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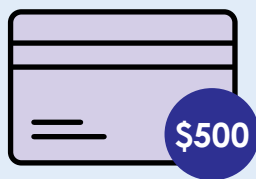




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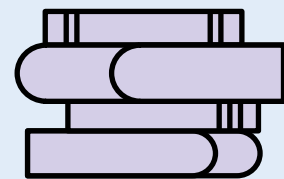
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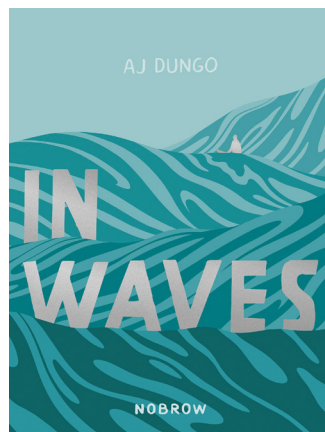
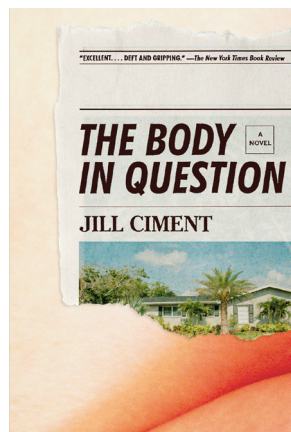
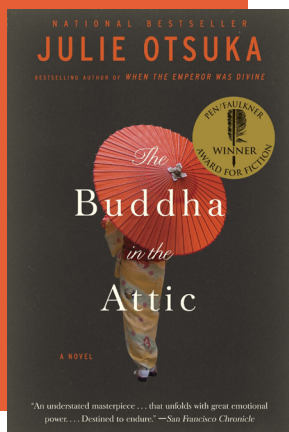
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Make a long story short

Spring is getting closer every day, and with all that excitement bubbling up, perhaps your attention span is short circuiting. No need to worry—the editors of BookPage have just the ticket. During the shortest month of the year, keep it short and sweet with these five succinct books.

The Buddha in the Attic

Julie Otsuka is a master of the short novel, and her National Book Award finalist, **The Buddha in the Attic**, is an epic saga written with brevity. In just 144 pages, Otsuka captures the lives of a group of Japanese women who immigrate to America, meet their husbands (many of whom lied about their ages and occupations), find work as farmers and maids, navigate the racist and classist minefields set by their white employers, raise children and scratch out a living, only to disappear suddenly as the United States enters World War II. The story is relayed by a first-person plural narrator who encompasses dozens of experiences, and it unfolds in a series of snapshots that coalesce into an astonishing mosaic of Japanese American life at the beginning of the 20th century. You can sense the mountain of research that Otsuka distilled into each beautiful sentence. It's innovative, surprising and deeply moving.

—Christy, Associate Editor

The Body in Question

A courtroom drama that spotlights the jurors' sequestration instead of the case itself, Jill Ciment's **The Body in Question** enraptured me from the start. The protagonist, a middle-aged photographer whose life is consumed by caring for her much older husband, views the jury's three-week isolation as a respite from assisting him. Her liberation leads to an affair with another juror that, though initially secret, begins to bleed into their surroundings with far-reaching consequences. At 192 pages, **The Body in Question** keeps readers engaged with fast-paced developments and characters who are eccentric in their ordinariness. Ciment's sparse writing enhances the mundanity of sequestration, even when a case is as monumental as this one. Though the subject matter is complex, the narrative progresses without judgment, in the same way a jury must consider only the facts laid before them before reaching a verdict.

—Jessie, Editorial Intern

In Waves

A comic book moves more quickly than other types of literature, so even though AJ DUNGO's graphic memoir is actually quite long, the total time readers spend with the book isn't. **In Waves** is powerful, as DUNGO blends moments from surfing history with memories of falling in love with and then losing his partner to cancer. The sections on their time together will absolutely wreck you, but as those dark waters ebb and flow, the story of surfing offers levity, revealing the sport's legacy as a refuge for Hawaiians. An especially helpful dose of hope comes from the friendship between surf legends Duke Kahanamoku and Tom Blake: "Duke represented the blissful nature of surfing. Tom personified the idea that surfing could provide comfort to those who felt broken." **In Waves** engages with both the depths of DUNGO's grief and the safe haven of surfing, offering a quick dip that will leave readers a bit battered by the waves.

