller with more twists than the Minotaur's labyrinth. The audiobook is narrated primarily by actor Louise Brealey, who has given life to complex female characters in the audio editions of *The Girl on the Train* and *The Silent Patient*, Michaelides' first novel. Actor Kobna Holdbrook-Smith's nuanced performance as the novel's killer reminds us that monsters are made, not born.

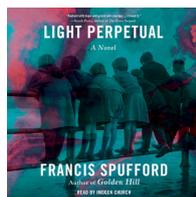
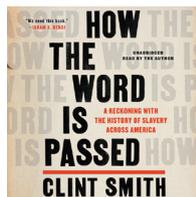
—Deborah Mason



The Anthropocene Reviewed

Based on John Green's podcast of the same name, *The Anthropocene Reviewed* (Penguin Audio, 10 hours) is a collection of essays structured as reviews of the human experience. From sublime sunsets to odd fascinations like the Hall of Presidents, Green makes even the most obscure topics compelling. This is a truly gratifying experience; only the audiobook edition offers the opportunity to be part of a melancholy World War I singalong.

—Anna Zeitlin



★ How the Word Is Passed

Writer, poet and educator Clint Smith narrates the audio edition of *How the Word Is Passed* (Hachette Audio, 10 hours), a timely reckoning with America's past dependence on the cruel institution of chattel slavery. The content is heavy, at times nearly overwhelming, but Smith's factual storytelling voice models the courage and fortitude required to take it all in.

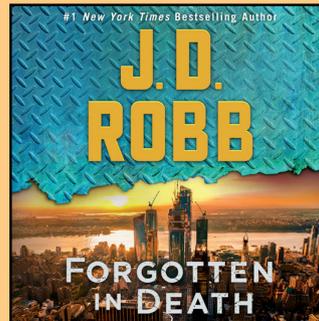
—Autumn Allen

★ Light Perpetual

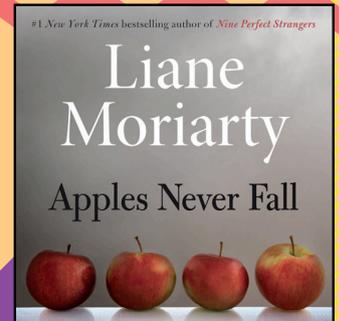
One fine day in 1944, a German V-2 rocket hits a South London Woolworths. Among the civilians incinerated by the bomb are five children. In *Light Perpetual* (Simon & Schuster Audio, 12.5 hours), novelist Francis Spufford explores the tantalizing question: What if these children had been war survivors instead of victims? Scottish-born actor Imogen Church, known for her performances of Ruth Ware's audiobooks, gives a wonderful voice to each of the five as they progress from childhood to old age.

—Deborah Mason

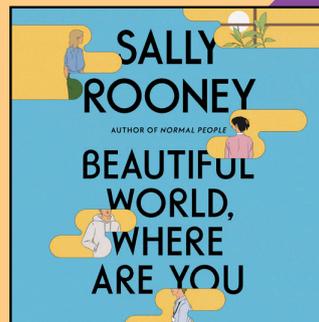
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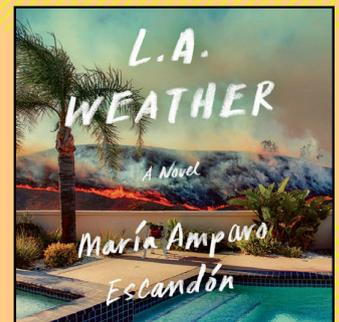
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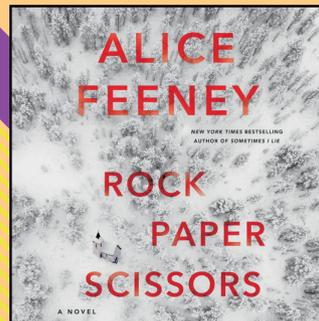
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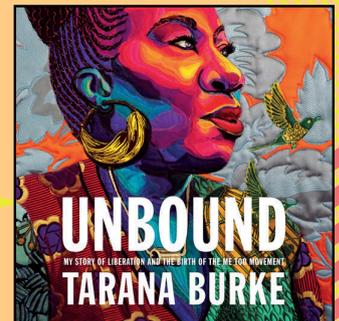
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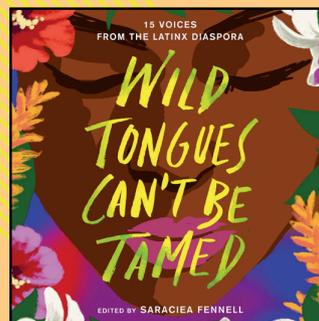
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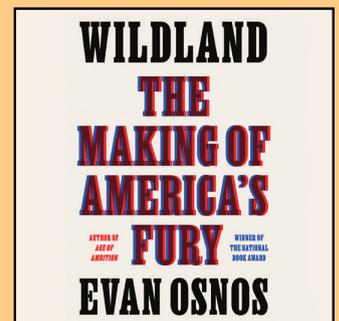
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READ BY THE AUTHOR



READ BY A FULL CAST



READ BY THE AUTHOR

MACMILLAN AUDIO

Now we're talking

These books will teach parents how to have sensitive conversations with their kids—in ways that ensure their kids actually listen.

Parenting ideals are constantly evolving. These excellent, up-to-date guides provide strategies for communicating with your kids in ways that will resonate today.

★ Bringing Up Race

“We need to talk to our children about race long before they start making up their own stories,” writes Uju Asika, author and mother of two boys. “We need to tell them before the world whispers too many lies in their ears.” Asika is a Black Nigerian woman who grew up in Great Britain and has also lived in the United States. “I’m no stranger to prejudice,” Asika writes.

For years, Asika has written a popular parenting blog called “Babes About Town,” which focuses on fun family outings in London. Now she’s the author of **Bringing Up Race: How to Raise a Kind Child in a Prejudiced World** (Sourcebooks, \$16.99, 9781728238562), which tackles that all-important question, “How do you bring up your kids to be cool, kind, and happy when there is so much out there trying to break them down?” It’s an extremely informative and enjoyable read, thanks to Asika’s wise but never preachy style and her inclusion of stories from her family and many others. She also shares the opinions of various specialists and closes each chapter with “Talking Points,” Q&A-style examples that tackle real-life scenarios that might come up for kids of any race, such as, “If my child is curious about someone’s family background, how can they ask without appearing rude or racist?”

Reading this book feels like having a stirring, in-depth conversation with an affable expert on this vital topic. As Asika concludes, “There’s nothing more urgent than bringing up our kids to think globally, fairly, and with empathy for their fellow humans. We need to be responsible for raising a generation of people who are more open, more tolerant, less afraid.”

★ Dear Highlights

Since its founding in 1946, the editors of *Highlights* magazine have personally responded to every piece of mail a child has sent, whether it’s a letter, poem or drawing. In 1979, the magazine started drawing on this wellspring of letters, publishing a monthly “Dear Highlights” advice column filled with questions and concerns on all sorts of topics, including Santa, siblings, friendship, parents, sexuality, identity, body image, illness and death. Now the editors have compiled selections from their correspondence treasure trove in **Dear Highlights: What Adults Can Learn From 75 Years of Letters and Conversations With Kids** (Highlights, \$24.99, 9781644723258), edited by *Highlights* editor-in-chief Christine French Cully.

Although names have been changed for privacy reasons, ages and dates are included with all the letters. Chapters are organized by kids’ primary concerns, such as families, school and societal issues and events. Often, facsimiles of the original letters are shown, in the children’s real handwriting,

alongside a multitude of other particularly wonderful drawings and poems. The historical references are intriguing as well, as children have asked questions about the Kennedy and King assassinations, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the *Challenger* disaster, COVID-19 and more. Both kids and adults will find it easy to get lost in this lively, unique and fascinating book.

How to Talk When Kids Won’t Listen

“The more you ask me to do something, the less I want to do it.” I repeatedly heard this statement from my three children, and we all stalked away feeling frustrated. I definitely needed a copy of **How to Talk When Kids Won’t Listen: Whining, Fighting, Meltdowns, Defiance, and Other Challenges of Childhood** (Scribner, \$27, 9781982134150).

Authors Joanna Faber and Julie King explain that when we try to calm kids down by minimizing their troubles, they end up feeling worse. Straight-shooting words of wisdom are laced with cartoons and helpful humor, such as the insightful quip, “When you’re upset your new shoes were stolen at the gym, that’s not the moment you want your friend to remind you to be grateful you have feet.” Faber and King tackle everything from homework hassles, sibling battles and screen time to sex and divorce concerns. Chapters end with fun quizzes designed to reinforce the strategies discussed, as well as key takeaways with scripts.

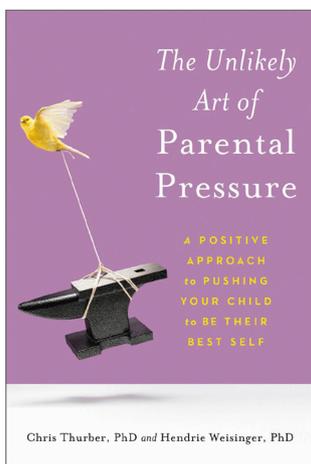
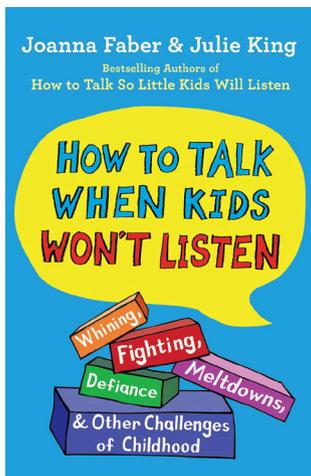
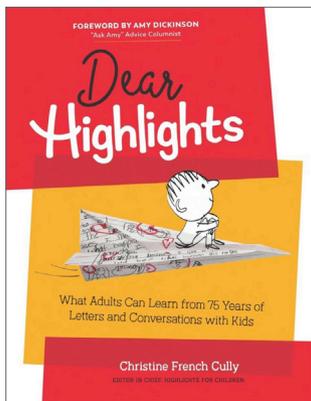
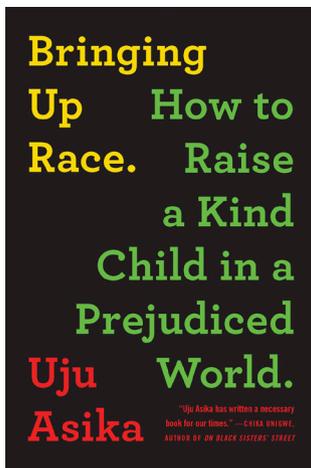
How to Talk When Kids Won’t Listen is an essential guide that’s easy to dip into as needed. As Faber and King write, “If we want kids to grow up to be independent thinkers and responsible problem-solvers who can consider the perspectives of others, we have to consider their perspective and give them practice making decisions, taking responsibility, and solving problems.”

The Unlikely Art of Parental Pressure

When it comes to raising successful children, parents typically ask the wrong question, according to psychologists Chris Thurber and Hendrie Weisinger. Instead of asking how much pressure they should apply, parents need to reframe the question: What are the healthiest ways to push our children? Using a variety of case studies, these authors offer parents effective strategies to do just that in **The Unlikely Art of Parental Pressure: A Positive Approach to Pushing Your Child to Be Their Best Self** (Hachette Go, \$17.99, 9780306874772).

Thurber and Weisinger point out the necessity of praising a child for doing their best rather than feeling disappointed that a certain goal wasn’t achieved, such as a first-place trophy or an A+. They also outline the differences between healthy and harmful pressure and explain that one key to success is helping kids not to choke at important moments. Whether you’re concerned about your child’s grades, athletics, music lessons or social life, **The Unlikely Art of Parental Pressure** is likely to be a transformative guide.

—Alice Cary



RICK BRAGG

Bestselling author of *All Over but the Shoutin'*

WHERE I
COME FROM

Stories from the Deep South

"A dose of humor or nostalgia or adventure or, quite often, descriptions of food that make you feel you can't live another minute without a plate of fried chicken."
—*Tampa Bay Times*



Facets of America

A first-rate collection of essays gathered from *Southern Living* and *Garden & Gun* magazines, **Where I Come From: Stories From the Deep South** (Vintage, \$17, 9780593310809) by beloved memoirist Rick Bragg provides unique insights into the author's corner of America. In these brief but powerful pieces, Bragg's curiosity ranges far and wide as he reflects upon personal interests (pickup trucks, Southern cuisine, country music) and more universal matters (race and religion). Offering a kaleidoscopic look at the contemporary South, this colorful compilation is sure to inspire rousing discussions.

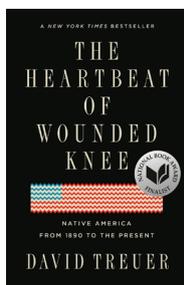
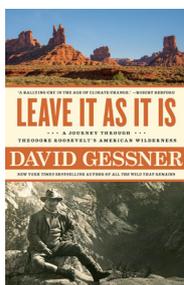
David Gessner takes readers on an unforgettable tour of the nation's monuments and parks in **Leave It As It Is: A Journey Through Theodore Roosevelt's American Wilderness** (Simon & Schuster, \$18, 9781982105051).

These four provocative nonfiction books offer fresh perspectives on our nation.

Gessner gives an overview of the life and advocacy of Theodore Roosevelt, whose forthright protection of some of America's most iconic and beautiful natural areas laid

the foundation for the modern conservation movement. Gessner also shows how Roosevelt's work remains significant today as he visits Yellowstone National Park, the Grand Canyon and other sites. Subjects such as environmentalism and the future of public lands will get book clubs talking, and Gessner's humor and incisive observations make him a wonderful traveling companion on this journey through America's most mesmerizing landscapes.

In **Looking for Miss America: A Pageant's 100-Year Quest to Define Womanhood** (Counterpoint, \$17.95, 9781640094901), Margot Mifflin delivers a fascinating historical survey of the Miss America pageant. Using the contest as a gauge of the advancement of women in America, Mifflin traces its evolution from a tourist attraction in Atlantic City in 1921 to a scholarship contest 100 years later. Her brisk, spirited narrative will entertain readers even as it presents fruitful material for discussion, with topics as wide-ranging as the #MeToo movement and the role of pageants in society.



Ojibwe author David Treuer gives a fresh account of Native American history in **The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present** (Riverhead, \$17, 9780399573194). Blending history and reportage with personal narrative, Treuer sets out to show that, contrary to the story told in books such as *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Indigenous culture was not destroyed in the late 19th century. Rather, it is still alive and vibrant today. Authoritative yet accessible, his book is rich in talking points, including contemporary depictions of Native Americans in popular culture and the impact of the American Indian Movement.

BOOK CLUB READS FOR FALL



THE GUEST LIST

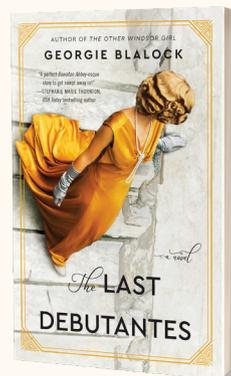
by Lucy Foley

"I loved this book. It gave me the same waves of happiness I get from curling up with a classic Christie... The alternating points of view keep you guessing, and guessing wrong."
—ALEX MICHAELIDES,
New York Times bestselling author

THE LAST DEBUTANTES

by Georgie Ballock

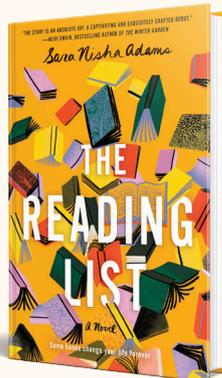
"A perfect Downton Abbey-esque story to get swept away in!"
—STEPHANIE MARIE THORNTON,
bestselling author



THE READING LIST

by Sara Nisha Adams

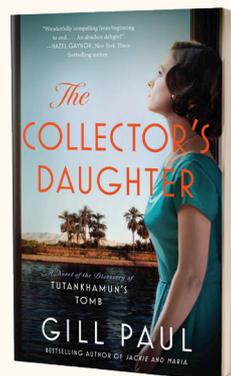
"The story is an absolute joy. A captivating and exquisitely crafted debut."
—HEIDI SWAIN,
bestselling author



THE COLLECTOR'S DAUGHTER

by Gill Paul

"The Collector's Daughter will mesmerize its readers as much as the lure of ancient treasures mesmerized these famous Egyptologists. An absolute delight!"
—HAZEL GAYNOR
New York Times bestselling author



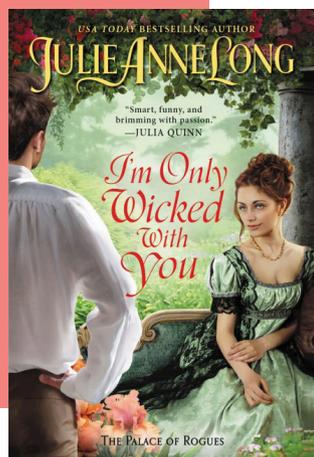
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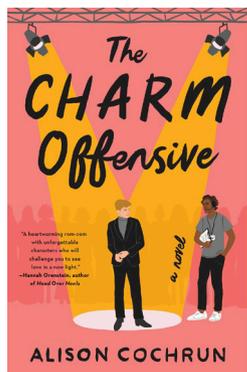
A BookPage reviewer since 2003, Julie Hale recommends the best paperback books to spark discussion in your reading group.



★ I'm Only Wicked With You

Historical romance doesn't get more glorious than Julie Anne Long's **I'm Only Wicked With You** (Avon, \$8.99, 9780063045088), the third book in her Palace of Rogues series. While residing at a genteel London boardinghouse, self-educated and ambitious American Hugh Cassidy meets Lady Lillias Vaughn, an earl's sheltered daughter. Hugh's on a mission for a friend and has no time for or interest in aristocratic debutantes, but he's fascinated by Lillias' beauty and quiet

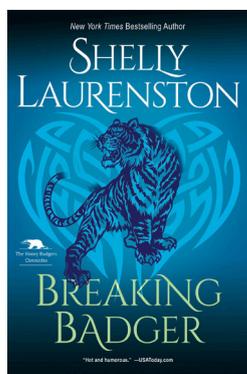
strength. Lillias is equally struck by Hugh's handsome face and clever ways, but she's also nursing a secret heartache. The pull between them is undeniable, and though they try to ignore it, the attraction proves overpowering. Filled with witty banter, yearning and lush descriptions of passion, as well as wonderful, fully drawn secondary characters, this romance hits every note just right.



★ The Charm Offensive

Alison Cochrun twines an earnest exploration of mental health and sexuality through a truly memorable love story in **The Charm Offensive** (Atria, \$17, 9781982170714). Dev Deshpande works as a producer on the reality dating show "Ever After." It's a dream job until he's assigned to be handler of this season's "prince," germaphobic and touch-wary tech whiz Charlie Winshaw. Diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder, panic disorder and generalized anxiety, Charlie hopes TV stardom will erase his reputation of being difficult to work with. But he's not particularly attracted to any of the women

vying to become his soulmate, and he can't stop thinking about Dev, with his busy brain and big heart. Cochrun's clever behind-the-scenes glimpses of "Ever After" will delight reality TV fans, but it's **The Charm Offensive's** tenderness and deep, believable emotion that will linger in readers' hearts.



Breaking Badger

There are no dull pages in **Breaking Badger** (Kensington, \$15.95, 9781496730145) by Shelly Laurenston. Siberian tiger shifter Finn Malone learns no good deed goes unpunished when he comes to the aid of a band of honey badger shifters under attack. They're energetic and unpredictable, but then he discovers that these women might be the key to finding out who's responsible for the murder of his father. He and his brothers enlist their help, leading to more chaos as well as a surprising attraction to badger/hyena hybrid shifter Mads Galendotter. Laurenston immerses readers in a world full of family,

friends and shifter dynamics that never fail to amuse. Secondary characters with smart mouths and interesting abilities boost the high-octane entertainment. There's nonstop banter, plenty of blood and gore and flaming-hot lovemaking as the intrepid Mads battles her dangerous relatives while learning that teammates can be friends and that your true family is the one you choose.