—Cat, Deputy Editor

A Spindle Splintered

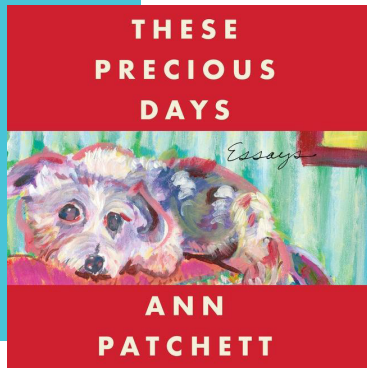
We are currently living through an absolute gold rush of sci-fi and fantasy novellas, and among all those tiny universes, Alix E. Harrow's **A Spindle Splintered** contains a multiverse. It's a *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* and "Sleeping Beauty" mashup that's just as fun as it sounds and way smarter than it needs to be. It follows Zinnia Gray, a young woman with a rare condition that will cause her to die before her 22nd birthday. During her "Sleeping Beauty"-themed 21st birthday party, Zinnia jokingly pricks her finger on a spindle and ends up in a fairy-tale world, complete with a princess on the verge of succumbing to her own curse. You can sense Harrow's glee on every single page, especially when she drops references and jokes tailor-made for a specific type of Tumblr-using, fandom-obsessed, very online reader. But this novella is as poignant as it is pop-culture obsessed, spinning a tale of sisterhood that defies the bleakness of every reality.

—Savanna, Associate Editor

A Psalm for the Wild-Built

Have you ever gone on a walk with a friend in nature and ended up in a highly personal or philosophical conversation? That's sort of what reading Becky Chambers' novella is like. It's a thoughtful fable that effortlessly incorporates profound questions—such as, why does human life need a purpose?—into what is essentially a road-trip story about a monk and a robot. The novella's first half is so charming and soothing that by the second half, when Chambers' protagonists are forging paths through the literal and metaphorical weeds, you'll find yourself hanging on their every word. It all works because Chambers never loses the trees for the forest. In one moment, her characters will be discussing whether death is necessary to give life meaning, and in the next, they'll be discussing the point of onions. Imaginative and comforting, **A Psalm for the Wild-Built** is a sheer delight.

—Stephanie, Associate Editor



★ These Precious Days

Author Ann Patchett narrates her essay collection **These Precious Days** (HarperAudio, 11 hours) with a warm familiarity that inspires reflection. She adopts a conversational, easygoing style in these 22 personal essays, which include anecdotes about growing up in a blended family, decluttering her life and managing

social expectations for women and couples. The common thread is the value of our experiences, and Patchett's encouraging voice emphasizes that our imperfections have a unique place and perfection of their own.

—*Maya Fleischmann*

Where the Deer and the Antelope Play

Best known for his role as Ron Swanson on "Parks and Recreation," Nick Offerman offers an escape from the grind with **Where the Deer and the Antelope Play** (Penguin Audio, 11.5 hours). Offerman's project entails getting dirty, digging into the past and infusing daily life with the gifts of the wilderness. He infuses this refreshing take on America's environmental and social landscapes with disarming humor, and his husky voice is a perfect invitation to the great outdoors.

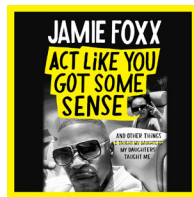
—*Mari Carlson*



The Storyteller

Dave Grohl's memoir, **The Storyteller** (HarperAudio, 10.5 hours), is as raw and unfiltered as his music. The Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter, guitarist and drummer reads his book in a gruff, sometimes hoarse voice, discussing his lifelong passion for music, his rock influences and the thrill of standing center stage. If you love the Foo Fighters' signature wall of sound, you'll find Grohl's delivery of his life story to be intensely upbeat and inspiring.