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

Contentious courtships

In the glittering world of modern royalty, two couples come to terms with their personal demons and find love.

These witty enemies-to-lovers rom-coms are perfect for both fans of all things royal and readers who are eager for a variation on the trend. Rather than being princes or princesses themselves, the couples in these romances either work for or get sucked into the orbits of royal families.

In **Battle Royal** (Avon, \$15.99, 9780063040069), the first book of her Palace Insiders series, Lucy Parker follows two London bakers at war with each other. Dominic De Vere and Sylvie Fairchild met on the set of "Operation Cake," a baking show that Dominic judges with stern disdain. When Sylvie's unicorn cake exploded and clocked Dominic on the forehead, she was promptly eliminated.

Their worlds collide again when Sylvie is invited to be a judge on "Operation Cake" while both of them are also competing to snag the commission of a lifetime: Princess Rose's wedding cake. As Dominic and Sylvie layer flavor upon flavor and craft intricate details into their cakes, they uncover essential truths about each other and themselves. Parker strikes the perfect balance between relationship growth and delicious, pastry-related escapism.

In Karina Halle's **The Royals Next Door** (Berkley, \$16, 9780593334195), a duke and duchess's departure from royal duties leads to romance between two solitary people who find themselves unwillingly fascinated with each other.

Piper is a second grade schoolteacher, diehard romance reader and anonymous podcaster. She also lives with and takes care of her mother, who has borderline and dependent personality disorders. Then the Duke and Duchess of Fairfax—a

fictionalized version of England's Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex—move in next door to Piper's modest cottage on an island off the coast of British Columbia. Harrison Cole, the duke and duchess's personal protection officer, takes his job very seriously. He sees Piper as a security hazard; she sees him as a burr under her skin.

The main couples in both **Battle Royal** and **The Royals Next Door** have to take giant leaps of faith into trust and love, giving these royal-adjacent romances a satisfying dose of reality. Parker and Halle have a lot of fun with all the glamorous trappings of royalty, but they temper the whimsy with the emotional inner journeys of their four main characters,

all of whom come to terms with their turbulent childhoods over the course of their love stories.

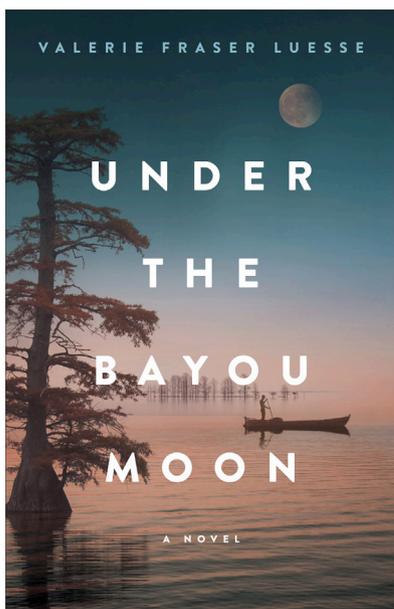
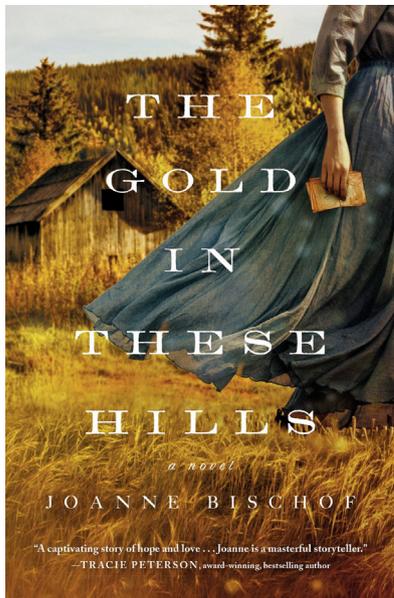
In **Battle Royal**, Parker slowly reveals that Dominic's stepfather was openly disdainful of him, and Dominic's subsequent desire for control over his emotions results

in his somewhat narrow-minded arrowing through life. **The Royals Next Door's** Harrison was a caregiver to his mother and siblings in his early teens, and he's found comfort in adherence to rules ever since.

But under their carefree exteriors, Sylvie and Piper have struggles of their own. Sylvie must overcome recurring feelings of inadequacy, while Piper has been haunted since childhood by her mother's debilitating illnesses, which contributed to Piper developing anxiety and complex PTSD. Even with their sorrows, both women retain their desire to eke out a life for themselves that is joyful, which will constantly endear them to readers.

—Keira Soleore





her desperation is heightened by the dwindling population and abandoned buildings that surround her. In the modern-day timeline, Johnny clings to the unpromising remains of his marriage like a crutch, refusing to face the inevitable.

Bischof's characters are flawed and easy to like. Juniper's friend Edie is secretive but fiercely loyal, and she also longs for her lover. She faces painful circumstances and leans on Juniper during such times. The town's schoolteacher is a discreet woman who becomes a wonderful help to Juniper and her daughter. As Johnny discovers the uncanny similarity between his circumstances and those of Juniper's husband, he sees an opportunity to redeem his life and move forward. Hope and friendship provide all these characters with the strength to carry on, despite day-to-day heartbreak and fear of the unknown.

In *Under the Bayou Moon* (Revell, \$15.99, 9780800737511), lively and creative Ellie longs to live authentically. Hoping to achieve her goal, she leaves her community of friends and family in Alabama to take a job as a teacher in rural Louisiana. In the town of Bernadette, Ellie feels unwelcome from the start, but the town's physician convinces her to give the job a chance. She gradually wins the hearts of the townsfolk through her warmth and respect, and she soon finds a home in Bernadette.

HAVE A LITTLE FAITH IN ME

For readers who love inspiring, romantic tales, two novels offer a bounty of hope, love and redemption.

Historical novels from Joanne Bischof and Valerie Fraser Luesse masterfully tell stories of strong-willed women who venture into the unknown.

As winter approaches, Juniper Cohen is struggling to earn enough to sustain her and her young daughter in the barren ghost town of Kenworthy, California. Though it has been months since she last saw her husband, John, who left after the town's mine closed, Juniper holds onto the hope that he will return to them. She writes him letters even though she is unaware of his location or whether he is even still alive. More than a century later, Johnny Sutherland buys Juniper's house to begin a new life after separating from his wife, and there he finds Juniper's letters.

In *The Gold in These Hills* (Thomas Nelson, \$16.99, 9780785241355), Bischof's immersive storytelling captures an immense amount of detail, especially characters' private thoughts and emotions. As Juniper reflects on her life in Kenworthy with John and waits for answers about his disappearance, her pain is palpable, and

A lovely romance blossoms between Ellie and Raphe, a Catholic man who is surprised by her appreciation of his Cajun culture. Raphe is taking care of his nephew, whom he is determined to raise despite the incessant pressure from an evangelical Christian preacher to place the boy for adoption.

Christy Award-winning author Luesse peppers her latest novel with funny, engaging conversations and situations. Readers will enjoy vibrant portraits of 1949 Louisiana's sights and scenery, as well as descriptions of Cajun culture and cuisine. Local politics provide an exciting backdrop to the story, including discussions about teaching French alongside English in school. There are also powerful, corrupt figures looking for oil in the bayou, unconcerned about the Creole and Cajun people or protecting the waterways.

The story is enhanced by the legend of a white alligator that is said to inhabit the swamps. Sightings of the majestic animal add thrilling scenes to the story, although political and religious forces use the legend to support their misguided and self-seeking agendas.

Under the Bayou Moon is a charming tale of romance, culture and history, filled with characters who will fascinate readers.

—Edith Kanyagia

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A hard-won happily ever after

Helen Hoang's third book was the hardest to write. It also might be her best one yet.

The acclaimed romance writer's artistic burnout was ultimately the key to creating **The Heart Principle** (Berkley, \$16, 9780451490841), a long-awaited love story for Quan Diep, a fan-favorite character from Hoang's previous books, who meets his match in Anna Sun, a classical violinist.

Romance fans have been so excited for *The Heart Principle*, and now it's finally out! How do you feel?

This was an extremely difficult book to write, and one of the reasons is how personal it was. Anna's story was inspired by recent events in my own life. Her emotions and thoughts, especially, are things that I personally felt and thought. Now that I'm sharing my experiences with readers, one of the biggest things I'm feeling is *vulnerable*.

While many readers will be familiar with the first two books in the series, this may be the first Helen Hoang romance for others. What would you tell those new readers to expect from *The Heart Principle*?

This is not the most lighthearted book I've written, and I recommend picking it up when they need catharsis rather than a fun, feel-good experience. I suspect this is the kind of book that will make people cry. It's also, in my opinion, very steamy.

What is your typical writing process like? Was there anything different about crafting this book in particular?

Before I was published, I used to daydream my books in their entirety before I wrote them. My stories were an escape, somewhere I could go when real life became too much. *The Kiss Quotient* and *The Bride Test* were "daydream" books, and because of the way publishing works, I finished writing them both before my debut. **The Heart Principle** is the first book that I had to write *after* being published, after people had developed expectations of me, and the pressure to meet those expectations made it impossible to daydream. Honestly, the pressure, combined with life events, made me mentally ill.

Like Anna, I compulsively started this book over again and again. Nothing I wrote was good enough, and I couldn't see where the story was going. I completely lost confidence in my ability as a writer, and

I second-, third-, fourth-, fifth-guessed myself with every sentence, which led to panic attacks and burnout. Writing this book was a real journey for me. I had to fight for every word, and I had to fight for my mental health as I did so. In the end, I can't quite say I managed to regain trust in my writing, but I do *accept* my writing. This is what I have to give. It's not perfect. It's not the best. It's not what every single reader wants. But it gets to stand, it gets to be—just like each of us gets to be.

Quan was a fan favorite pretty much from the moment he was introduced in *The Kiss Quotient*. Did you expect that at all? How hard was it to write a heroine to match him?

Truthfully, I didn't anticipate Quan would be a fan favorite, and yes, I had a hard time creating a heroine to match him. But I tried my best to give Quan someone who saw him, truly loved him and felt real at the same time.

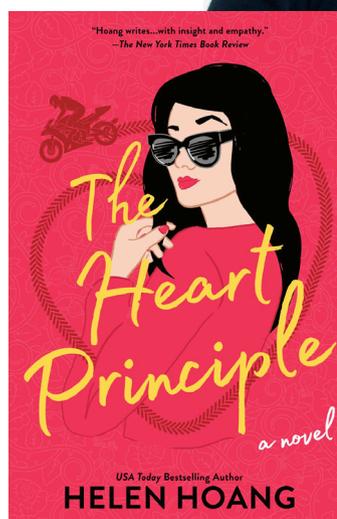
Anna gets a boost of viral fame on YouTube but experiences some heavy burnout while trying to make lightning strike twice. Was this part of Anna's story always present, or did it become more prominent as you were writing during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many people became burned out with work?

When I first pitched this story to my publisher, it was supposed to be a fun, gender-swapped *Sabrina* and had nothing to do with burnout. Clearly, things changed during the writing process. My first book, *The Kiss Quotient*, did far better than I imagined it would, and when I tried to reproduce the magic with **The Heart Principle** so I wouldn't disappoint readers, my efforts led to burnout, which in turn inspired that aspect of the book.

The worst of my burnout happened right before the COVID-19 pandemic. Ironically, quarantining under stay-at-home orders was a relief to me. Being on the autism spectrum, social interaction is extremely stressful and demanding work for me, and I haven't minded social distancing at all. That



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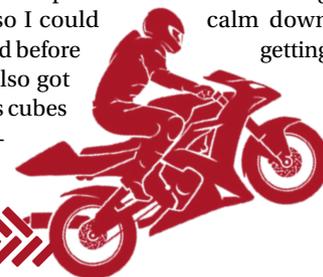
Illustrations from *The Heart Principle*, designed and illustrated by Colleen Reinhart.

said, like for most people, the off-the-charts levels of anxiety and uncertainty during these times have been a challenge.

What's been getting you through the past year? Any wonderful books that brought you comfort? A new, calming hobby?

Hands down, the books that provided the greatest escape for me over the past year are Ruby Dixon's *Ice Planet Barbarians* romances. (There are 22, plus an adjacent series with another 15 books, and I read them all.) They're as far from reality as you can get (they literally don't take place on this planet), there are no politics or impeachments or elections, and the conflicts revolve around basic survival. The heroes are blue aliens (most of them, anyway) whose greatest goals in life are to make their human mates (they come in all body types and ethnicities and are each the most beautiful person in the world to their alien) happy.

When I was writing and struggling with frequent panic attacks, it helped to have coloring books on hand so I could calm down and reset my mind before getting back to work. I also got really into Rubik's cubes and such. My current favorite is



Kiss kiss, bang bang

These romantic roller coasters will leave you breathless.

the Gigaminx. It's a dodecahedron with five-layered sides. I spent hundreds of hours (not exaggerating) solving, mixing and resolving this puzzle as a form of meditation. The algorithms are ingrained in my muscle memory now.

Complex emotional arcs are always prominent in your romances. Without giving away too many details, Anna deals with a family tragedy in this book. How do you balance tough subjects (anxiety, grief, trauma) while still moving the couple toward a happily ever after?

When I write heavy topics in romance, the key for me is finding the emotional connection between those things and the conflict keeping the lovers apart. Once that's done, the story seems to fall into place and balance itself very naturally. In *The Heart Principle*, for example, that emotional connection is Anna's helpless desire for external validation.

Out of the three books in the Kiss Quotient series, which hero is your favorite—Michael, Kai or Quan?

I really can't pick. It would be like asking me to say which of my kids I love more!

One of the things I've loved most about your books are your author's notes. They're very cathartic to read, and you really give readers a peek at your inspiration for each specific romance. How did that become a tradition for you, and do you think you'll always write one for each book?

When we were preparing to release *The Kiss Quotient*, I remember thinking that I had more to share than just the story in the book, that I wanted to talk about my late autism diagnosis. It changed my life, and I hoped that by bringing attention to the underdiagnosis of autism in women, I could help lead other women like myself toward greater self-understanding and improve their quality of life. I asked my editor if I could add an author's note to the book, and she supported the idea.

For *The Bride Test* and *The Heart Principle*, on the other hand, I didn't originally plan to write author's notes, but when my editor asked if there was more I wanted to say, I realized that there was. I think she could see how personal these books are to me and wanted to provide the opportunity for me to share the stories behind the stories. I'm not sure I'll always write author's notes like these. It'll depend on the book. If there's something important I left out or if I feel I can bring attention to issues close to my heart, I imagine I'll ask readers for those extra minutes of their time before they shut the book.

—Amanda Diehl



Visit BookPage.com to read our starred review of *The Heart Principle*.

The stakes are high, danger is imminent and the sexiness is through the roof in this trio of romantic suspense novels.

Author duo Kit Rocha is back with the second installment of the Mercenary Librarians series. The first, *Deal With the Devil*, introduced librarians Maya, Dani and Nina, who brokered a deal with a group of AWOL supersoldiers known as the Silver Devils to survive in a post-apocalyptic Atlanta. *The Devil You Know* (Tor, \$18.99, 9781250209382) is another exciting dystopian adventure packed with danger, sexy romance and fascinating world building.

Maya may not have the combat skills of her fellow librarians, but she's got as much grit, determination and intelligence in her self-described "soft and squishy" body as anyone in her squad. Raised with the wealthy and well educated, she learned to speak dozens of languages and mastered various advanced sciences. Now Maya uses her brilliance to help her small community while building a repository of information.

Gray is the consummate sniper—stoic, determined and laser-focused. The Silver Devils, who were once a private security group for medical and tech conglomerate TechCorps, were granted superhuman abilities by implants. But now those implants are deteriorating, and Gray has begun to experience seizures. Despite the secret kernel of affection he keeps buried in his heart for Maya, he's more interested in keeping her alive and safe than in his arms.

Rocha's writing is tight and purposeful, keeping readers on their toes as they, along with Maya and Gray, try to figure out who they can actually trust. There are moments of both gasping surprise and laugh-out-loud humor in this fun and totally unique romance.

Alexandra Ivy's *Faceless* (Zebra, \$8.99, 9781420151442) will ruin any preconceptions readers may have about safe, sleepy small towns.

When Wynter Moore was 4, she witnessed the murder of her mother in a robbery gone wrong. For the past 25 years, Wynter has returned annually to her mother's grave in Pike, Wisconsin, and Wynter's longtime friend Noah Hunter is there waiting for her every time. Loyal, kind and dependable Noah has loved Wynter from afar ever since they met in grief counseling as teenagers, but he's been hesitant to take things further because he knows

that good friends are far more valuable than lovers.

But then Wynter receives an unexpected envelope containing a still shot from surveillance footage of her mother's murder, a clue that could unlock the killer's identity. She turns to game warden Noah, who has been trained in observation and security, to help her investigate.

Ivy ably balances Wynter's overwhelming emotions upon revisiting her mother's death with the addictiveness of unraveling the truth. There's a lot of details to unpack in this book, along with a lot of characters, which unfortunately turns down the slow burn of this friends-to-lovers romance to a simmer. It would have been nice to see a little more of Wynter and Noah's romantic progression, but in the hectic world of romantic suspense, *Faceless* offers a breather: It's a love story with a gentler pace, despite the danger the main couple finds themselves in.

Adriana Anders ratchets up the tension to stratospheric heights in the highly anticipated follow-up to 2020's *Whiteout*, *Uncharted* (Sourcebooks Casablanca, \$8.99, 9781492677536). Set in the Alaskan wilderness, this forced proximity romance delivers a suspenseful TKO.

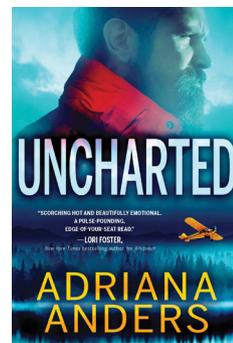
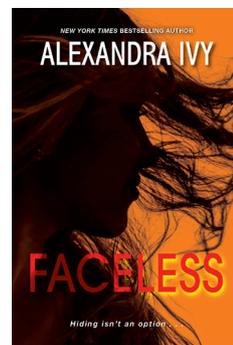
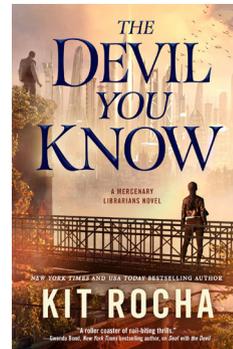
With staccato-style sentences, Anders brings new and returning readers up to speed on the ruthless Chronos corporation, which has deployed a team of mercenaries and scientists to gain access to a deadly virus. The only thing standing in Chronos' way is hot-shot pilot Leo Eddowes and the other members of her secret military unit.

Leo and her unit have traveled to Alaska in search of a scientist who stole a vial of the virus from Chronos. When Leo decides to follow a lead without

the rest of her team, she ends up crashing her plane in the wilderness after being attacked by Chronos' goons. Leo is saved by the mysterious Elias Thorne, who has his own tortured history with the evil corporation.

Anders has created two great protagonists who are equally skilled and equally wary of one another. Every sentence, every scene, is packed with emotion. The landscape provides as strong a foe as the enemies who are pursuing the pair, which makes the story all the more stressful. This is an exhausting book, but in the best possible way. It's the literary version of a Bruce Springsteen song, meant to be sung loudly and reverberate from every pore.

—Dolly R. Sickles

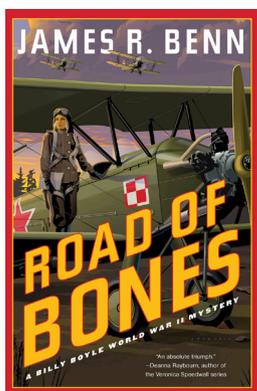




My Sweet Girl

Sri Lankan writer Amanda Jayatissa's debut, **My Sweet Girl** (Berkley, \$26, 9780593335086), is a dark thriller of international deceit and murder, narrated in alternating chapters by 12-year-old Paloma, who is adopted from a Sri Lankan orphanage by a wealthy American couple, and her adult self 18 years later. The Paloma of the present day is estranged from her parents and haunted by hallucinations (or are they?) of a strange woman who eats the faces of beautiful young girls. One evening, Paloma returns to her apartment and finds her roommate brutally murdered, after which she flees the scene and gets blackout drunk. By the time the police arrive, the scene has been sanitized, leaving no trace of any such killing, but how can that be? Paloma doesn't know, and neither do we. As the story unfolds, the reader begins to recognize incongruities between the younger and older Palomas, incongruities that are not easily reconcilable and are increasingly unsettling. I thought I had twigged to the ending before the

Big Reveal, and I was quite proud of myself. But I was way wrong. I love it when that happens.