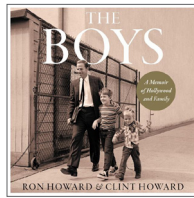
—*G. Robert Frazier*



★ Act Like You Got Some Sense

In this often hilarious and consistently stirring performance, comedian and actor Jamie Foxx dishes on his toughest role: being a father. Throughout **Act Like You Got Some Sense** (Hachette Audio, 6 hours), he brings honesty and heart to stories about his childhood and shows how these experiences guided him as a parent. This raucous listening experience brims with attitude and positivity.

—*Maya Fleischmann*

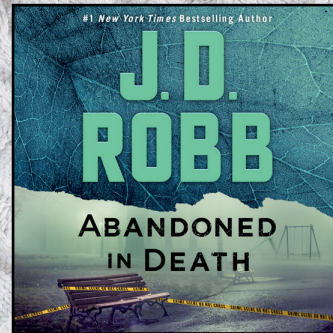


★ The Boys

Happy days are here again. That's the impression when listening to the soft-spoken, down-home tones of Ron Howard, better known to the world as forever young Opie Taylor and Richie Cunningham of "Andy Griffith" and "Happy Days," respectively. In **The Boys** (HarperAudio, 13 hours), Howard takes turns with his brother, Clint, to reminisce about being icons to adoring viewers in the 1960s and '70s. If you didn't know better, you'd swear you were sitting at the family dinner table as the Howard boys regaled you with stories of their early days in Hollywood.

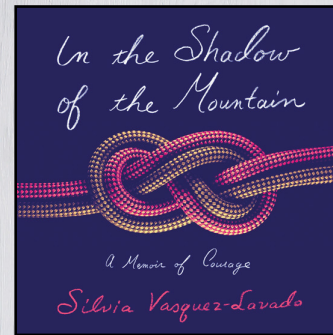
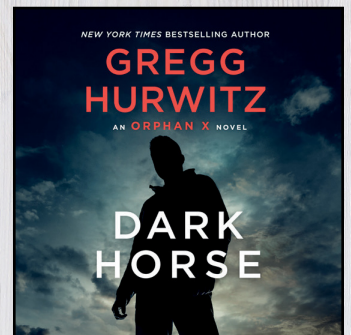
—*G. Robert Frazier*

THE WINTER'S BEST NEW AUDIOBOOKS

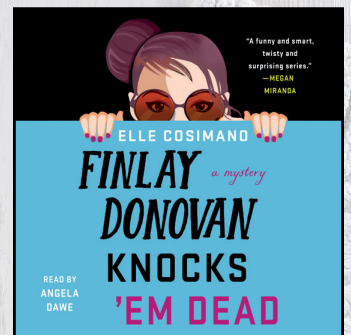


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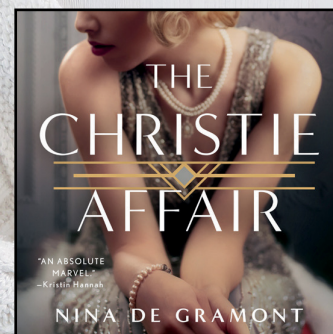
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"Excellent... this series just gets better!"
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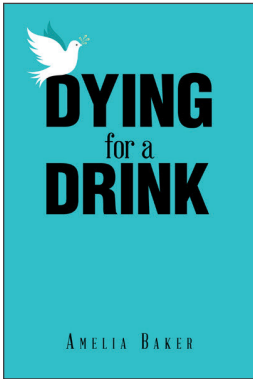


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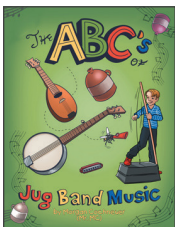


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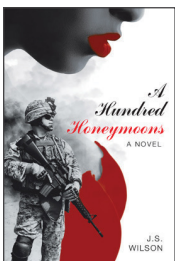