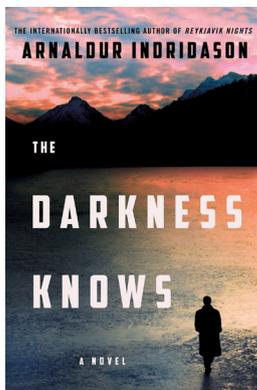


Road of Bones

September, 1944. As James R. Benn's 16th Billy Boyle novel, **Road of Bones** (Soho Crime, \$27.95, 9781641292009), opens, the U.S. Army investigator is hitching a ride to Ukraine aboard a B-17 bomber. And then all hell breaks loose: German fighter planes drive the bombers into ground fire range, and one by one the American airplanes fall, including the one carrying Billy's friend, Big Mike Miecznikowski. Some of those aboard the disabled bomber parachute to an unknown fate below, but it is not clear whether Big Mike is among them. Billy's airplane makes it safely through to Poltava air base in Ukraine, where he has been tapped to investigate the murder of a pair of soldiers, one Russian, one American. If the Russians have their way, it will be an American taking the fall. Optics are everything, right? Billy must balance his investigation with his personal need to learn the fate of his friend and also somehow placate the Russians at every turn—no

mean feat. A fascinating subplot has Billy encountering the Night Witches, an all-female band of Russian fighter pilots who took stealth bombing to a new level by turning off their engines as they approached their targets, silently gliding in to deliver their deadly payloads. As always, Benn covers all his bases with a taut narrative, relatable characters and crisp dialogue. **Road of Bones** is another superlative installment in the best World War II mystery series on offer.

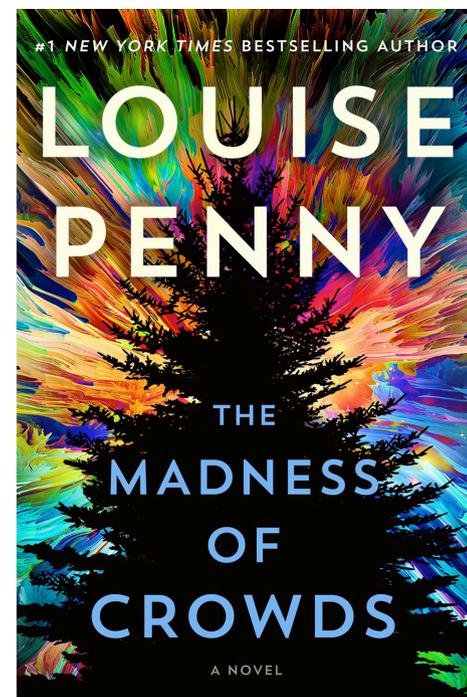
Sign up for our mystery newsletter at BookPage.com/enews.



The Darkness Knows

Thirty years ago, a Reykjavik businessman named Sigurvin disappeared. A suspect, Hjaltalín, was arrested at the time but later released for lack of evidence. Now, thanks to climate change, the melting of an Icelandic glacier has exposed Sigurvin's frozen body (surely the textbook definition of a "cold case"). Arnaldur Indridason's latest novel, **The Darkness Knows** (Minotaur, \$27.99, 9781250765468), finds retired police detective Konrád, the original investigator on the case, at loose ends. He has never entirely recovered from the death of his wife, and truth be told, he is somewhat bored with life nowadays. Konrád's initial mandate is simply to re-interview Hjaltalín, who is now incarcerated for a different crime, but he continues to maintain his innocence. Konrád has no official standing, but the case nagged at him when he first worked on it, and he finds it beginning to nag at him once again. So he launches what is essentially a private citizen's investigation, stripped of most

of the tools of his trade. It is slow going, as might be expected of a decades-old case, and Konrád is not as spry as he once was. So if you are looking for explosive action and edge-of-the-seat suspense, it would be best to look elsewhere. **The Darkness Knows** is slowly and deliberately plotted. No stone is left unturned; indeed, no stone is left undescribed. But Indridason is a consummate storyteller, one of the cream of the Nordic noir crop, and if methodical police procedurals are your thing, you have come to the right place.



★ The Madness of Crowds

The Madness of Crowds (Minotaur, \$28.99, 9781250145260) is Louise Penny's 17th novel featuring Sûreté du Québec Chief Inspector Armand Gamache. The chief inspector is well known among his compatriots and readers alike for staring down ethical dilemmas, and this time he is facing a real conundrum. In Gamache's Canada, there is a growing (or festering, depending on your viewpoint) movement dedicated to the idea of withholding care or outright euthanizing older and disabled people in order to preserve valuable resources for those likely to have better outcomes. The de facto leader of the movement is professor Abigail Robinson, a statistician whose numbers are more on target than her morality. It falls to Gamache to provide security for Robinson as she speaks to an unruly crowd of both supporters and naysayers. Gunshots ring out, and Gamache secures his charge. But the professor's assistant is brutally bludgeoned to death shortly afterward. Gamache has personal feelings about this ethical dilemma, as one of his grandchildren has Down syndrome. Gamache's decision to afford protection to a constituent who, even theoretically, threatens a family member isn't one he takes lightly. **The Madness of Crowds** is not an easy read by any means, but it's easily one of the best mystery novels (or novels of *any* genre) in recent memory.

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.

Dying to get away

These vacations are anything but relaxing.

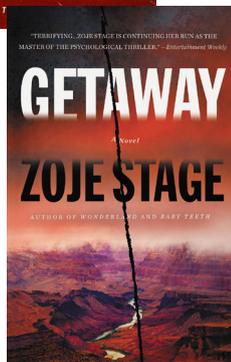
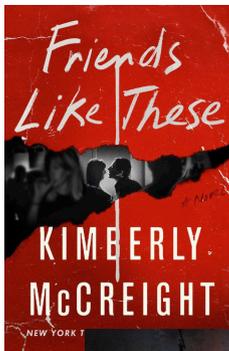
Good company, beautiful scenery, false pretenses and uninvited guests make for nerve-rattling, riveting armchair travel in these two thrillers.

At the beginning of Kimberly McCreight's **Friends Like These** (Harper, \$27.99, 9780063061569), five friends reunite for a bachelor party in the Catskills. The sixth member of their group, Alice, died by suicide in college, and they've kept secrets about the events surrounding her death ever since. But the trip has a more serious purpose that's yet another secret to keep: The group plans to hold an intervention to convince one of their number, Keith, to check into rehab.

When the weekend is over, someone is missing, someone is dead and Julia Scutt, a local detective, is tasked with prying the truth from the insular, privileged and totally shellshocked group. And Julia has a tragedy in her own past that may be clouding her judgment.

The community where the party's host, Jonathan, owns an opulent country house is in an economic slump, which results in a tense dynamic where "weekenders" like this group are both hated and needed. It can be hard at first to distinguish the individual members of the clique; their relationships and connections could fill a wall chart with connecting strings. But their collective self-absorption makes it that much more satisfying when some comeuppance is finally distributed.

As each character narrates their version of events, new pieces of information bring you closer to the truth... if only there weren't so many lies mixed in. The false leads, big cast of characters and huge twists make **Friends Like These** an entertaining puzzle. Take this book on your vacation and be glad you're not on *their* vacation.



Getaway (Mulholland, \$28, 9780316242509) drops three women into the Grand Canyon for some adventurous hiking and unforeseen terror. Sisters Imogen and Beck have made the trip before with their family, but in the intervening years, Imogen suffered two major traumas that have turned her focus inward. Beck hopes the trip will restore her sister's courage and also help mend Imogen's rift with their mutual friend

Tilda, a less experienced hiker who waits until they're well into the hike to tell them as much. That alone would be bad enough, but soon all three women begin to have the sneaking suspicion that they are not alone on the trail.

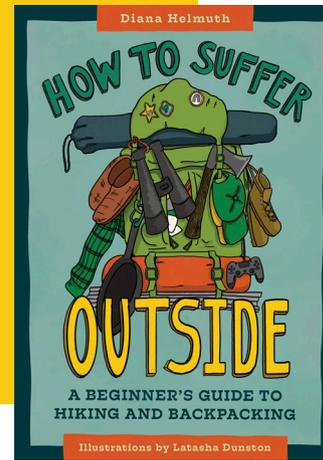
Author Zoje Stage (*Baby Teeth*) gives this horrifying thriller emotional depth through a careful layering of big themes and tiny details. Stage has hiked the Grand Canyon herself, and her characters' descriptions of the hike have an immersive, absorbing effect. The violence in this novel is truly

frightening, more so because of how it contrasts with the beauty of the canyon's vistas, sounds and silences.

When there are three people in a challenging setting, two are almost always aligned while the third feels left out, and that can shut down communication and make it difficult to solve problems. Empathetic Imogen thinks she knows how best to help, but her compassion may be blinding her to how dire their situation really is.

Getaway plays with shifting loyalties, old hurts and the potential for reconciliation in a way that's emotionally affecting but never slows down the plot. A truly devilish thriller, it balances gut-twisting suspense with heartfelt connection.

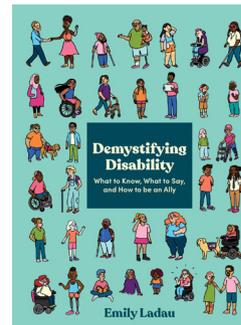
—Heather Seggel



★ How to Suffer Outside

"If you can walk, put stuff in a bag, and remember to eat, you can backpack," declares Diana Helmuth in the perfectly titled **How to Suffer Outside** (Mountaineers, \$18.95, 9781680513110). I'm not entirely sure I buy this statement, but that didn't stop me from enjoying the heck out of Helmuth's funny, frank writing. Her perspective is a breath of fresh air on the whole fresh-air-and-nature thing. While she claims to be no expert backpacker herself, she drops all kinds of useful,

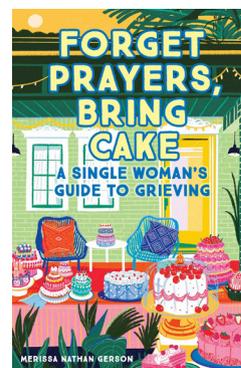
earned wisdom in these pages, spinning tales from her own hiking adventures along the way. Were I a bookseller, I would press this book on customers regardless of their interest in backpacking. I would recommend it for the voice and storytelling: Here, stay inside if you want. Turn off Netflix, and read this.



Demystifying Disability

The disabled community is vast and diverse, and society is due for a paradigm shift in thinking and talking about its members. With **Demystifying Disability** (Ten Speed, \$16, 9781984858979), activist and writer Emily Ladau is a responsible guide and advocate for change. Ladau recognizes that just as there are multitudes of disabilities, there is room for all of us to learn more about disabled people's varied experiences and make our world more inclusive and accessible. Changes in vocabulary—like opting for

disabled instead of euphemistic words like *handi-capable*, or avoiding words like *lame* and *idiot* as common pejoratives—help shift mindsets one word at a time. Changes in media norms are necessary as well. Ladau explains how feel-good stories about disabled people "overcoming" their disabilities actually reinforce the bias toward able-bodied people. Right now, ableist beliefs and behaviors still fly under the radar, and Ladau's careful treatment of this subject is a corrective that can help us all be better humans.



Forget Prayers, Bring Cake

While the title is pleasingly cheeky, **Forget Prayers, Bring Cake** (Mandala, \$16.99, 9781647224196) never loses sight of the fact that there's nothing funny about the death of a loved one. Grieving is always difficult, but it can be immeasurably more painful if you're a single woman, argues Merissa Nathan Gerson—on top of all the ways our culture is ill-suited, period, for allowing us the time and space and voice that grief demands. After learning that in other cultures there's an individual known as a *moirologist*—"a non-married woman hired . . .

to strike the earth, tear at her hair, scream and wail and provoke others to grieve for the dead"—Gerson offers herself, with this book, as a compassionate, experienced voice for those who have suffered a loss. Her advice and personal stories offer solace and insight for any mourner but are shared with a keen eye toward the unique experience of losing a loved one when you are young and single.

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

get thee to a nunnery

A 12th-century abbess deserves to be your next literary hero. Lauren Groff, author of *Fates and Furies*, shares how she found refuge in her latest novel's community of nuns.

Lauren Groff's fourth novel, **Matrix** (Riverhead, \$28, 9781594634499), is a mesmerizing portrait of a remarkable nun in 12th-century England who over- sees an abbey in a rapidly changing and sometimes hostile environment. After Groff's previous books, which have explored small towns, utopian communities and Floridian flora and fauna, my most pressing questions for the author can be boiled down to, why a novel about nuns? And why now?

"Those are the questions," Groff says with a laugh, speaking by video call from a writer's retreat in Italy. She traces the novel's genesis back to three years ago, when she was at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University, working on a very different novel, one she hopes that at some point will come into the world. "I was surrounded by artists and scholars that were doing things that were so far beyond my ken," she recalls. "Every day was like a mini-explosion in my brain."

She attended a lecture on medieval nuns by Dr. Katie Bugyis, who has researched the lives of nuns based on the liturgy they produced and used. "It was as if she had opened up my brain and threw her light in," Groff says. "I knew it was the next thing I was going to write."

Marie, the nun protagonist of **Matrix**, is banished from Eleanor of Aquitaine's court at age 17 and sent to live in a penurious abbey. Awkward and miserable, Marie makes the best of her situation and soon rises to the senior position of abbess. Bit by bit she transforms the tumbledown, muddy convent into a prosperous estate with verdant fields, healthy flocks and a successful scriptorium, protected by a forest labyrinth and Marie's shrewd awareness of shifting political winds. Along the way, she is inspired by spiritual visions and memories of her mother's family, whom she accompanied on the early Crusades.

Marie's story is based on that of Marie de France, considered to be one of France's most important writers and the country's first acknowledged female poet. So little is known about Marie that her biography is merely outline; Groff describes trying to research her as "being handed a poetic form."

But we do know some things about her, Groff says. "We know approximately when she lived and where. We know she was a noble or gentlewoman because she was able to write in several languages. She was educated at a time when most women were not. And most importantly, we know what she wrote: fables and *lais*," or narrative poems of courtly love.

Elements from Marie's *lais* appear throughout **Matrix**, which is rich with furred rosebuds, blooming trees and enclosed gardens. "It was a joyous experience to go back to the *lais*, which I knew from college, and to create her life from the work," Groff says. "I know it's the opposite of what scholars do, but I'm not a scholar, I'm a fiction writer."

Groff did a tremendous amount of research for **Matrix**, including visiting a small Benedictine convent in Connecticut where she was struck by the strong ties of kinship and community. "I was profoundly moved by the way the older nuns, who are not far from death, are cared for by the people who love them

so deeply," she says. "It's a definition of family that is not often represented in the outside world."

Groff drew from this idyllic setting to create her fictional community of sisters. Marie's convent is a place of female friendships and love affairs, scholarship and learning. It's a refuge for outsider women and those with untapped talents, ranging from engineering to calligraphy to animal husbandry. "I wanted to live in a world of women," Groff says. "I wanted to hear women's voices, experience only a female gaze."

Examining the balance of community and the individual is nothing new for Groff, whose novels *The Monsters of Templeton* and *Arcadia* also examined small-town life and intentional communities. Even *Fates and Furies* depicts a closed community of two people whose insular marriage makes it difficult for anyone else to penetrate their intense bond.

"You know," Groff remarks ruefully, "I keep thinking I'm writing a brand-new book, but maybe I'm writing the same thing every time. I was raised in the small town of Cooperstown, New York, and I was utterly fascinated by the way individuals acted within a tight and closed community. It was early training for storytelling to be among growing, living stories of other people that you could watch out of the corner of your eye. A small place in the middle of nowhere was a real petri dish for understanding human behavior."

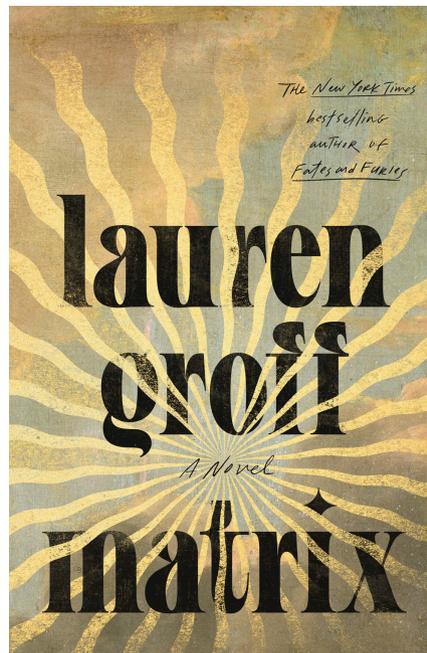
Even though the world of **Matrix** could not seem further away from 21st-century America, Groff is well aware of how current affairs informed the writing of her new novel—and indeed, all of her work. "It's very much in our national DNA to insist on the importance of the individual," she says. "But a country cannot be a country without

the collective, and right now the pressure points between these two courses are rising. My work struggles with this paradox and explores how Americans are choosing to live."

At several points in the novel, Marie experiences striking visions that she does not share with the other nuns but rather keeps in a series of private notebooks. These visions draw imagery and language from the Bible, a seminal book in Groff's upbringing and an early step in her lifelong love of literature.

Groff was raised in the Presbyterian church, where her father was a deacon, and she remembers the church of her childhood as a vaulted, soaring space, "like the inside of a whale." The experience of being in communion with others while singing or praying had a meaningful aesthetic impact. But it was the stories from the Bible that hooked her.

"Stories are the thing that made me a person," she says. "I was the kind of kid who was filled with religious fervor. I had a beautiful little Bible with fine tissue pages and gilt edges. I would sit and read it at night, just trying to get through all the begats and the thous, and just be filled with this unappeasable longing for the stories. And then I started seeing the stories reflected back at



Visit BookPage.com to read our starred review of **Matrix**.

"Awe is the most powerful emotion I know, because within awe, there is fear, there is love, there is wonder."



me from the other things I was reading. It was such an exciting feeling, like an electrical charge, to see biblical stories echoing in literature.”

Over time, Groff explains, literature took the place of religion. “I’ve become a secular believer, if that makes sense. I believe in the goodness of humanity. I am moved by the natural world in a way that is akin to the kinds of things I experienced as a child. When I am writing, I try to give the reader a few of those moments of wonder and awe. Awe is the most powerful emotion I know, because within awe, there is fear, there is love, there is wonder.”

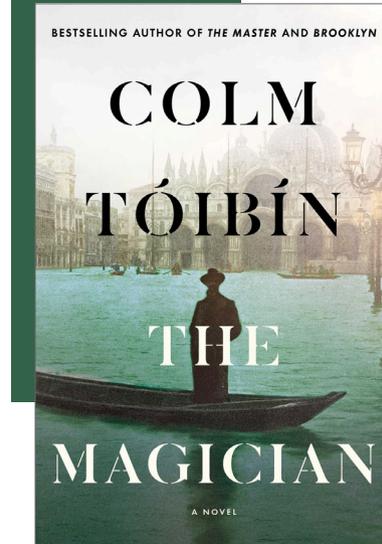
The awe-filled moments in *Matrix* are too many to count, whether in the poetry of Marie’s visions, her longing for friends who are far away or the vivid descriptions of the creation of the labyrinth, a structure associated with religious contemplation that in Groff’s hands becomes a symbol, a weapon and a line of defense.

Marie conceives of the labyrinth less as a place for the nuns to find peace and more as an instrument to separate themselves from the outside world, which she perceives as dangerous and threatening. For Groff, the symbol of the labyrinth goes even deeper. She read about ancient ruins in England that had been buried underground over centuries and were now re-emerging. “Because of climate change and the wet ground drying out, the impressions of these ruins are literally coming up from the earth and becoming apparent,” she says. “I loved that idea of a hidden structure that only through trauma could be revealed. The novel is structured around the shape of a labyrinth, although it’s deeply embedded and I’m not sure anyone can see it. But it’s there.”

Matrix tells a tale of the astounding ingenuity, strength and female companionship that flourished during an era of intense patriarchal oppression. *Matrix* is the Latin word for mother, but additional definitions include a plant whose seeds were used for producing other plants, a grid, an organizational structure and, perhaps most significantly, “the bedrock in geology in which you find gems.”

Groff has created a labyrinth of jewel-like moments, selected from an incredible woman’s life during a time ostensibly far away from our own, and transformed it into a novel that is perfect for right now.

—Lauren Bufferd



The Magician

Fourteen years ago, Colm Tóibín gave us the exquisite novel *The Master*, a lyrical and probing portrait of Henry James that was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2004. *The Magician* (Scribner, \$28, 9781476785080) takes a similar approach to Nobelist Thomas Mann, and though Tóibín has not quite captured lightning in a bottle a second time, this deeply researched, highly accomplished fictional narrative still makes for compelling reading. While *The Master* focused on just five years in James’ life, *The Magician* covers some 60 years in Mann’s life, lending it a more sweeping trajectory. In many

ways, the novel is as much about Mann’s eccentric family as about the great writer himself.

Tóibín has assuredly drawn heavily on Mann’s diaries, which were published to great attention in 1975, 20 years after Mann’s death. Those private papers revealed truths the circumspect writer had been careful to conceal during his lifetime, particularly regarding his sexuality. Since the 1912 publication of *Death*

in Venice, speculation existed about Mann’s attraction to men, but the father of six was largely able to deflect such talk. Tóibín makes Mann’s generally repressed but occasionally acted-upon sexuality one of the throughlines of the narrative in *The Magician*, but it is by no means the sole focus of this meaty fictional biography.

Mann lived through the shattering events of the first half of the 20th century, but he was born into the placid, privileged world of the fin de siècle German bourgeoisie—a world he re-created in his 1901 masterwork, *Buddenbrooks*. Propriety and discretion were his watchwords, so it is all the more remarkable that he sired a brood of rule-breaking offspring. The opposite of their cautious father, three of Mann’s children were openly gay, and two of those, Erika and Klaus, were political and artistic provocateurs. The family also had deep-seated emotional disorders; Mann’s two sisters and two of his children, as well as his sister-in-law, died by suicide.

Mann himself, as Tóibín presents him, was a stoic observer of all of this familial drama, trussed by his Teutonic restraints. Only the horrific disruption of World War II, which scattered the family and jettisoned Mann and his wife, Katia, to Los Angeles, seemed to awaken the elder statesman to the evils of the wider world and the fragility of his family. The pages of Tóibín’s novel dealing with the war years crackle and soar above the rest.

In addition to the colorful Manns themselves, *The Magician* is populated by literary and cultural icons—Christopher Isherwood and W.H. Auden (who married Erika to protect her with British citizenship), Arnold Schoenberg and Richard Strauss, Gustav and Alma Mahler, Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt—underscoring how Mann lived within the circumference of more than one great circle. His children dubbed him “the Magician” because he performed tricks for them at dinner, but Tóibín suggests Mann was more audience than performer—“the Observer,” perhaps, transfiguring his observations of others into enduring art, even though he never fully understood himself.

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.

MARAUDING MONKEYS AND BANDIT BEARS

Mary Roach is hot on the trail of nature's outlaws.

Wandering through Aspen, Colorado, at 3:30 a.m., Mary Roach turned into a dark alley and encountered a burly intruder: a full-grown black bear happily gorging himself on restaurant waste. Roach knew full well that the bear could be dangerous. She also knew that the bear shouldn't grow accustomed to being close to humans because it could lead to bolder, more aggressive behavior in the future. Nonetheless, she pleaded with her companion from the National Wildlife Research Center, "Can we go just a little bit closer? Just a foot closer?"

As she chats by phone from her home in the Bay Area, Roach vividly recalls that impulse to forget everything she knew about responsible wildlife encounters. "None of that was in my head," she says. "It was just, 'I want to get closer.' . . . People almost seem to have an inborn affinity for animals—particularly big, furry, kind of cute ones. People are drawn to them. They want to feed them. And there begins the problem."

That Aspen garbage gangster is just one of a variety of furry fugitives Roach writes about in **Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law**, her fascinating and often hilarious investigation into what happens when creatures commit crimes ranging from murder and manslaughter to robbery, jaywalking, home invasion and trespassing. Ever since her 2003 debut, *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*, Roach has been taking readers on a series of surprising explorations—from space travel to the afterlife. Like Susan Orlean, Roach has a knack for taking a deep, deep dive into unexpected and sometimes even mundane subjects

(the alimentary canal, for instance, in *Gulp*) and unearthing a narrative feast of freaky fun facts and captivating characters.

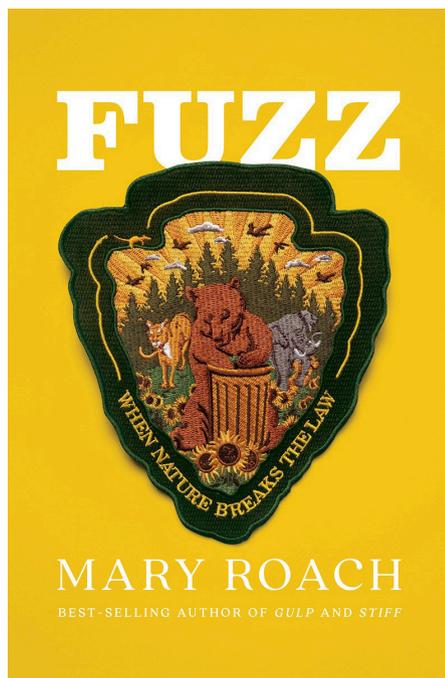
Roach started honing her keen observation skills early, as an elementary school student in Norwich, Vermont, where she and a friend sometimes ventured out at night to peek into people's windows. (Decades later, her mother was absolutely horrified when Roach fessed up to these outings.) "We weren't Peeping Toms, obviously," she says. "We weren't looking for naked women or men. We just liked to look in."

And that, Roach says, is the curiosity factor that sparks her writing. "My motivating sentiment is 'What's going on in there? This is a world I don't know. Maybe it's interesting.'"

She also mentions another childhood adventure that may have signaled an early predilection for wildlife research. She and her friend called it "The Potted Meat Project,"

in which the two pals would hang or bury potted meat sandwiches in the woods in Etna, New Hampshire, "playing naturalists. Then we'd go and take notes and look for tracks," Roach says. When they returned, the food was gone and there were some tracks, but "we didn't follow up. We were in fifth or sixth grade, and we had the attention span of a gnat."

Writing **Fuzz** involved much more follow-through as Roach trekked with man-eating leopards in the Indian Himalayas, investigated gull vandals at the Vatican the night before Easter Mass and tracked mountain lions in California. Thankfully, she finished these travels before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. "It would have been a disaster,"



Fuzz

Norton, \$26.95, 9781324001935

Science

"My motivating sentiment is 'What's going on in there? This is a world I don't know. Maybe it's interesting.'"



she says, imagining what might have been. “Yes, you can talk to scientists on Zoom, but that doesn’t work for me. I need something I can tag along for and see as it unfolds. That’s so much more interesting for my readers, and for me, honestly. I really love that part of what I do: the research, and the being there.”

Because of this commitment, Roach encountered intense, unforgettable new worlds as she researched **Fuzz**. In northern India, she came within 100 yards of a leopard wearing a radio collar—but, much to her disappointment, she never saw the animal, who was on the other side

“Yes, you can talk to scientists on Zoom, but that doesn’t work for me. I need something I can tag along for and see as it unfolds.”

of a river. “I would’ve loved to be in the classic *National Geographic* scenario, surrounded by these creatures, but sometimes it doesn’t work out that way,” she says. In another part of India, she armed herself with bananas because she wanted to know “what it was like to be mugged by monkeys,” which is a widespread problem in many areas. “I was nervous,” she admits. “They’re not large animals, but they can get aggressive.

I was standing with a bag of like six bananas, so I was asking for it.” The monkeys were speedy snatchers, as it turned out, so they left Roach unscathed.

Reading one of Roach’s books is always a breezy, informative treat, but a lot of behind-the-scenes effort goes into their creation, given Roach’s trademark immersive approach. The creation of this book, especially, involved hurdles from the start. In fact, Roach initially contemplated covering a completely different topic: natural disasters and the science of rescue, first aid, prevention and preparation. Eventually, however, she realized that she wouldn’t be allowed to tag along with first responders during those crucial early moments of a disaster.

After that, Roach turned her attention to tiger penises. (Yep, you read that right.) She’s fascinated by forensics, whether humans or animals are involved, and an expert taught her how to tell counterfeit tiger penises from real ones, which are valued in some cultures for their supposed powers of virility. “I can fill you in if you want to know,” she says with a laugh. “I’ve got all of these bizarre photographs of dried mammal genitalia on my phone.” However, once again, she couldn’t further develop this subject because she couldn’t legally visit crime scenes, which often involved poachers.

Illustration by Jared Oriell from **Fuzz**, used with permission of W.W. Norton.

Roach then had a eureka moment: “What if we turned it around, and the animals were the perpetrators rather than the victims?” Before long she was in Reno, Nevada, attending a five-day training session for wildlife officers tasked with investigating animal attacks. (She refers to these professionals in chapter one of **Fuzz** as “maul cops.”) Roach was gloriously in her element, hearing tales of bears discovered in the back seat of a car eating popcorn and a cougar wrongfully accused of murder. (The murderer was actually a human, armed with an ice pick, who years later bragged about the crime.) During one training session, Roach and the other participants headed out to examine simulated crime scenes in the woods so they could guess what had happened. As with any crime scene, DNA is often key, but with animal attacks, clues are often contaminated by scavenger animals who arrive after a death. Roach relished such forensic details, jotting down remarks like, “Bears are more bite bite bite bite. It’s a big mess.”

“You spend three or four days with those people, and you get the sense that, my God, animals are attacking everyone all the time,” Roach says. “But . . . it’s actually super rare. Animal attacks just tend to get so much media attention when they happen. It eclipses anything else happening in the news, even human murders.”

In addition to killer animals, Roach’s book includes one chapter on poisonous beans, as well as one on “danger trees”—falling trees or limbs that sometimes kill bystanders. When one such tree was being blown up for safety reasons in British Columbia, Canada, Roach got to be a “guest detonator.” “That was awesome,” she says. “I enjoy large explosions.”

With all of this deadly data, has writing **Fuzz** changed how Roach feels about outdoor adventures?

Roach explains that when she hikes in California, she sometimes sees signs warning of mountain lions and coyotes in the area. “My first reaction is that I’d love to encounter one,” she says. “I don’t have a fear of any of them. But at the same time, it saddens me, because whenever these animals are coming in contact with humans more frequently, it doesn’t go well for the animals.”

—Alice Cary



Visit BookPage.com to read our starred review of **Fuzz**.

MORE SCIENTIFIC SHENANIGANS FROM MARY ROACH



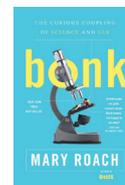
Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers (2003)

“Inevitably, the doctors and scientists I wanted to visit would ask me to tell them about the book. . . . What could I say? ‘It’s a fun book about dead people. You’ll love it!’”



Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife (2005)

“What happens when we die? . . . Will some part of my personality, my me-ness persist? What will that feel like? What will I do all day? Is there a place to plug in my lap-top?”



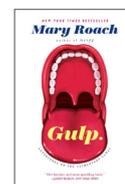
Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex (2008)

“The unspoken assumption was that . . . people study sex because they are perverts. Or, at the very least, because they harbor an unseemly interest in the matter. Which makes some people wary of sex researchers and other people extremely interested.”



Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void (2010)

“It surprised me to learn that one of the biggest problems of living in space long-term is boredom. One of the Apollo astronauts commented that he ‘should have brought some crossword puzzles.’”



Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal (2013)

“How lovely to picture one’s dinner making its way down a tranquil, winding waterway, digestion and excretion no more upsetting or off-putting than a cruise along the Rhine.”



Grunt: The Curious Science of Humans at War (2016)

“This book is a salute to the scientists and the surgeons, running along in the wake of combat, lab coats flapping.”

Beautiful World, Where Are You

By Sally Rooney

Literary Fiction

You never know what a person might be going through. A famous novelist may be plagued by insecurity. A childhood friend who grew up in a manor house may have epilepsy. Good fortune isn't always the panacea some would believe.

Sally Rooney (*Normal People*) knows this well. Her first two novels were laser-sharp investigations into the lives of characters in their 20s and early 30s. She continues this work in her third book, **Beautiful World, Where Are You** (FSG, \$28, 9780374602604), an ambitious novel that deepens her earlier themes.

As with Rooney's debut, *Conversations With Friends*, the new book focuses on a quartet of characters. Alice is a novelist with mixed feelings about her early success. She says of her public persona, "I hate her with all my energy," animosity that

leads to a spell in a psychiatric hospital.

After years in New York, she moves to Dublin and meets Felix, who works in a warehouse. She invites him to Rome for an event promoting the Italian translation of her book. Their relationship deepens but not without tension over the imbalances between them.

Meanwhile, Alice's university friend Eileen has become a low-paid editorial assistant. She has rediscovered feelings for Simon, who grew up in the aforementioned manor house and is deeply religious.

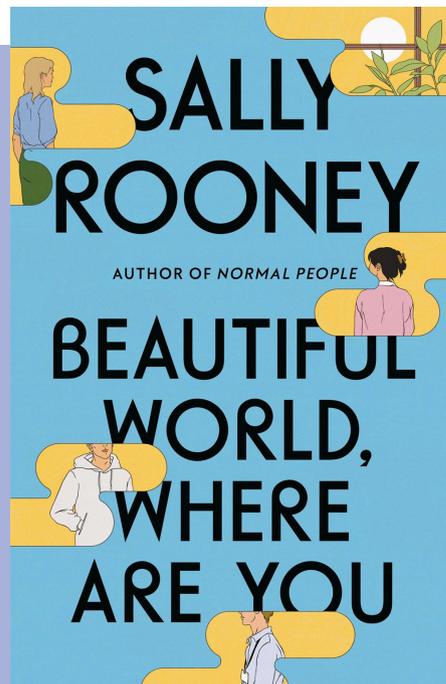
Throughout the book, Alice and Eileen exchange long emails. Interspersed among them are disquisitions on socialism versus capitalism, political conservatism and whether the nature of beauty can

survive in a social-media era.

Unlike Rooney's previous novels, parts of this one feel self-consciously artsy, with a chapter-long backstory and paragraphs that run for many pages. But on the way to its heartfelt destination, this flight is still smooth despite brief, mild turbulence. Rooney writes with uncommon perceptiveness, and her ability to find deeper meaning in small details, such as knowing how a friend takes his coffee, remains unparalleled.

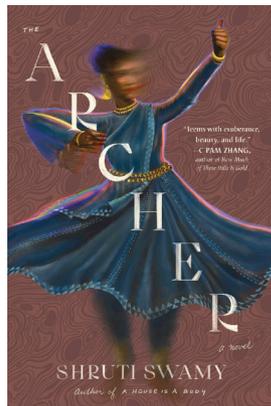
Beautiful World, Where Are You is a brutally honest portrait of flawed characters determined to prove "that the most ordinary thing about human beings is not violence or greed but love and care."

—Michael Magras



The Archer

By Shruti Swamy



Coming of Age

Vidya is a girl set apart in her time, growing up in a crowded tenement in 1960s Bombay, a place that does not value girls as it does boys. She chafes against men's unwanted attention, and her dark skin makes her feel

alienated by her own extended family. Her mother's mysterious ways perplex her, and her father's demands keep a distance between them.

But Vidya's restlessness is a gift, though it will take many years for her to understand and embrace it. As she journeys slowly into womanhood, she takes up a serious, devoted study of kathak, the storytelling dance that mesmerized her as a little girl. Her process of becoming forms the heartbeat of **The Archer** (Algonquin, \$26.95, 9781616209902), and the narrative shifts from third person to first as she matures and claims her place in her own story.

Shruti Swamy's visceral first novel after her critically acclaimed story collection, *A House Is a Body*, **The Archer** blends the corporeal and the spiritual in a story about what it means to be a woman and an artist. Swamy's writing is transportive, precise and almost hypnotic, not unlike the controlled

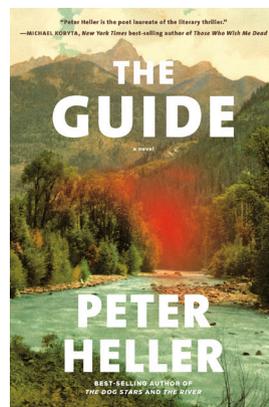
and expressive dance form that Vidya loves. The author's perceptive and observant eye misses nothing, from a single ripening mango on a tree to the inner workings of a young female mind. In depicting Vidya's interior world, Swamy captures both the dark side and long-awaited light of dawn, of discovery, of fulfillment. There is darkness, yes, but also "those dreams where you remember you could fly."

As Vidya maneuvers through worlds—home, school, women, men and dance, always dance—she discovers life. As a child, she "wanted to be marked, altered, changed. Split open," and by the end of the novel, she is.

—Melissa Brown

The Guide

By Peter Heller



Thriller

Peter Heller takes readers on another thrilling wilderness adventure in **The Guide** (Knopf, \$27, 9780525657767), set at a luxurious fly-fishing compound near Crested Butte, Colorado. Protagonist Jack, first introduced in Heller's

Deliverance-like novel, *The River*, is still recovering from the tragedy that unfolded before his eyes

during a canoe trip three years ago. He has also never recovered from witnessing his mother's violent death when he was a boy, another tragedy for which he feels responsible.

A virus known as Covid Redux threatens the world, but Jack hopes to lose himself in the rhythms of a pristine Rocky Mountain river as a fishing guide. "It'd be nice to have one summer of peace," he muses. Fishing, in fact, is Jack's therapy for his trauma and PTSD: "He had learned that it was much less a distraction than a form of connection: of connecting to the best part of himself, and to a discipline that demanded he stay open to every sense, to the nuances of the season and to the instrument of his own body, his own agility or fatigue."

Jack is assigned to guide the perfect client, a fishing expert named Alison K who also happens to be kind, beautiful and a world-famous singer. Romance ensues, and things could hardly be better for Jack—except for strange events that build from a slow drip into a heavy cascade. There are security cameras on bridges and a nearby closely guarded fortress. Jack's boss barks gruff, odd orders at him. Jack hears shots fired and strange screams, and finds a mysterious boot buried in the dirt that later disappears.

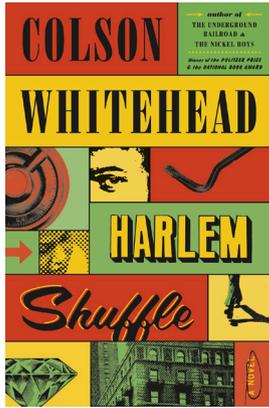
Heller is an expert at building suspense, and he's a first-rate nature writer, lending authenticity to the wealth of wilderness details he provides. (He has traveled the world as an expedition kayaker.) He also uses a notable layout technique—adding space between each paragraph—that makes readers turn his thrilling pages even faster. One warning, however: Heller's novels, especially *The River*,

are not for the faint of heart. Still, **The Guide** is a glorious getaway in every sense, a wild wilderness trip as well as a suspenseful journey to solve a chilling mystery.

—Alice Cary

★ Harlem Shuffle

By Colson Whitehead



Crime Fiction

Somewhere near the end of Colson Whitehead's tragicomic **Harlem Shuffle** (Doubleday, \$28.95, 9780385545136), I found myself giggling in spite of myself. What was happening on the page was horrible, but it was

hilarious. It was hilarious in the way that the comeuppance of the white supremacist clowns at the end of "Breaking Bad" was hilarious. The clowns in Whitehead's story probably didn't deserve their fate quite as much, but when they underestimated who they were dealing with, their fate was sort of sealed.