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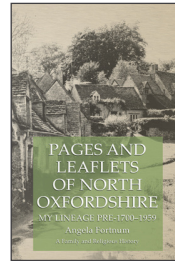


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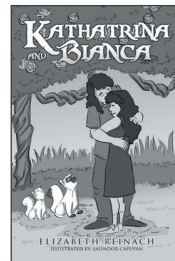
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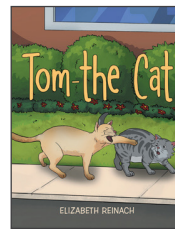


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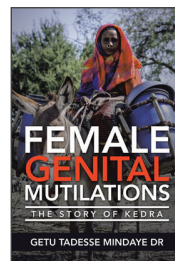


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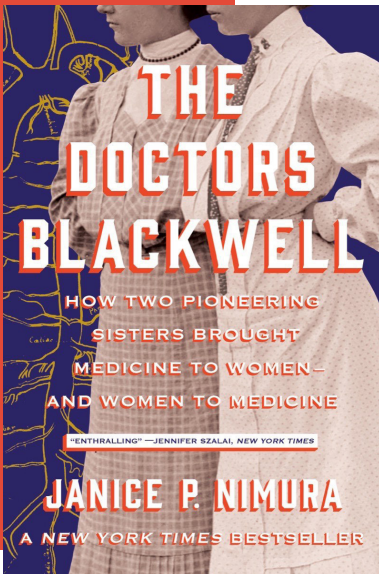
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BOOK CLUB READS FOR WINTER



Ladies of the laboratory

In **The Doctors Blackwell: How Two Pioneering Sisters Brought Medicine to Women and Women to Medicine** (Norton, \$16.95, 9781324020202), Janice P. Nimura tracks the history-making careers of Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell. As women in the male-dominated medical field during the 1800s, the sisters faced enormous obstacles, yet Elizabeth became the first woman to earn a medical degree in the United States and Emily developed into an exceptional physician. Nimura's well-researched narrative offers a wide range of

subjects for conversation, including the history of American medicine and the complications and pitfalls of first-wave feminism.

In her moving memoir, **Lab Girl** (Vintage, \$16, 9781101873724), paleobiologist Hope Jahren shares the story of her remarkable career in science

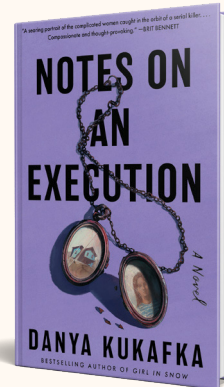
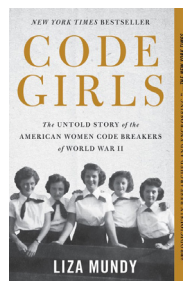
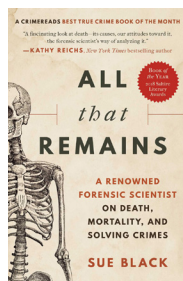
These books on extraordinary women who have made strides in the STEM fields are equal parts informative and inspiring.

while musing on the wonders of the natural world. From the challenges she faced as a female researcher to the labs she established and her experiences

with bipolar disorder, Jahren provides a beautifully written account of her life and work. Her book is a terrific pick for reading groups in search of a substantial yet entertaining memoir, offering ample opportunities to discuss gender, family and mental illness.

Thriller and true crime fans alike will savor Sue Black's **All That Remains: A Renowned Forensic Scientist on Death, Mortality, and Solving Crimes** (Arcade, \$18.99, 9781950691913). Black, a celebrated forensic anthropologist, delivers a fascinating chronicle of her unusual profession, mixing memoir with firsthand accounts of crime scene procedures and life in the laboratory. A native of Scotland, she approaches sensitive topics such as death and the human body with compassion, good sense and a sly sprinkling of humor.