Like Dante leading us through the levels of hell, Colson Whitehead presents the levels of rotteness in 1960s New York City.

Indeed, like "Breaking Bad" and "The Wire," **Harlem Shuffle** acknowledges a sense of morality and an ethical code that may be strange to those of us who aren't crooks or cynics. Whitehead's Ray Carney is one of those rare people who can walk the line between crooked and straight and live to tell the tale. By day, he's a genial Harlem furniture salesman. By night, now and then, he fences "gently used items." He is a genuinely devoted family man, not just to his smart, sensible wife and adorable kids but also to his cousin and childhood bestie, Freddie. Everyone knows a Freddie. He's the perennial problem; he's the one who gets you into the trouble you can't even imagine. Yet you can't quit Freddie, because he's charming and he's handsome and he's stupid, and most of all, he's blood.

Like Dante leading us through the levels of hell, Whitehead presents the reader with the levels of rotteness in early to mid-1960s New York City. There are heists and stickups and beat downs, as well as the hypocrisy of the Black upper crust who think Carney is too dark-skinned to join

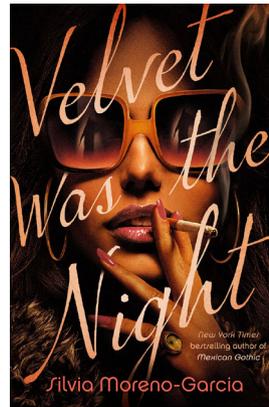
their club. There's the tiresome regularity of racist police violence and the protection money paid to the cops and local hoods with lovely monikers like Miami Joe, Cheap Brucie, Yea Big and Louie the Turtle. Downtown, the rottenness is carried out in pristine office towers built by rich white folks who own not only the buildings but also the machinery of the city itself. Carney gets caught up in all of it thanks to a smidgen of criminal DNA he inherited from his dad and, inevitably, Freddie's fecklessness.

At the end we see the chasm from which the World Trade Center's twin towers will rise, the fruit of a deal between more compromised New York mucky mucks. Sic transit gloria mundi, says the author. Thus passes worldly glory. **Harlem Shuffle** is yet another Colson Whitehead masterpiece.

—Arlene McKanic

Velvet Was the Night

By Silvia Moreno-Garcia



Noir

Silvia Moreno-Garcia has a knack for re-envisioning familiar, even comforting genre territory in vital new ways, something she proved with her last novel, the incredible *Mexican Gothic*. In that book, Moreno-Garcia turned her gift

for evolving classic tropes toward gothic tales full of spooky houses and spookier families. For her next trick, the author moves into pulp adventure territory for a novel that evokes the best conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s.

Set in the wake of the brutal murders of dozens of student protestors in Mexico City in June 1971, **Velvet Was the Night** (Del Rey, \$28, 9780593356821) follows two lost characters in a world that seems determined to suppress their spirits. Maite and Elvis are both dreamers of a sort, in love with music and stories and adventure, though their day-to-day existences could be not more disparate. Maite wants a more exciting life; she spends her days in a dull office job, is constantly reminded by her mother that she'll never live up to her sister's achievements, and loses herself in the romantic adventure tales she finds at the local newsstand. Elvis longs to escape the brutality of the paramilitary group he's been roped into.

When the case of a missing woman and an incriminating roll of film enters their lives, Maite and Elvis find themselves on a winding collision course, one that could open both their eyes to the ways in which their lives might change.

As always, Moreno-Garcia couches all her riffs on genre conventions within a deeply ingrained sense

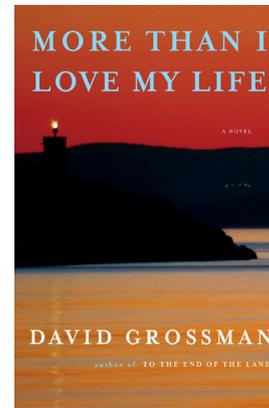
of character. Before we can fully grasp the many angles of the tangled, noir-tinged web she's weaving, we must first get to know Maite and Elvis and their different forms of ache and longing. Through precise, accessible yet poetic prose, these characters instantly come alive, and when they begin venturing into Mexico City's darker corners, we are eager to follow them. The result is another triumph for one of genre fiction's brightest voices, a book that will keep you up late into the night—not just for its intricate plotting but also for the two souls pulsing at its core.

—Matthew Jackson

★ More Than I Love My Life

By David Grossman

Translated by Jessica Cohen



Family Drama

Award-winning Israeli writer David Grossman's **More Than I Love My Life** (Knopf, \$27, 9780593318911) is a complex novel about the secrets that scar three generations of women for a lifetime.

Upon her 90th birthday, family matriarch Vera Novak reunites with her daughter, Nina, after five years of separation. Both Vera and Nina have committed the almost unpardonable act of abandoning young daughters—Vera when Nina was 6, and Nina when her own daughter, Gili, was even younger. The circumstances surrounding Vera's and Nina's departures are complex, slowly revealed and come to dominate all three women's emotional lives.

When Nina, who has spent several years on a tiny island between Lapland and the North Pole, announces that she's in the early stages of dementia, she asks Gili, a writer and filmmaker now approaching her 40s, and Gili's father, Rafael, formerly a film director himself, to record Vera's story. The novel reaches its climax when the foursome journeys to the island of Goli Otok, off the coast of Croatia, once home to a notorious labor camp and reeducation center for opponents of the Tito regime in the former Yugoslavia. Vera was sent there after the death of her husband under circumstances she's withheld from Nina all her life.

In harrowing passages that alternate with the present action, Vera recalls two months of her nearly three-year imprisonment when she was marched daily to a cliff top and forced to stand in the blazing sun, her only companion a sapling she shaded with her body.

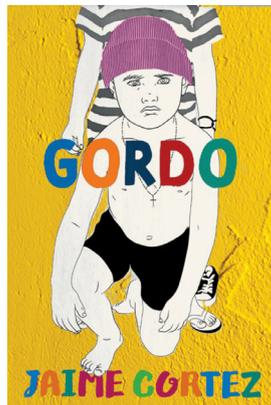
Vera, Nina and Gili are memorable characters, each suffering in different but equally profound ways. Grossman effectively inhabits the

consciousnesses of these women and doesn't spare the reader any of their considerable emotional pain. He's a sympathetic if unflinchingly honest chronicler of their anguish. A reader doesn't have to identify with the particulars of the women's stories to appreciate how the consequences of fateful choices can reverberate down through the generations.

—Harvey Freedenberg

★ **Gordo**

By Jaime Cortez



Short Stories

Jaime Cortez is a celebrated Chicano graphic novelist, visual artist, writer, teacher, performer and LGBTQ rights activist. His collection of short stories, **Gordo** (Black Cat, \$16, 9780802158086), reveals that he also possesses the eye

of a photographer. Like Diane Arbus or Weegee, Cortez depicts warts-and-all moments of vulnerability precisely, sometimes even harshly, and without sentiment. Unlike Arbus and Weegee, his camera is the printed word, rather than a Nikon or Speed Graphic.

The protagonist of many of these short stories is a young lad nicknamed Gordo who feels confused by the world as he grows into his oversize frame during the 1970s. He lives in the ag-industrial maw of central California, where a person's horizons are frequently circumscribed by the limited choices available (working in the fields or trundling off to one of the mega food processors that stipple the landscape), particularly if that person's first (or only) language is Spanish.

Like many of John Steinbeck's characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*, the people who inhabit the pages of **Gordo** are often poor in economic terms but lead richly complex lives. There's Raymundo, who as a boy grows his hair long, is bullied and labeled as queer, and as an adult unexpectedly finds himself in a position to assist a former classmate. Nelson Pardo is an Salvadoran ex-army colonel who hates his janitorial gig at the Jolly Giant vegetable plant. And Alex's accident with a chainsaw reveals his identity as a trans man to Gordo, who is shocked by the realization that everybody else already knew.

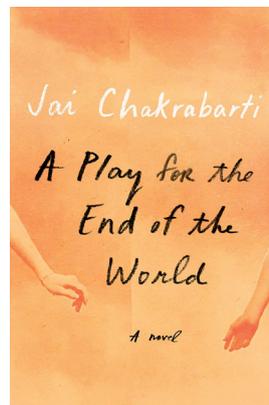
Cortez is native to this locale, and it shows. He succinctly portrays a largely overlooked California landscape that's as far removed from the worlds of Silicon Valley and Hollywood as it is from the 14 moons of Neptune. What ultimately draws the reader in, though, is the book's emotional honesty. Gordo is no smarty-pants, wise-beyond-his-years

kid; even as he grows up, he's often puzzled by life's abundant mysteries. The characters in and around his life exhibit kindness and cruelty in fluid motion. Cortez artfully frames these characters' daily struggles and captures them in the freeze-frame flash of a master at work.

—Thane Tierney

A Play for the End of the World

By Jai Chakrabarti



Historical Fiction

In Jai Chakrabarti's debut novel, **A Play for the End of the World** (Knopf, \$27.99, 9780525658924), a play by Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore is a magical and malleable symbol, used to help children accept a dark reality

and as a tool for resistance.

When Holocaust survivor Jaryk Smith was a child living in a orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi occupation of Poland, *The Post Office* represented the possibility of hope. In the children's production of the play, Jaryk played Amal, a little boy with an incurable disease who's confined indoors but makes the most of what he's got: a window. Amal makes friends at a distance and gleans vicarious joy from watching others play.

Through the play, Jaryk and his fellow orphans experienced a kind of liberation by imagination. But while the other children's relief was temporary, Jaryk had the life-altering fortune and burden of becoming the orphanage's lone survivor. Unlike his fellow orphans, unlike almost everyone else he had known in his short life, Jaryk got a chance at a long life.

A Play for the End of the World primarily focuses on what happens next, how new life takes root after extreme ruin. Chakrabarti frames recovery and renewal as a long and winding road, requiring more than a little grace and serendipity. For a long time, connections are difficult for Jaryk, relationships almost impossible. He experiences the world as though he's wrapped in thick, protective insulation. He has big feelings but they're subdued or self-censored.

Then in 1972, Jaryk's oldest friend, Misha, a man 10 years his senior who lived and worked at the orphanage when Jaryk was a child, dies unexpectedly while traveling alone in India for a production of *The Post Office*. Jaryk is tasked with taking Misha's place as director, and the play provides him with another shot at redemption. "I finally have a chance to do something good," he tells his weary girlfriend, Lucy Gardner.

Whereas "in Warsaw, *The Post Office* helped to

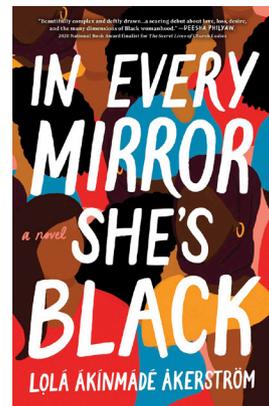
prepare the children for death," this production has a radically different agenda. In Gopalpur in West Bengal, where the people are poor and the territory disputed, the production's organizer, professor Rudra Bose, sees the famous play as a political tool: "It's all about a new life. About resistance!" But while political unrest is the novel's frequent backdrop, its most recurring theme is stubborn resilience: living fully in the face of sorrow, loving after immeasurable loss.

Chakrabarti's novel is realistic and tentative and breathtakingly poignant, with a payoff that's more than worth the trip if you have the heart to withstand it.

—Carole V. Bell

In Every Mirror She's Black

By Lolá Ákínmadé Àkerström



Literary Fiction

Nigerian American author Lolá Ákínmadé Àkerström's debut novel is as much a liberating battle cry as it is a searing, multifaceted examination of the hearts and minds of Black women navigating

white-dominated spaces. Told from multiple perspectives, **In Every Mirror She's Black** (Sourcebooks Landmark, \$26.99, 9781728240381) follows three Black women whose lives intersect in Sweden due to one wealthy white man named Jonny von Lundin.

Kemi, a first-generation American, is offered a lucrative position as Jonny's marketing firm's new diversity and inclusion adviser after a campaign's racial insensitivity makes international headlines. Brittany-Rae is a former model now working as a first-class flight attendant, which is where she first captures Jonny's attention and is soon swept up in a passionate romance with Jonny that appears to be the stuff of fairy tales. Finally, there is Muna, a Muslim refugee from Somalia who is the only surviving member of her family to be granted asylum in Sweden and now carves out a living as a janitorial worker at Jonny's company.

Despite Kemi's, Brittany-Rae's and Muna's vastly different backgrounds and circumstances, all three women initially believe that Sweden (and Jonny) could be the answer to their prayers and an opportunity for a fresh start, unburdened by their past and its traumas. Unfortunately, each woman soon learns that Sweden's "utopia" poses its own set of significant challenges and that its principles of inclusivity and tolerance only extend as far as the whitewashed homogeneity of the population. For immigrants and people of color, a hidden dark side

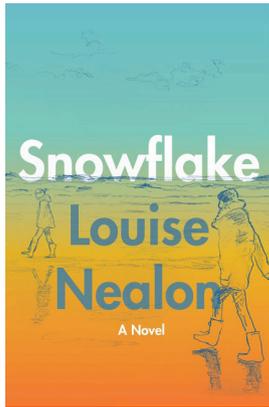
roils just below Sweden's glittering facade, transforming the country from refuge to prison for each of these women.

Åkerström, who moved to Sweden in 2009, has crafted an absorbing, if unsettling, narrative that dissects the realities of what it means to be a Black woman in the world today. She writes with genuine empathy for her characters and sheds light on their struggles with the understanding that there is no single Black experience. Rather than shying away from or oversimplifying difficult and complex topics, Åkerström has effectively packaged themes of racism, immigration, fetishism and otherness into an engrossing story that will enlighten its readers, regardless of their nationality or race.

—Stephenie Harrison

★ Snowflake

By Louise Nealon



Coming of Age

Let's cut to the chase: Louise Nealon's **Snowflake** (Harper, \$26.99, 9780063073937) is one of the most heartwarming, honest and brilliant coming-of-age novels you will read this year.

Nealon's debut is set on a dairy farm

in rural Ireland, and this idyllic setting is a fitting backdrop for the quirky yet endearing White family. Eighteen-year-old Debbie, the protagonist and narrator, has lived on the farm all her life with her mother, Maeve, and uncle Billy. A self-described country bumpkin, Debbie is a bit lost, a bit sad and rather reluctant to be a freshman at Trinity College in the big city of Dublin.

Louise Nealon's Snowflake is one of the most heartwarming and honest coming-of-age novels you will read this year.

Maeve, beatnik and beautiful, believes that her dreams are prophecies and therefore spends a lot of time sleeping, or when not asleep, writing about her dreams. Billy, disheveled but brilliant, takes care of the dairy farm, drinks a bit too much and prefers to live in a caravan behind their home. Debbie may not completely understand Maeve's and Billy's lifestyle choices, but in their chaos and flaws, she finds comfort, love and the freedom to be herself.

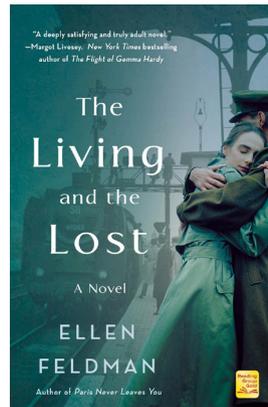
This novel is a true gift from Nealon, who has embraced wholeheartedly the writer's credo

to write what you know. She grew up in County Kildare, Ireland, on her family's dairy farm before attending Trinity College, and she still lives on the farm where she was raised. **Snowflake** is about growing up detached from the rest of the world and then learning to assimilate, while also trying to figure out who you are and what your purpose is. Reading it is to lose yourself in reveries about the imperfections of life, the people we love and care for, self-doubt and the pursuit of joy.

—Chika Gujarathi

The Living and the Lost

By Ellen Feldman



Historical Fiction

As **The Living and the Lost** (Griffin, \$17.99, 9781250780829) opens, Millie Mosbach has just returned to her hometown, Allied-occupied Berlin. Millie is German and Jewish, and she escaped Berlin as a

teen before the war with her brother, David. She attended high school and college in the U.S. with the help of an American family friend, all the while not knowing whether her parents and younger sister survived.

Postwar Berlin is almost unrecognizable. It's a mess of rubble and half-standing buildings, its inhabitants starving, the city divided into Allied and Soviet sections that are not yet completely sundered by the Berlin Wall. Millie has joined the U.S. Army, helping to sort out which Berliners can continue to work as editors, publishers and translators in this new denazified Germany. Meanwhile, David, who served with the Army in Europe during the war, is in Berlin, too, and he's not telling Millie what he's up to.

As the novel moves between Millie's and David's points of view, we get vivid glimpses of life in this unsettled landscape, with uncanny scenes of American military officers enjoying beers in former Nazi halls, German *Fräuleins* by their sides, and the abundance in military black markets contrasting with the extreme lack faced by Berliners. Millie is haunted by the probable loss of her parents and sister and by the choices she made earlier in life.

As Millie tries to tamp down her trauma, guilt and anger, the novel flashes back in time, filling in the siblings' pasts. While she was a scholarship student at the tony Bryn Mawr College, Millie experienced both the joys of college life and a genteel but insidious antisemitism.

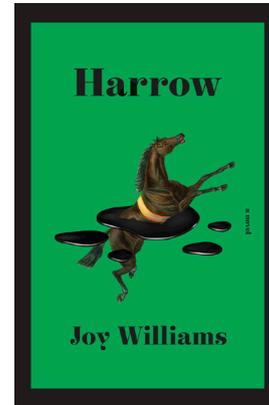
The Living and the Lost moves along quickly, and its descriptions and dialogue feel true to the

era. While the novel would have benefited from more interiority from both Millie and David, it's still an illuminating historical drama with plenty of action and even some romance, evoking a lesser-known historical period—the immediate postwar era and Berlin before the wall—and the complications and compromises that come with the end of war.

—Sarah McCraw Crow

★ Harrow

By Joy Williams



Literary Fiction

The title of Pulitzer Prize finalist Joy Williams' slim, wry novel **Harrow** (Knopf, \$26, 9780525657569), her first in 20 years, resonates through several connotations: to pillage, to plunder, to cultivate with a harrow, to torment, to

vex. Indeed, this is a wonderfully vexing novel, one whose symbols open up to the real world.

Khristen is a teenager whose life has been shaped by a story told by her mother about when infant Khristen died and came back to life, and by her subsequent presumed specialness. The world that surrounds Khristen is in ruins, marred by environmental collapse. Her mother disappears, and her boarding school for gifted teens shuttered. Little makes sense to her as she tries to figure out what survival means.

As we follow Khristen on her journey, we see the decimated landscape, hear harrowing conversations and observe a world that seems past redemption. Yet as Khristen arrives at a resort located near an odoriferous, puzzling lake known as Big Girl, we see her desire—and that of her friend Jeffrey—to save this place, no matter how challenging and gruesome it may be. Humans have destroyed the land, and yet in this novel, they can't quite let it go.

Khristen proves a compelling, ineffable character who escapes categorization. She's worth rooting for and deserving of our curiosity as we try to understand her. Precise and distanced, beautifully rendered and sparse, Williams' prose is fascinating, her voice captivating. The sentences are at once clear and mysterious. The descriptions of this world, one that is not quite ours but close, are striking. The dialogue is haunting and engaging.

Harrow creeps into your world. I finished the novel in two sittings and spent days trying to make sense of all that it offers, noticing water and land through a different lens, imagining the possibilities when we believe in the greatness that others see in us, and what happens when we choose not to.

—Freya Sachs

The top 12 weirdest moments in food history

Everything you never knew about Patagonian toothfish, Cuban supercows and cinnamon sticks

In his debut book, Matt Siegel takes intel from nutritionists, psychologists, food historians and paleoanthropologists and weaves together an entertaining account of the food we eat. These 12 surprising food facts offer a taste of the weird, wonderful backstories you'll find in **The Secret History of Food** (Ecco, \$27.99, 9780062973214).

1. In 1893, the Supreme Court had to rule whether tomatoes were a fruit or a vegetable.

This happened not long after people finally decided that tomatoes weren't poisonous (a belief that lasted for hundreds of years, owing largely to their botanical relationship to mandrakes and deadly nightshade) and that they weren't used to summon werewolves (the tomato's scientific name, *Solanum lycopersicum*, literally means "wolf's peach").

2. People used to think potatoes caused syphilis and leprosy.

This was chiefly because of their resemblance to the impacted body parts of the afflicted. Now, of course, potatoes are America's favorite vegetable, largely thanks to french fries. (Tomatoes are in second place, owing largely to their use in frozen pizza and canned tomato sauce.)

3. Vanilla isn't very "vanilla."

While vanilla has unfortunately become a synonym for "ordinary," it's really anything but. For starters, it's the only edible fruit to come from orchids, even though they're the largest family of flowers. Vanilla gets its name from Spanish conquistadors, who named it after the Spanish word for "vagina." It has to be pollinated by hand using a technique developed by an enslaved 12-year-old named Edmond Albius. And it's the world's second most expensive spice behind saffron.

4. The first breakfast cereals were intentionally bland.

Ready-to-eat breakfast cereals were created in the 1800s by religious health reformers who believed sugar and spices were sinful and that consuming them incited bodily temptation, leading to such sexual urges as chronic masturbation and adultery—and ultimately resulting in eternal damnation.

5. Our affinity for certain comfort foods begins in the womb.

Research suggests many of our adult food preferences are influenced by flavors (e.g., vanilla) present in breast milk and amniotic fluid, which absorb flavors and odors from the parent's diet. Meanwhile, other food preferences, such as people's polarized responses to cilantro, go back even earlier to the genetic inheritance of specific taste receptors.

6. People used to believe personality traits and intellect were passed on through breast milk.

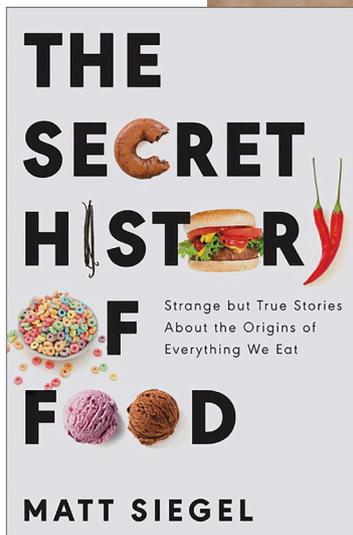
As a result, early wet nurses were screened for things like breast shape, manners and vices such as day-sleeping and gambling addiction to ensure their milk was "child friendly."

7. An entire ear of ancient corn used to be about the size of a cigarette.

Over thousands of years, corn was selectively bred from a nearly inedible weed into the modern staple many cultures now depend on.



©KENZI FLINCHUM



Visit BookPage.com to read our starred review of *The Secret History of Food*.

8. There's a decent chance the honey in your cupboard comes from lawn weeds or poison ivy.

And that's OK. (Though there's also a chance it's not honey at all but a mixture of corn syrup and yellow food coloring . . .)

9. Fidel Castro was obsessed with American dairy.

He spent decades funding the genetic manipulation of a dairy "supercow" named Ubre Blanca ("White Udder") that produced four times the milk of American cows, was assigned a security detail in an air-conditioned stable and was eulogized with military honors and a life-size marble statue after her death.

10. No one wanted to eat Patagonian toothfish until they were rebranded as Chilean sea bass in 1994.

Now they sell for \$29.99 a pound at Whole Foods.

11. Spice traders used to make up stories about the exotic origins of spices so they could sell them for more money.

Cinnamon, it was said, came from giant bird nests and had to be transported using rafts without oars on a treacherous journey that took five years and was powered by courage alone. Black pepper was said to grow in forests guarded by serpents that had to be scared away by setting the trees on fire, which explained why black pepper pods were the color of ashes.

12. The adage "you'll catch more flies with honey than vinegar" isn't really true.

Rather, catching flies depends on a host of complex variables including the age, gender, sex drive, mating status, thirst and stress level of each fly—as well as the concentration of the vinegar, the time of day and the season. (Even then, some research suggests you'll catch even more flies with beer or human semen, with one scientist calling semen "the crack cocaine of the fly world.")

—Matt Siegel

★ Beautiful Country

By Qian Julie Wang

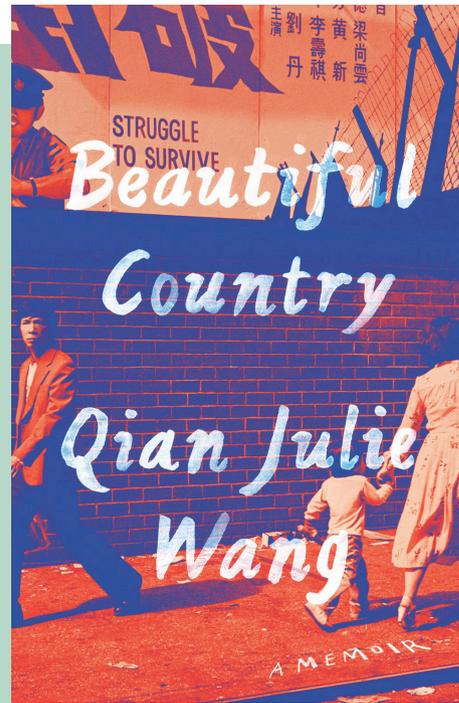
Memoir

From ages 7 to 12, Qian Julie Wang lived as an undocumented immigrant in Brooklyn, New York. Her hunger was regularly so intense that she broke into cold sweats—which, according to her Ma Ma, meant Wang was growing and getting stronger. One classmate referred to Wang’s family not as “low-income” but “no-income.” Her world was simultaneously frightening and normal as she sat listening to scuttling cockroaches with her parents nearby. She describes childhood trenchantly in **Beautiful Country** (Doubleday, \$28.95, 9780385547215), allowing readers to feel her anger, longing, loneliness and fear—and to observe her parents’ desperation.

In Beijing, Wang’s mother was a published professor who spoke Mandarin, the language of intellectuals. But in Brooklyn, her mother lamented, “All these Cantonese assume that if you speak

Mandarin you’re a farmer from Fuzhou.” Wang’s mother got a job sewing in a sweatshop, where “there was no day or night; there was only work.”

Wang’s parents regarded her as their best hope for a future, optimistic that she would be suited to this Mei Guo, “beautiful country.” They were right to believe in her. By fourth grade, Wang wrote so well that her teachers suspected plagiarism, and now Wang has written a memoir precise enough to chill her readers. The narrative is full of sharply rendered scenes, such as one in which Wang’s mother suffers in a cold sushi factory before coming home to warm herself in front of a pot of boiling water.

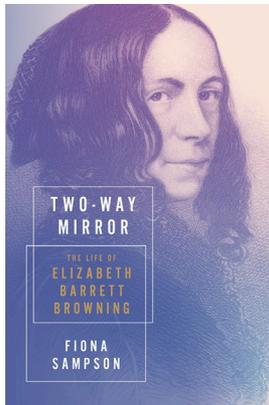


Wang dedicates her memoir to “those who remain in the shadows.” Indeed, **Beautiful Country** shines light on the childhood that continued to haunt Wang into adulthood, even as her professional accomplishments mounted. She is vulnerable in revealing her uniquely American trauma: a bruised wrist that never quite healed; a hunger that was never quite sated; a feeling that everything, at any moment, could suddenly be taken away. Wang, who is now a civil rights lawyer, is a voice we need. Readers will be grateful for the courage she has displayed in persevering and speaking up.

—Kelly Blewett

★ Two-Way Mirror

By Fiona Sampson



Biography

When people think of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry, they might think of the greeting cards in which they’ve read her most oft-quoted lyric: “How do I love thee? / Let me count the ways.” Fiona Sampson’s dazzling and absorbing **Two-**

Way Mirror: The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Norton, \$27.95, 9781324002956) is likely to change that.

Sampson challenges the usual portrait of Barrett Browning as a “swooning poetess” whose identity is closely bound up with her father and husband. Modeled on *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning’s narrative poem divided into nine books, **Two-Way Mirror** chronicles Barrett Browning’s growth as a poet, her long-term illness, her marriage to Robert Browning and their subsequent lives in Italy.

Drawing on Barrett Browning’s copious correspondence, Sampson illustrates that the poet was a “pivotal figure” who was acknowledged during her lifetime “as Britain’s greatest ever woman poet” and who attracted international acclaim. Barrett Browning’s use of the female voice in lyric and narrative poetry represented a radical departure from other narrative poems, such as Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The

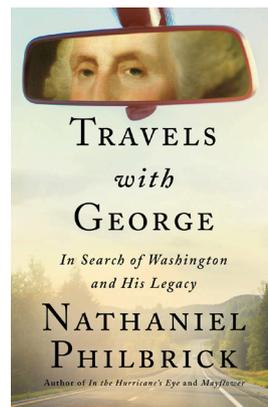
Wife of Bath,” in which women characters were, as Sampson writes, “ventriloquized by men.” In the end, according to Sampson, “Elizabeth’s poetry too composes a kind of self-portrait, or rather mirror. As she became herself through writing, her writing reflected that developing self. And so her body of work creates a kind of looking glass in which, dimly, we make out the person who wrote it: her choices and opinions, what moved her, habits and characteristic turns of phrase.”

Two-Way Mirror will enthrall readers and encourage them to read Barrett Browning’s poetry, whether again or for the first time.

—Henry L. Carrigan Jr.

Travels With George

By Nathaniel Philbrick



American History

As the familiar story goes, George Washington, the Revolutionary War’s iconic general, led the Colonies to an improbable victory over the crushing British monarchy and its oppressive taxation. But accord-

ing to Nathaniel Philbrick in **Travels With George: In Search of Washington and His Legacy** (Viking, \$30, 9780525562177), Washington’s real challenges as a leader began after that. With abolitionists to the

north, enslavers to the south and anti-Federalists everywhere (even in his own Cabinet), Washington set out just months after his 1789 inauguration on an uncomfortable, arduous tour of the shaky new union he felt compelled to unite.

In the late summer of 2018, in a time hardly less politically fraught, Philbrick, his wife and their “red bushy-tailed Nova Scotia duck-tolling retriever,” Dora, embarked from Washington’s Mount Vernon to follow in the former president’s footsteps. Inspired by *Travels With Charley* by John Steinbeck—who wrote, “We do not take a trip; a trip takes us”—Philbrick expected “a journey of quirky and lighthearted adventure” that instead “proved more unsettling and more *unexpected* than I ever could have imagined.”

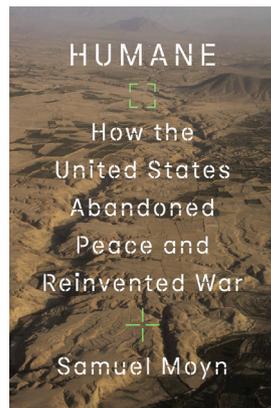
Visiting the cities Washington once rode through on his white horse, or paraded through in a cream-colored carriage with two enslaved postillions, or strode into wearing a simple brown suit (the new president had a feel for political theater), Philbrick enriches the facts with help from local archivists, librarians, curators, docents and even the descendants of those who were there. But Philbrick keeps one foot in, and a respectful perspective on, the present throughout, assessing hazards then—such as when Washington’s horses fell off a ferry—and now—such as when Philbrick’s own sailboat nearly capsized in a vicious storm on his way to Newport, Rhode Island.

When BookPage interviewed Philbrick in 2006 for *Mayflower*, his Pulitzer Prize history finalist, he said, “I think it’s really important that we see the past as a lived past rather than something that was fated to be.” With **Travels With George**, he succeeds again at this aim. Washington emerges as the complicated, flawed but no less heroic leader

that his newborn country desperately needed. The quantity and quality of the details Philbrick gathers as he straddles past and present make this an extraordinary read.

—Priscilla Kipp

★ **Humane**
By Samuel Moyn



Political Science

In 1880, the chief of the Prussian General Staff wrote, “Eternal peace is a dream—and hardly a beautiful one. . . . War is part of the world order that God ordained.” Many have disagreed with this statement and offered various alter-

natives, from abolishing war completely to conducting it in a more humane way. In his enlightening and provocative **Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War** (FSG, \$30, 9780374173708), Samuel Moyn, a professor of law and history at Yale, offers “an antiwar history of the laws of war” that traces America’s journey, over the last century and a half, toward the disturbing place we now find ourselves: a period of endless war.

Moyn discusses many notable individuals, causes and arguments within this history, including the founding of the Red Cross despite Leo Tolstoy’s strong opposition. The peace efforts of an Austrian noblewoman named Bertha von Suttner, especially through her book *Lay Down Your Arms* in 1889, stand out as well. Moyn writes, “Before World War I, no document of Western civilization did more to turn what had been a crackpot and marginal call for an end to endless war into a mainstream cause.” In 1905, von Suttner became the first woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

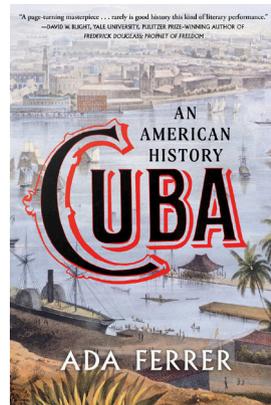
Moyn argues that the increased use of “unmanned aerial vehicles” (armed drones) and U.S. Special Forces in the modern era makes belligerency more humane but augurs for a grim future. In Barack Obama’s Nobel Prize address in 2009, he said, “We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes.” Instead, Obama emphasized a commitment to global justice and international law and insisted on humane constraints—which included the use of drones. He sanctioned the use of armed drones more times in his first year in office than George W. Bush did in eight years. By the time Obama left office, drones had struck almost 10 times more than under his predecessor, with thousands killed. Special Forces units were engaged in fighting in at least 13 countries during the last year of Obama’s presidency, and the same approach continued during the Trump years.

This sweeping and relevant book is a vital look at

how foreign policy should be conducted ethically in the face of America’s endless wars.

—Roger Bishop

★ **Cuba**
By Ada Ferrer



History

To explore the history of Cuba is to explore the history of the United States. In her new epic history, **Cuba: An American History** (Scribner, \$32, 9781501154553), author and historian Ada Ferrer shows the complex ties between these two

countries going back centuries.

As the myth goes, Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492. But in actuality, he didn’t discover anything in the United States; he landed in Cuba, which was already very much inhabited. Columbus and his men killed most of the Indigenous population and, with Spain’s backing, introduced an economy that used enslaved labor to produce sugar, tobacco and rum.

With his blunder of mistaking Cuba for India, Columbus initiated Spain’s centurieslong era of colonial dominance—with Havana, Cuba, at the center of it all. By the 18th century, Havana was the third-largest city in the New World. Britain and France, looking to end Spain’s colonial power, sought control of Cuba for its strategic location in the Caribbean, as well as for its military fortifications and natural riches. Meanwhile, as England’s colonies in North America grew, the fledgling United States profited enormously from Cuba’s economy. Eventually, because of their symbiotic relationship, Cuba supported the United States’ fight against Britain.

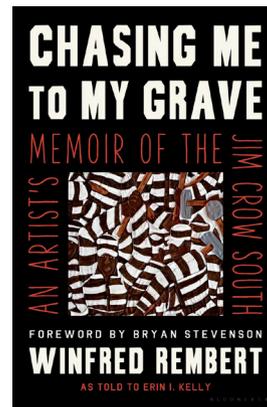
As time went on, Spain’s control of the Americas eroded, especially after the Seven Years War and the Spanish-American War. Ferrer’s retelling of these wars’ events from an updated, more nuanced perspective will bring a fresh view to history you thought you already knew. The narrative is often simplified as “the United States saved Cuba,” but Ferrer’s look at the Spanish-American War frames it as the point at which relations between the two countries finally began to sour.

Organized into 12 parts and accompanied by stunning historical photographs and illustrations, **Cuba** covers more than five centuries of complicated and dynamic history. Although much of the book covers the upheaval and chaos of the 20th century, Ferrer is an exceptionally thorough guide of the 15th century onward, careful to keep her readers’ attention with interesting characters, new insights on historical events and dramatic

yet accessible writing. This new history of Cuba shows how connected all of our countries’ histories really are.

—Sarojini Seupersad

★ **Chasing Me to My Grave**
By Winfred Rembert



Memoir

Art can redeem suffering, but it can also reveal brutalities that degrade the human spirit. Art can capture the hopelessness of individuals hemmed in by fences not of their own making, even as it portrays the hopefulness of scaling

those barriers and strolling in the expansive paths beyond. In **Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist’s Memoir of the Jim Crow South** (Bloomsbury, \$30, 9781635576597), Winfred Rembert recounts to co-author Erin I. Kelly his own gripping, often harrowing stories of growing up in Cuthbert, Georgia, and of turning to painting to represent the atrocities and celebrations of his life.

Rembert opens his memoir by recalling the journey to find his birth mother, who gave him away as a baby. He stole away from Cuthbert and walked up the railroad tracks 40 miles to Leslie, Georgia, where he found his mother but discovered she was none too happy to see him. Back in Cuthbert, Rembert celebrates the bustling juke joints and stores on Hamilton Avenue, depicting flourishing scenes of Black men and women going about their daily lives.

Life turned bleak when Rembert was arrested while fleeing a civil rights demonstration in 1965. He was brutalized and nearly lynched by law enforcement officers and a gang of white men. Eventually Rembert was sent to a chain gang, which he describes as being “like slavery. You have to meet all those demands and keep a sense of yourself as well.” In a stroke of good fortune, Rembert met a young woman named Patsy, whom he eventually married when he was released from prison.

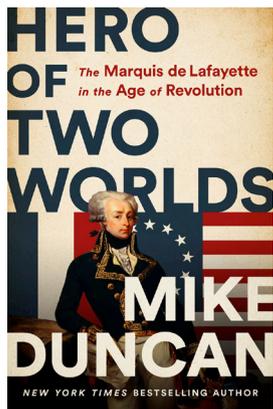
While imprisoned, Rembert developed his artistic skills, and he continued to carve and paint on leather until his death in 2021. His art, which is reproduced throughout the book, depicts the people of Cuthbert, his family and his time on the chain gang. “With my paintings I tried to make a bad situation look good,” Rembert writes. “You can’t make the chain gang look good in any way besides by painting it in art.”

Chasing Me to My Grave is a testament to the ways one man used his art to educate, delight and depict the trauma that arises out of memory.

—Henry L. Carrigan Jr.

Hero of Two Worlds

By Mike Duncan



Biography

In this engrossing biography, author and history podcaster Mike Duncan illuminates the eventful life of the Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette is, of course, a popular hero of the American Revolution. **Hero of Two Worlds** (PublicAffairs, \$30,

9781541730335) broadens our understanding of his engagement in other major political movements, as well, chronicling his role in the French Revolution and the toppling of the Bourbon Dynasty in 1830.

At first glance, nothing in Lafayette's early history suggests his future commitment to liberal ideals. Lafayette (1757–1834) was born Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier in Chavaniac, France. A son of the nobility, he lost his father when he was only 2, making him the sole heir to the family's fortune. His mother's death when he was 12 left him in the care of guardians who made many decisions for him, including arranging his marriage to Adrienne d'Ayen at age 16. They were a devoted couple until her death in 1807.

Duncan traces the origin of Lafayette's embrace of liberty and equality to the summer of 1775, when he first learned of George Washington and the colonists' struggles. Politics had cut short his career in the French army, so Lafayette decided to follow this new noble cause. He managed to become a major general in the Continental Army, and by age 24, he'd earned a stellar reputation on both sides of the Atlantic.

In detailing Lafayette's long career, Duncan takes a measured approach to his subject, making excellent use of primary sources, especially letters. The author effectively balances Lafayette the man with Lafayette the public figure and helps delineate the relationship between the United States and France.