Liza Mundy's **Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II** (Hachette, \$16.99, 9780316352543) illuminates a little-known facet of American history. As Mundy recounts in the book, women from across the country were trained to be code breakers for the U.S. Army and Navy during World War II. Working in secret, they made an invaluable contribution to the war effort. Mundy blends in-depth research with interviews with former "code girls" to create an enthralling narrative that disrupts historical stereotypes surrounding women's contributions in wartime.



NOTES ON AN EXECUTION

by Danya Kukafka

"A searing portrait of the complicated women caught in the orbit of a serial killer. . . . Compassionate and thought-provoking."

—BRIT BENNETT,

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Vanishing Half*

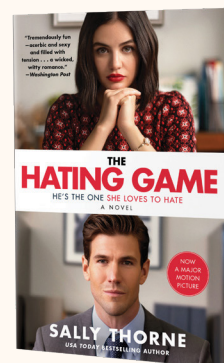
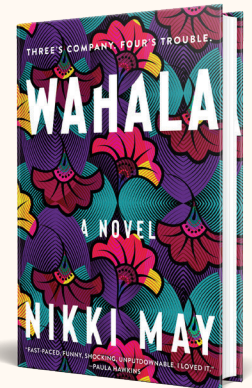
WAHALA

by Nikki May

"Utterly winning...brings to mind *Sex and the City* but feels more modern, more real."

—AMANDA EYRE WARD,

New York Times bestselling author of *The Jetsetters* and *The Lifeguards*



THE HATING GAME

Now a motion picture starring Lucy Hale and Austin Stowell, *USA Today* bestselling author Sally Thorne's hilarious and sexy workplace comedy all about that thin, fine line between hate and love.

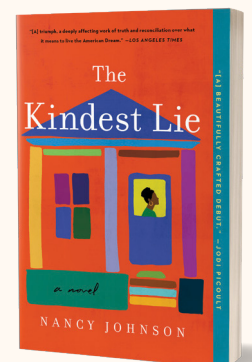
THE KINDEST LIE

by Nancy Johnson

"*The Kindest Lie* is a deep dive into how we define family, what it means to be a mother, and what it means to grow up Black...beautifully crafted."

—JODI PICOULT,

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

★ Grist

James Beard Award-winning chef Abra Berens and her collaborators have created a most magical combination of aesthetics, soul and practical guidance in **Grist** (Chronicle, \$35, 9781797207131), a cookbook focused on humble stuff: beans, legumes, grains and seeds. Let it be said that I *love* beans, and I really love the way Berens provides, along with specific recipes, a number of templates to follow for any combination of ingredients you crave or happen to have on hand. For example, a bean + vegetable + flavor + texture

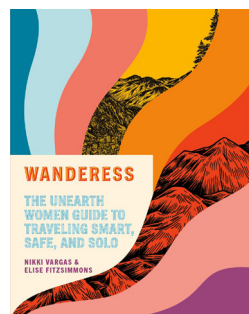
chart starts with beans (any kind), then lists four suggested ingredients for each step: add veg, add flavor, add extra texture and serve. Elsewhere, she walks us through a week's worth of lentils without boredom, and her recipes regularly include three or more variations. Topping it all off are Lucy Engelman's beautiful illustrations, which make this a true work of cookbook art.



Where They Purr

A bedroom decked out in lush linens and pillows—and a cat, luxuriating on the bespoke duvet. A kitchen with floor-to-ceiling windows—and a cat, nonchalantly surveying the room from atop the dining table. This is the fabulous world of **Where They Purr: Inspirational Interiors and the Cats Who Call Them Home** (Thames & Hudson, \$50, 9781760762285), in which images of sleek interiors foreground the homes' feline overlords.

Photographer Paul Barbera got the idea for a cat-centric home design book while working on a previous project, *Where They Create*, and the result takes those “how they styled it” shots we’ve all seen while shopping online—a sofa, say, captured with the owner’s pet proudly lounging—to the next-next level. The homes featured here are mostly high-end and very modern, full of sharp angles and long lines. You might be inclined to call some of them cold, except how could you when fluffy Pud or Pippi or Gustov is lurking or perched or sprawled in their midst? As a cat lover, my only quibble with this *purr*fectly delightful book is that there are too few orange tabbies in the mix. I suppose we all, like our cats, have our own *pre*ferences.



Wanderess

As I prepare for a solo journey to the Southwest, I’m happy to have in my pocket **Wanderess: The Unearth Women Guide to Traveling Smart, Safe, and Solo** (Clarkson Potter, \$16.99, 9780593138496), a guide for women, by women, and geared toward solo travelers. Whether you’re going it alone for the first time or planning a girls’ trip, the editors from *Unearth Women* have assembled in this colorful book all the resources, hacks and advice you could

ask for, including tips for traveling while pregnant and specific recommendations for women of color and travelers who are trans, lesbian or queer. The writers also offer an outline for creating your own Feminist City Guide, which centers women-owned businesses; if you like, you can pitch your guide(s) to *Unearth Women* for possible publication.

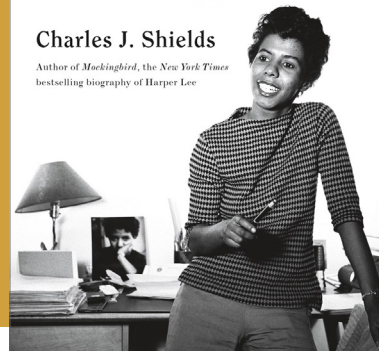
Susannah Felts is a Nashville-based writer and co-founder of The Porch, a literary arts organization. She enjoys anything paper- or plant-related.

LORRAINE HANSBERRY

THE LIFE BEHIND
A RAISIN IN THE SUN

Charles J. Shields

Author of *Mockingbird*, the *New York Times*
bestselling biography of Harper Lee



Lorraine Hansberry

In many respects, Lorraine Hansberry could be called a one-hit wonder. But that hit, *A Raisin in the Sun*, is an iconic masterpiece that continues to speak to audiences more than 60 years after its premiere. Hansberry was only 29 when she seemingly came out of nowhere to become the first Black female playwright produced on Broadway. Six years later, she died tragically young, precluding further literary greatness. Charles J. Shields, best known as a biographer of Harper Lee, delves into the short

yet significant life of this great writer in **Lorraine Hansberry** (Holt, \$29.99, 9781250205537), an evenhanded and informative study that reveals truths about a woman whose complexities were largely erased from the public portrait she and her heirs fashioned.

Shields has not written a glitzy showbiz biography that takes readers behind the scenes of the theater world. In fact, the triumph of *A Raisin in the Sun* only takes up a couple of chapters near the end of the book, and Hansberry and the team that mounted the show—including her cheerleader husband, Bob Nemiroff—were Broadway outsiders. Instead, the story Shields tells is of a smart, reserved and gifted young woman from the Black upper class who applied her intelligence, and sometimes anger, to a quest for her authentic personal identity in midcentury America.

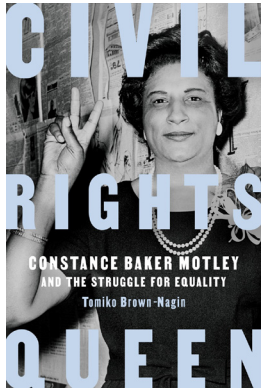
Hers was a life of confounding contradictions. The Hansberry family wealth was amassed by Lorraine’s father, a Chicago real estate tycoon who fought racial covenants all the way up to the Supreme Court yet was himself a slumlord who preyed on Black tenants. His daughter’s rebellion manifested in part through her embrace of communist ideals (which triggered FBI surveillance), yet she did not refuse the monthly profit checks she received from the family business. Married to a Jewish man, Hansberry eventually came to terms with her lesbianism but stayed married. While she was at the center of the Black cultural dialogue in her time—counting Paul Robeson, James Baldwin and Alice Childress among her friends and influences—she maintained that her most famous play at its heart was about class rather than race.