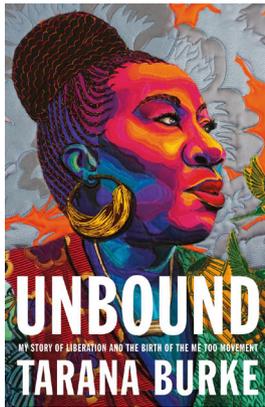
Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of **A Hero of Two Worlds** is Duncan's exploration of Lafayette's long and enduring popularity with Americans. (Unlike the French, the Americans never stopped loving him.) In 1824, Lafayette was invited for a visit by President James Monroe as the nation prepared for its 50th anniversary, and he received a hero's welcome.

Lafayette was a unique and unifying figure in American history, celebrated and revered by all political parties. As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, Duncan's impressive biography provides an insightful look at the American Revolution that can be appreciated by history lovers and general readers alike.

—Deborah Hopkinson

★ Unbound

By Tarana Burke



Memoir

Before she was the world-famous creator of #MeToo, the movement that sparked a reckoning with the mistreatment of women, especially women of color, Tarana Burke was a community organizer and journalist. Her experience as a reporter will be no surprise to anyone who reads **Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement** (Flatiron, \$28.99, 9781250621733), her unflinching, open-hearted, beautifully told account of becoming one of the most consequential activists in America.

Burke was molested by a neighborhood boy in the Bronx when she was 7. Over the years, despite the presence of several loving adults in her life, Burke was repeatedly sexually assaulted. "I was a grown woman before I truly understood the word *rape* and was able to relate it to my experience," she writes. "Language like *rape*, *molestation*, and *abuse* were foreign to me as a child. I had no definitions and no context. Nobody around me talked like that."

In spite of her trauma, Burke writes with humor and gratitude about her experiences. She delves into the rich history of her family, led by a granddaddy who "believed in celebrating Blackness in as many ways as possible" and a mother who was a devout Catholic. In school, Burke was both academically gifted and an agitator who spent time in the principal's office. A high school leadership program led Burke to Selma, Alabama, where she laid the groundwork for #MeToo after realizing there was an utter lack of programs to support and protect young women as they spoke their truth about sexual abuse.

Burke also writes honestly about her reaction to #MeToo becoming a viral phenomenon on social media in 2017, initially without her knowledge or participation. After spending more than a decade traveling around the country, conducting workshops and speaking on panels about surviving sexual assault, she worried social media would water down or misuse her work.

Ultimately Burke realized that "all the folks who were using the #metoo hashtag, and all the Hollywood actresses who came forward with their allegations, needed the same thing that the little Black girls in Selma, Alabama, needed—space to be seen and heard. They needed empathy and compassion and a path to healing."

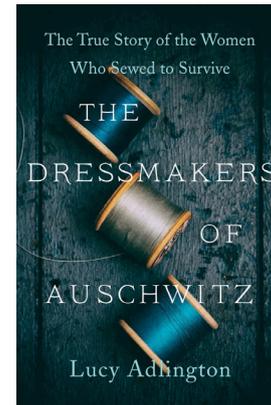
Unbound is not just a thoroughly engrossing read. It's also an important book that helps us

understand the woman who has been so influential as our country struggles to acknowledge women's trauma.

—Amy Scribner

The Dressmakers of Auschwitz

By Lucy Adlington



History

Clothing can accomplish many things. It can bestow group identity or express individuality. Creating it can be both an artistic outlet and drudgery. It can reflect the highest standards of craftsmanship or be as simple as sewing a seam.

It is both performance and practicality. And, as we learn from Lucy Adlington's **The Dressmakers of Auschwitz: The True Story of the Women Who Sewed to Survive** (Harper, \$17.99, 9780063030930), clothing can be a lifeline out of hell.

It's difficult to imagine a more unlikely (or hideous) juxtaposition than a fashion salon in Auschwitz. But there it was: a fashion studio and workshop literally yards away from the interrogation block used to torture prisoners. Author and costume historian Adlington discovered the "Upper Salon" while researching a book on the global textile industry during World War II. Established by the larcenous and amoral Hedwig Höss, wife of Auschwitz commander Rudolf Höss, the salon's official mission was to provide beautiful, haute couture clothing to the wives of top-ranking Nazis, female SS guards at the camp and, foremost, Frau Höss herself. The salon's other purpose was to provide a safe haven for the enslaved female laborers who, under the supervision of Marta Fuchs, a Jewish prisoner from Slovakia, cut, sewed and altered the outfits that would adorn their tormentors.

Adlington does an excellent job of telling the story of Marta and all the other women whose lives were spared because they had the skills to work in the comparative safety of the Upper Salon. She also provides the greater historical context of how the Nazi government viewed fashion as both a powerful propaganda weapon and an important tool for funding the Holocaust.

This information is helpful in understanding the journeys these designers, seamstresses and cutters took to Auschwitz and the Upper Salon, and overall Adlington weaves historical information into the individual dressmakers' stories well. But the most powerful lesson from **The Dressmakers of Auschwitz** is how the bonds of friendship, family and skill allowed these women to survive with humanity while resisting the brutality around them.

—Deborah Mason

★ The City Beautiful

By Aden Polydoros

Historical Fantasy

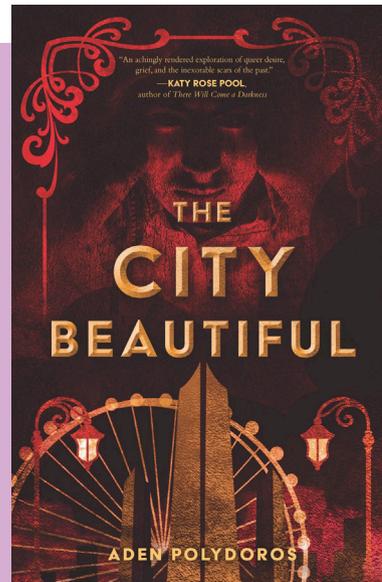
In 1893 Chicago, Alter Rosen lives on Maxwell Street, a neighborhood populated by Jewish immigrants like himself who have recently arrived from Russia and Eastern Europe. Alter's life is difficult. He feels lucky to have found a job at a Yiddish newspaper when so many must work in dangerous slaughterhouses and textile mills. Alter works hard and saves as much money as possible to pay for his mother and sisters to join him in America. It's a task he must undertake alone, after his father died during their own voyage two years ago. Alter must also keep his feelings toward other boys, especially his friend and roommate, Yakov, to himself.

There are new tensions in the neighborhood to deal with as well. Despite the excitement over the World's Fair, a series of disappearances—all teenage, Jewish boys—have troubled Alter's community. When Yakov is found dead, the police declare it an accident and show no interest in investigating further. As Alter assists in the ritual cleansing of Yakov's body, something strange happens: Alter becomes convinced Yakov is alive, feels their souls

cleave together and then passes out. When he awakens, he feels changed by the experience, convinced that Yakov was murdered and determined to find answers.

With help from Raizel Ackermann, a passionate anarchist and reporter for the *Arbeiter Zeitung* newspaper, Alter tracks down leads about Yakov and the other missing boys. His search reconnects him with Frankie, a charismatic criminal he knew during his early days in Chicago. Working together, the three race against time to uncover heinous crimes of abuse, coercion, corruption and hatred committed against the backdrop of the Gilded Age's grand ambitions and gory underbelly.

Author Aden Polydoros' third traditionally published novel is a gorgeous, disturbing, visceral and mystical experience. Alter is an exemplary historical fiction protagonist. His perspective, opinions and concerns are fitting reflections of his time, religion and cultural background, but his journey of growth and self-acceptance will satisfy contemporary readers. The inclusion of a subplot drawn from



Jewish folklore complements the primary narrative perfectly and adds a clever ticking clock to the story, and though the novel is long, it rarely loses momentum. The relationships between Alter, Raizel and Frankie are tender and playful and provide brightness amid an otherwise dark story.

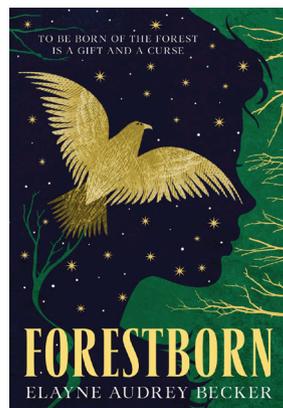
The City Beautiful (Ink-ward, \$19.99, 9781335402509) is steeped in vibrant historical detail, including the exhilarating but superficial atmosphere of the World's Fair, the vile working conditions of the meat industry, the burgeoning social-

ist and workers' movements and the era's wave of Jewish immigration to America. Polydoros pulls no punches when depicting the horrifically inhuman treatment that workers (many of whom were children) experienced during this time, which some readers may find distressing. His unflinching and well-rounded depiction of Jewish American and immigrant history makes **The City Beautiful** a superb addition to the ranks of YA historical fiction.

—Annie Metcalf

Forestborn

By Elayne Audrey Becker



Fantasy

Rora and her brother, Helos, are shape-shifters who fled their home in the Western Vale and have been living in the kingdom of Telyan. There, Helos works as a healer while Rora is a spy for King Gerar. When a deadly sickness spreads throughout Telyan and the king's younger son, Finley, is infected, King Gerar sends Weslyn, his oldest son and heir, to the Vale with Rora and Helos to barter for a cure. It's a fraught mission that comes to a crescendo when Rora discovers that one of Telyan's neighboring kingdoms is vying for war.

Elayne Audrey Becker's ambitious **Forestborn** (Tor Teen, \$17.99, 9781250752161) explores themes of identity, otherness and belonging. Rora's ability to transform into animals as well as into other people means that she is never quite comfortable in her own skin. And although Rora and Helos are safe within Telyan, the same isn't true for magical beings in other kingdoms, who

are subject to prejudice, cruelty and expulsion.

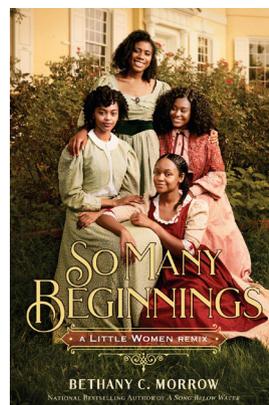
While exposition initially weighs down the action, the novel soon moves at an exciting clip. Becker has a light touch with the story's romances: Rora and Weslyn's shared experiences draw them close, and Helos longs to return to Finley with a cure.

Becker satisfyingly resolves her characters' arcs, but readers who prefer standalone novels should know that **Forestborn** ends on a cliffhanger. They'll need to wait for the sequel to discover whether Rora and her companions' deeper struggle for their very existence will succeed.

—Kimberly Giarratano

★ So Many Beginnings

By Bethany C. Morrow



Historical Fiction

In **So Many Beginnings** (Feiweil & Friends, \$17.99, 9781250761217), Bethany C. Morrow proves up to the challenge of remixing Louisa May Alcott's most famous work: *Little Women*.

Like Alcott's novel, **So Many Beginnings** takes place during the

American Civil War. However, the experiences of Morrow's March sisters—formerly enslaved young Black women—are drastically different from those of Alcott's more sheltered white family.

In the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Marches have settled on Roanoke Island, along North Carolina's Outer Banks. Many people don't know that the island was home to a colony of free, formerly enslaved people during the Civil War. As Morrow notes in an afterword, she didn't learn about this history until researching the novel.

On Roanoke, the March sisters realize that they've exchanged the brutality and dehumanization of enslavement for the paternalism and disrespect of Union forces, missionary teachers and other white people who have come to the island to dictate what young Black people should learn, where they should live and even how they should dress.

Morrow's nuanced take on what life was like for newly freed Black people at this time will prompt readers to reconsider the simplistic good vs. evil, North vs. South mythologies that characterize too many Civil War narratives. Morrow also skillfully incorporates cultural divisions between Southern Black people like the Marches, who lived through enslavement, with those of Northerners who never experienced enslavement firsthand.

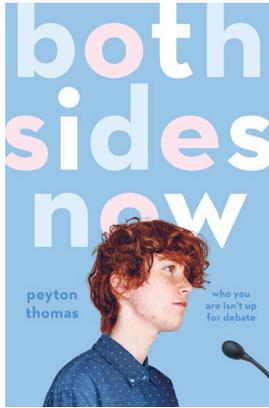
Part of the new Remixed Classics series, which reinterprets canonical texts like *Treasure Island* and *Wuthering Heights* through diverse cultural lenses, **So Many Beginnings** contains twists that will surprise even the most devoted *Little Women* fans.

In addition to shedding light on a lesser-known chapter of American history, Morrow takes creative (and for many readers, long-desired) liberties with the fates of the four March sisters. Alcott fans and newcomers alike will find much to appreciate in Morrow's sophisticated remix.

—Norah Piehl

Both Sides Now

By Peyton Thomas



Fiction

Finch Kelly feels most at home on the debate stage, and winning the national debate championship could be his ticket to achieving his dreams: admission to Georgetown and eventually becoming the first transgender member of Congress.

But his family's finances are falling apart, his feelings for his debate partner, Jonah, are growing complicated, and the topic for the championship debate will require him to argue against his own human rights. As the pressure mounts, Finch begins to lose confidence in everything he once believed.

In a sharp and emotional first novel, Peyton Thomas explores the queer high school experience through Finch, who longs to look more like the teenage boy he is and whose feelings for Jonah cause him to question his sexual orientation. The novel also confronts racism through Jonah's experience as a Filipino American who deals with microaggressions from debate judges and his gorgeous, Juilliard-bound boyfriend. Add in the socioeconomic woes that are never far from Finch's thoughts, as his parents grapple with unemployment and his debate opponents' families write huge checks to prestigious colleges, and **Both Sides Now** (Dial, \$17.99, 9780593322819) is jampacked with timely issues.

Thomas doesn't pull any punches on difficult topics and never reduces his characters to objects of pity, instead depicting teenagers working hard to find their places in a world that has thrown obstacle after obstacle in their paths. He balances serious political conversations and scenes of emotional hardship with moments of comedy and a spirit of true camaraderie and respect between Finch and Jonah.

Teens who participate in their schools' debate or Model United Nations programs will especially appreciate the book's detailed exploration of contemporary political issues, but Thomas' witty prose, strong pacing and knack for creating vivid, dimensional characters have broad appeal.

—Sarah Welch

Step aside, Homer

Teen girls narrate their stories in vibrant verse.

The novel in verse is experiencing a bit of a renaissance in children's and YA literature. Writers including Kwame Alexander, Elizabeth Acevedo, Jason Reynolds, Candice Iloh, Jasmine Warga and Joy McCullough have garnered both critical acclaim and commercial success. These two YA novels feature teenage narrators for whom the carefully chosen words of poetry hold the key to self-discovery.

The title and cover of Tina Cane's first YA book, **Alma Presses Play** (Make Me a World, \$17.99, 9780593121146), set the scene immediately: Portable cassette players and big headphones are the technology of the day as 13-year-old Alma and her Jewish Chinese family ring in the new year of 1982 in New York City.

For Alma, eighth grade and the following summer are a time when "there's a lot going on / but also nothing at all." She ponders her possibly romantic feelings for her neighbor Miguel, gets her first period, dodges her parents' increasingly frequent arguments and misses a friend who moves away. Along the way, Alma's guidance counselor, Ms. Nola, encourages her to write down her feelings about race, gender and life in her neighborhood. Plus there's candy to eat and share—Tootsie Rolls and Pop Rocks and Twizzlers—and music for every mood, from Stevie Wonder and Blondie to David Bowie and the Pretenders.

The most noticeable feature of **Alma Presses Play** is the way Cane arranges Alma's words on the page. Most lines consist of blocks of words set apart by white space, which allows readers to inhale between each phrase and makes Alma's words feel breathy, immediate and authentic. Lists, letters, dictionary-style definitions and outlines break up the pace. Cane sprinkles in details of life in the 1980s such as mixtapes, Atari video game systems and Judy Blume novels, as well as the ever present question of what, exactly, the plural of Walkman is.

The Greek and Roman mythology that Alma studies in school—especially the character of Janus, the god of transitions, and stories of female protagonists such as Helen and Pandora—provides an ongoing lens through which Alma makes sense of her life. Cane offers multiple, sometimes contradictory versions of these myths, enabling Alma and the reader to wrestle with the stories' alternating messages of women's power and powerlessness. "Even though fiction is made-up / it contains a certain kind of truth," Alma muses, a fitting description of Cane's writing. As Alma makes decisions about

school, relationships and even the city she wants to live in, it's wonderful to watch her realize that she can set her life to the music that she chooses.

Two years ago, Moth's parents and brother were killed in a car crash, leaving an emotionally and physically scarred Moth to live with her aunt. Despite being an elite, talented dancer, Moth vows that she will never dance again: It "feels too joyful, too greedy now." Moth wishes that she had learned more Hoodoo practice from her grandfather, who promised before he died that he would "never leave [her] trapped—defenseless."

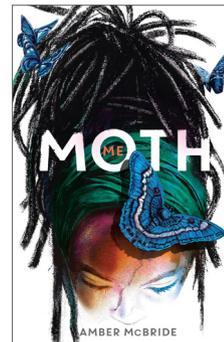
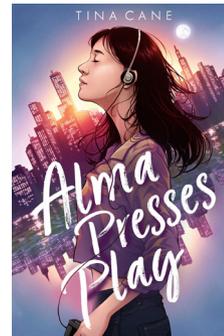
None of the other Black kids at her mostly white school want to be friends, but soon Moth meets Sani, who also feels out of place living with his mother's white family after his Navajo father left, and whose depression stops him from singing and playing the music that once brought him joy and meaning. Together, they depart on a cross-country road trip, visiting historical sites where enslavement and genocide underly white prosperity, exploring moth-related metaphors for growth and maybe even starting to fall in love. Will they find the courage to break out of their cocoons and emerge in new forms?

If you think you know where this story is going, think again. **Me (Moth)** (Feiwel & Friends, \$18.99, 9781250780362) will surprise you.

As in **Alma Presses Play**, the placement and alignment of words on the page plays a key role in the storytelling of **Me (Moth)**. Line spacing varies, and some lines are only one or two words long. Even punctuation is unusual: Ampersands replace standard conjunctions, and names often appear in parentheses even when meanings are otherwise clear ("my aunt (Jack)" or "my mom (Meghan)"). Author Amber McBride rhymes occasionally ("the accident that split / our car like a candy bar"), drawing attention to the sounds of words, and her imagery is often tactile and tangible ("the choreography is choppy water instead of wind blowing / through a field of wheat").

Moth engages in Hoodoo practices like lighting candles, burying significant objects and leaving offerings of food to ancestral spirits in the hopes of shifting odds in her favor. She also matches Sani's Navajo creation stories with traditional Hoodoo stories of her own. "All stories have ghosts," Moth tells Sani, and she's right. In this brilliant novel, the past haunts the present in places where history, memory and spirituality intertwine.

—Jill Ratzan



Of mice and men (and theoretical physics)

Torben Kuhlmann's exquisite *Einstein* explores how a mouse might have inspired one of the greatest scientific minds to ever live.

German author-illustrator Torben Kuhlmann is well-known for his acclaimed picture books about intrepid mouse adventurers, which feature his jaw-droppingly imaginative art. When the mouse hero of *Einstein* misses the big cheese festival, he builds a time machine but accidentally travels 80 years into the past, where he meets a patent clerk with some very unusual theories about the nature of time. We chatted with Kuhlmann about why mice make irresistible protagonists, the challenges and pleasures of creating a complex time-travel story and what he has in common with his mousy heroes.

Could you tell us a little bit about the creative journey of this book?

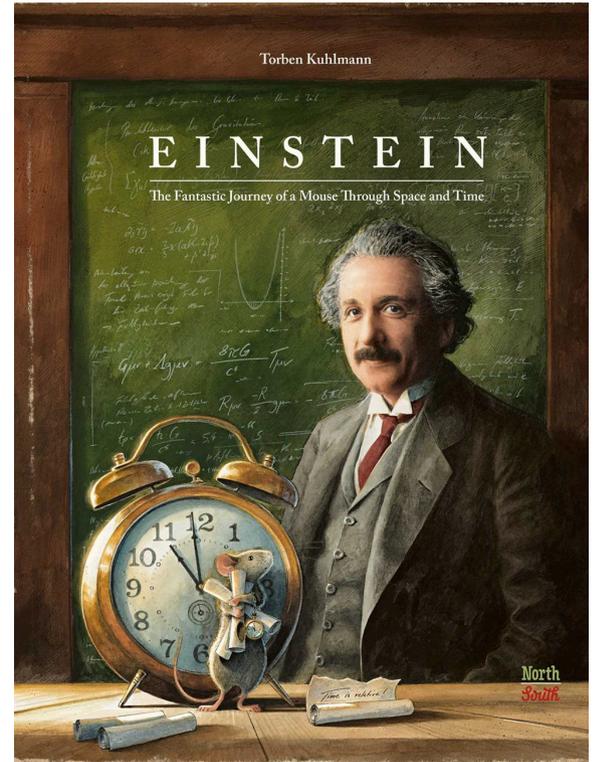
Every story starts with a core idea or a theme. In the case of *Einstein*, the idea to link one of the most famous theoretical physicists with the shenanigans of a time-traveling mouse came first. From there, I developed the narrative surroundings of the idea.

While in my research phase, many plot points seemed ideal for my premise of an Einstein-inspired mouse. There was Einstein's year of wonder in 1905, in which the young patent clerk wrote some of the most fundamental and revolutionary papers in theoretical physics. Where did his inspiration come from? Maybe from a mouse from the future?

As soon as I have a rough outline of the plot ready, I start working on the storyboard. I do rough sketches for every page in the book. These sketches also play with different perspectives and compositions for each scene.

As I craft the storyboard, I also start writing an early first draft, sometimes in rough handwriting next to the sketches. Once the storyboard is complete, I talk to my editor and tell her the story verbally.

The next and most time-consuming phase is crafting the artwork and writing the script. For each illustration, I use a combination of watercolor and pencil.



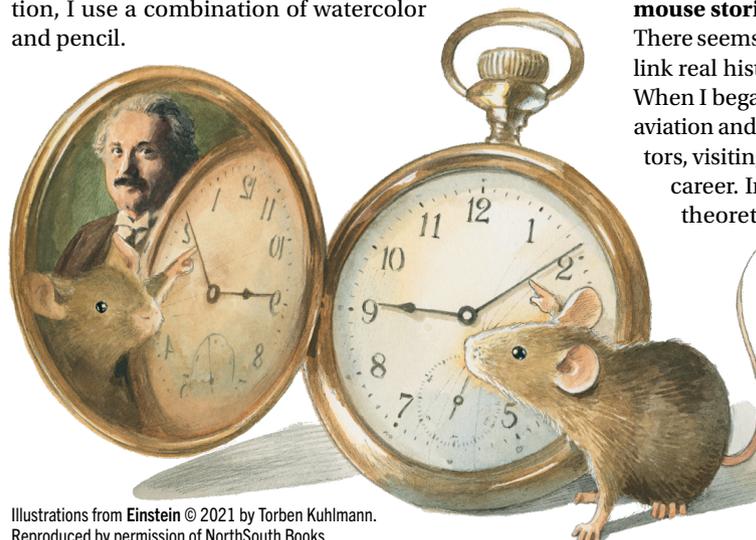
Einstein
NorthSouth, \$22, 9780735844445
Ages 6 to 12

Picture Book

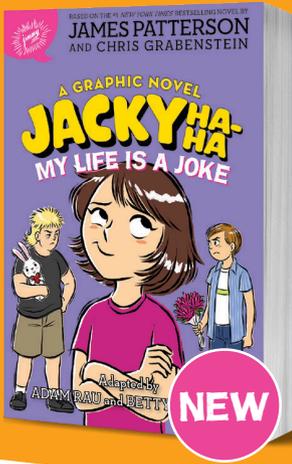
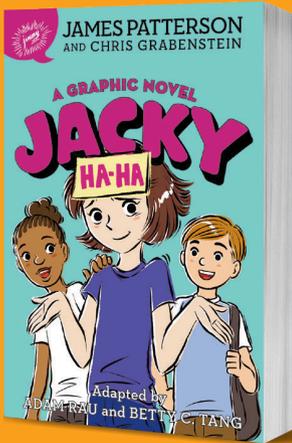
***Einstein* is your fourth book to feature a mouse as its protagonist. What continues to pull you back to telling mouse stories?**

There seems to be a never-ending well of opportunities to link real historical events with mouse-sized adventures. When I began writing, mice seemed to play a role only in aviation and space exploration. Then I moved on to inventors, visiting an unknown backstory in Thomas Edison's career. In *Einstein*, the adventurous mice landed in theoretical physics. It's fun to link the stories with each other and to hide small Easter egg-like surprises and hints to earlier titles. There is a small interconnected universe evolving.

All of your mouse books explore scientific ideas and figures. Did you enjoy learning about science when you were young, or is this more of



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a way to learn about topics you're not already knowledgeable about?

It is a little bit of both. I have always had a keen interest in science. I always wanted to learn how things work. Even today, I am still eager to learn new things. Working on my mouse adventures, with their science and history-oriented themes, allows me to dive into different very interesting topics, like Einstein's concept of relativity.

There's a storied history of mouse tales in children's literature, including Stuart Little, Mrs. Frisby and Ralph S. Mouse. Many of these mice have human characteristics, but your mice seem more . . . mousey. Why do you think children's authors are drawn to these creatures, and how did you decide that your mice wouldn't just be like small humans with whiskers and tails?

Indeed, mice seem to be favored characters in children's literature. I grew up with many of these stories, but even as a child, I noticed that sometimes it seemed almost incidental that a mouse was the protagonist. For example, there is very little "mousiness" with a character like Mickey Mouse. Mickey is even taller than his dog, Pluto.

One of the main reasons mice are so favored in children's literature might be their cuteness. That was one of my main reasons for writing about them as well. But I wanted my main characters to be as little anthropomorphized as possible, to look like any mouse you might encounter in your attic or your garage.

What was the most challenging part of creating Einstein? What was the most enjoyable?

The most challenging part of creating Einstein was figuring out how to tell a story about time travel and numerous causality loops while maintaining accessibility and keeping the narrative focus on the visuals. Much of the more complex ideas are only hinted at in the text and can be discovered by observing every detail in the illustrations.

This challenge was simultaneously also the most enjoyable part. It was a joy to figure out how a time-traveling mouse, inspired by Einstein's theories, could inspire Einstein in the first place, and how to mirror that plot with the more obvious story of a watch lost in the past and the fate of a furious cat.

You've mentioned that you're a huge fan of science fiction films. Were any films a particular influence on Einstein—either on the story that you tell, or on your illustrations?

An eagle-eyed observer might find some nods to my favorite science fiction films. You may discover a hidden



"I have always had a keen interest in science," says the Einstein author-illustrator, seen here in a self-portrait.

DeLorean or the TARDIS time machine from "Doctor Who." Films or, to be more precise, the language of cinema plays an important role in my work. I sometimes describe my method by comparing it to the work of a cinematographer or a director. It is my task to shoot a scene, to tell something visually, finding the correct lighting, atmosphere and composition for each moment of a story. But I use a pencil and watercolors instead of a camera. Filmmaking is something I am very interested in, and I use every opportunity to direct short animations myself—for example, the book trailers for my mouse adventures.

In the beginning of Einstein, the mouse is looking forward to attending a cheese festival. What's your favorite kind of cheese?

That is indeed something I have in common with my mouse adventurers: I really do like cheese. It is hard to point to one favorite kind. Among them are Italian pecorino, French Camembert and some Swiss cheeses.

I love the way you use perspective, and how so many scenes are shown from the mouse's point of view. You must have periods when you try to imagine the world as though you were a mouse. If you woke up tomorrow to discover that you had become a mouse, what would you do? Where would you go?

I would try to follow in the footsteps of the protagonist of Lindbergh and build an airplane from scrap and odds and ends—just to fact-check my own story. And of course I would avoid cats and owls at any cost.

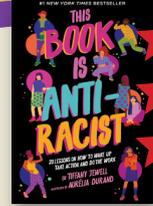
—Alice Cary



Visit BookPage.com to read our starred review of *Einstein*.

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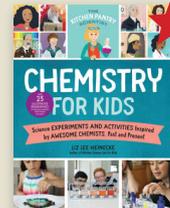
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★ Fallout

By Steve Sheinkin

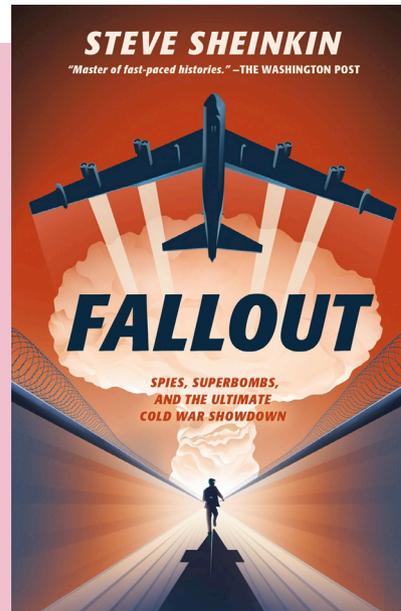
Middle Grade Nonfiction

Bestselling author Steve Sheinkin is best known for his 2012 book, *Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon*, which was a National Book Award finalist, a Newbery Honor book and winner of the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal. **Fallout: Spies, Superbombs, and the Ultimate Cold War Showdown** (Roaring Brook, \$19.99, 9781250149015, ages 10 to 14) is another engrossing work of nonfiction that reads like a page-turning spy thriller as it takes up the issue of nuclear weapons and international politics in a wide-ranging, information-packed account of the Cold War, including the development of the hydrogen bomb and the tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States that nearly erupted into war during the Cuban missile crisis.

Sheinkin clearly knows this terrain like the back of his hand, and his narrative jumps nimbly from Soviet spy Rudolf Abel's secretive life in New York

City (which will remind adult readers of the popular FX show "The Americans"), to the rise of Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev after the death of Josef Stalin, to the scientists developing the hydrogen bomb, and finally to President John F. Kennedy as he faced a terrifying standoff in October 1962. The Cuban missile crisis, Sheinkin observes, "was a bit like a chess match between grandmasters." As he depicts the conflict between two world powers, even readers familiar with the details of the crisis and its resolution will find themselves on the edge of their seats.

Although **Fallout's** primary narrative ends there, Sheinkin follows up on the players in an epilogue, where he also includes a personal touch. He reflects on how, as a teen, he fully expected that he would experience nuclear war before he graduated from high school.



In short chapters written in his signature energetic style, Sheinkin provides vivid details that keep interest high, such as 13 year-old paperboy Jimmy Bozart's discovery of a nickel with a secret code hidden inside or the intricate tradecraft practiced by two Soviet agents as they jump out of subway cars at the last minute to lose a tail while en route to a secret meeting at the Bronx Zoo. (Who would have thought the Bronx Zoo was a rendezvous point for spies?) Even minor characters on this international chess board stand out. Sheinkin expertly balances action, historical context and the

events of his narrative. Meticulously researched, **Fallout** includes copious source notes and an extensive bibliography.

Fallout is a compelling read that provides a riveting picture of the events of the Cold War. It's the work of a nonfiction master at his best.

—Deborah Hopkinson

A Soft Place to Land

By Janae Marks



Middle Grade

A Soft Place to Land (Katherine Tegen, \$16.99, 9780062875877, ages 9 to 12), Janae Marks' second middle grade novel, is a heartwarming story of family, friendship and one girl's longing to find her place amid the world's turmoil.

Until recently, 12-year-old Joy lived in a comfortable house with her loving parents and her little sister, Malia. But when Joy's father loses his job, her parents must sell their house to avoid foreclosure. Joy and her family move to a small apartment, where she and Malia must share a bedroom. The financial stress also means her parents can no longer afford Joy's piano lessons, which is a crushing blow because she loves music and aspires to become a film composer when she grows up.

Just when all seems lost, Joy meets a kindred spirit: Nora, a classmate who also lives in Joy's new apartment building and has worries of her own. Nora introduces Joy to a secret hideout where they can escape their troubles and share secrets. The hideout becomes the titular soft place to land for Joy, Nora and the other kids in their complex.

In the hideout, friendships blossom and splinter. A shared passion inspires Joy and Nora to test their independence by starting a dog-walking business to earn money, which elicits interest and growing trust from their parents, but yields unanticipated results. Troubling hidden messages scrawled on the hideout's wall leave Joy concerned, puzzled and wanting to do more to help the anonymous writer.

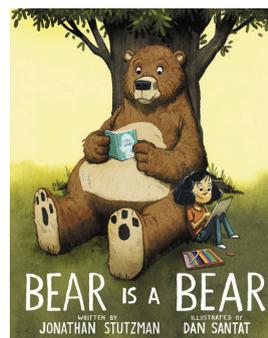
The desire for a safe haven is shared by all of the novel's characters. Chaos is everywhere, Joy discovers, but what matters is how you confront challenges, share what you've learned and invite others in. If you can find the strength and courage to do so, you may find that home has been right in front of you all along.

—Sharon Verbeten

Bear Is a Bear

By Jonathan Stutzman

Illustrated by Dan Santat



Picture Book

When it comes to animals in picture books, bears have a long and storied history. Large or small, woodland creature or friendly plush toy, their contributions are undeniable. Jonathan Stutzman and

Dan Santat's **Bear Is a Bear** (Balzer + Bray, \$18.99,

9780062880512, ages 3 to 7) more than earns its place among the ranks of Winnie, Corduroy, Paddington, Little Bear and more.

Although this Bear is a teddy toy, Santat depicts him as an actual bear. When the winsome Bear is introduced to his little girl, she is a baby gnawing on a wooden block and he is "hopeful and shy." He lowers his hulking body down onto the rug, lies on his tummy and smiles his most pleasing smile. The connection between them is instant: The baby attaches herself to Bear's head like a suction cup ("Bear is a snack.") before shooting snot directly at his face ("Bear is a tissue."). Bear is undeterred, and soon he has become a "warm, soft pillow" on which the child drifts off to sleep.

As the girl grows up, Bear plays many parts, always going along with whatever she wants to do. Together, they dress up for tea parties, dig for buried treasure and peer up at the stars through a telescope. Bear is a "brave protector" in a scary thunderstorm and a tissue, again, when the girl reads a tear-jerking novel. When the girl goes off to college, Bear becomes "a scholar" and "a piece of home," but eventually he is "a memory . . . covered in dust" in a trunk. But Bear is not forgotten, and soon he has a new role to play in the life of someone very important to his little girl.

Throughout the book, Caldecott Medalist Santat (*The Adventures of Beekle*) portrays Bear as a gentle giant who quickly earns a place in readers' hearts. Santat's illustrations are friendly and humorous, sure to remind adults of their own plush childhood friends who may also be tucked away in boxes. Stutzman's language is gentle and has an appealing

rhythm that's ideal for bedtime. The book's circular narrative and refrain of "Bear is a bear full of love" make for a satisfying read-aloud that's charmingly nostalgic with just the right amount of sweetness.

—Billie B. Little

The Last Cuentista

By Donna Barba Higuera



Middle Grade

A comet is on a crash course with Earth, and life on the planet will end. Three ships of colonists, including Petra Peña, have a chance at survival on another world. When Petra imagines her future on the distant planet Sagan, she dreams of

becoming a storyteller like the grandmother she must leave behind on Earth.

When Petra wakes from suspended animation after almost four centuries of space travel, she learns that the colonists did successfully reach Sagan, but an extremist faction known as the Collective took over the ship while she slept. These descendants of the non-suspended colonists believe that peace can only be achieved when every human being is exactly the same; they even genetically alter their skin to be colorless and transparent. Petra is the only person left whose memories of Earth have not been erased by the Collective's technology. She must use her wits and her stories to outsmart the Collective and fight for humanity's legacy.

The Last Cuentista beautifully demonstrates how cherished stories grow with us.

Petra's love of storytelling forms the heart of **The Last Cuentista** (Levine Querido, \$17.99, 9781646140893, ages 10 to 13). To communicate the sheer scope of what could be lost if the Collective succeeds, author Donna Barba Higuera

references both traditional and contemporary tales, from the epic of "Gilgamesh" to Yuyi Morales' 2018 picture book, *Dreamers*. Yet even as Petra seeks to protect the past, she doesn't shy away from change. She often tweaks the stories she retells and reminisces on her grandmother's own embellishments, beautifully demonstrating how even our oldest and most cherished stories continue to grow with us.

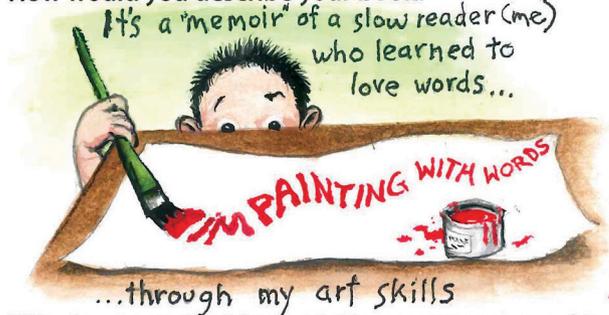
Particularly fitting for a novel about storytelling, the language Higuera employs is powerful and effective. The somber and sterile ship, the Collective members' eerily transparent skin and the lush alien world of Sagan are all portrayed in transporting detail. Higuera establishes a tense mood early on and preserves that tension throughout, while still creating spaces in which she quietly explores Petra's intense feelings of grief, hope and love. The contrast between these elements is balanced and complements the novel's bittersweet narrative.

Readers will find in **The Last Cuentista** a promise that the past is not the enemy of the future, but a gift that grants the perspective to meet that future with compassion and bravery.

—RJ Witherow

meet HUDSON TALBOTT

How would you describe your book?



...through my art skills
Who has been the biggest influence on your work?



Who was your childhood hero?

FURY—"The Story of a Horse and a Boy"
It was a TV show in the 50s.



What books did you enjoy as a child?

The World Book Encyclopedia.
I loved wandering through the pictures...



Paris... Parsnip... Penguin... Penicillin... Peru...
What one thing would you like to learn to do?

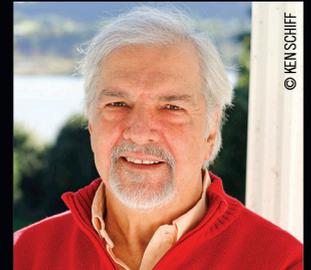
To grow old gracefully.



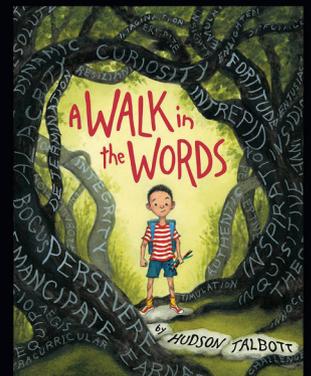
I'm often confused if I'm 7 or 70.

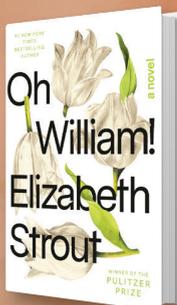
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Young Hudson Talbott was an enthusiastic artist, but he struggled with reading. His imaginative book **A Walk in the Words** (Nancy Paulsen, \$17.99, 9780399548710, ages 4 to 8) will reassure children as they become confident readers. Talbott has written and illustrated more than 20 books, including the Newbery Honor title *Show Way*, written by Jacqueline Woodson, and *We're Back! A Dinosaur's Story*.





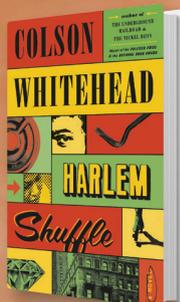
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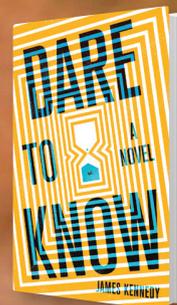
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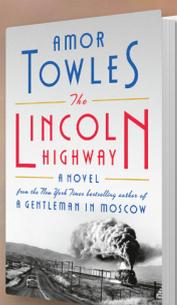
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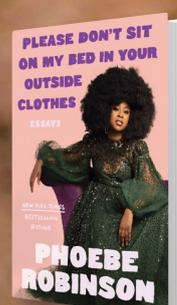
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