To paint the full landscape of the time and place that Hansberry inhabited, Shields often detours from the writer’s immediate story to place the many supporting players in context. These side trips are generally informative, although some seem extraneous and interrupt the flow of the main narrative. Shields raises interesting questions about others’ contributions to Hansberry’s work—particularly those of original *A Raisin in the Sun* director Lloyd Richards, and of Hansberry’s husband, who worked doggedly to shape her posthumous image and keep her literary legacy alive—but the answers remain largely unexplored. Overall, this equitable portrait of Hansberry is thoughtful and deftly rendered, a welcome corrective for the carefully curated and sanitized version that has long constituted fans’ received wisdom.

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.

BLACK WOMEN, BLACK CHANGE-MAKERS

Two biographies of trailblazing civil rights activists illuminate their vital work.



Constance Baker Motley and Fannie Lou Hamer came from starkly different backgrounds, but their political and legal contributions to the civil rights movement changed history in equal measure.

★ CIVIL RIGHTS QUEEN

Far too few Americans know Constance Baker Motley's name or legacy, and that dearth of recognition struck Harvard professor Tomiko Brown-Nagin as "a kind of historical malpractice." She hopes to right this wrong with her meticulously researched, fascinating biography, **Civil Rights Queen: Constance Baker Motley and the Struggle for Equality** (Pantheon, \$30, 9781524747183).

Regal, stately and tall, Motley was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1921 to parents who had emigrated from the Caribbean island of Nevis. Despite her family's poverty, she was raised to think of herself as "superior to others—to African Americans in particular." Nonetheless, living in the shadow of Yale University, she received an excellent education and developed an intense interest in racial inequality. In the end, Motley spent her life trying to improve "the lives of the very people [her father] had spent a lifetime castigating."

Motley's trailblazing career included work as a lawyer, politician and federal judge, and at every stage of her incredible journey, readers will feel as though they have a backstage pass. Brown-Nagin excels at packing in intriguing minute details while still making them easily understood, as well as at contextualizing each scene historically. Thurgood Marshall became Motley's mentor on the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and she played a crucial role in litigating *Brown v. Board of Education*. The sweep of history Motley inhabited is full of many such significant moments: visiting the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in jail in Georgia; serving as James Meredith's lawyer as he fought for admission to the University of Mississippi; having a heated televised debate with Malcolm X and more. She was the first Black woman to argue before the U.S. Supreme Court, arguing 10 cases and winning nine of them. Later, she was the first Black woman to become a New York state senator, as well as the first Black woman appointed to the federal judiciary.

Motley spent years paving the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and later as a judge, she helped implement it in a variety of areas. **Civil Rights Queen** is the unforgettable story of a legal pioneer who changed the course of history, superbly elucidated by Brown-Nagin.

—Alice Cary

UNTIL I AM FREE

Historian Keisha N. Blain's extensively researched chronicle **Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America** (Beacon, \$24.95, 9780807061503) ensures that Hamer's story—and her lessons for activists—will live on.

The granddaughter of enslaved people and the youngest of 20 children growing up on a plantation in the Jim Crow South, Hamer's formal education ended in the sixth grade. Her parents needed her to pick cotton in order to put food on the table. In 1962, at age 44, Hamer attended a meeting organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and learned for the first time that she had a constitutional right to vote.

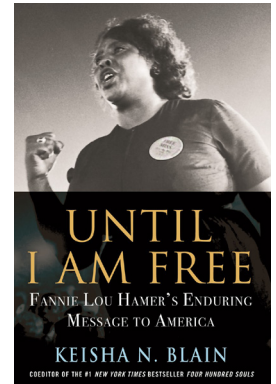
After attempting to exercise that right got her thrown off the plantation, Hamer began organizing voter education workshops and registration drives. Her family became targets of violence, her husband and daughter were arrested

and jailed, and their home was invaded. Eventually her work with SNCC activists almost cost Hamer her life: Jailed after a voter workshop in Winona, Mississippi, she took a beating that left her with kidney damage and a blood clot in one eye.

Undeterred, Hamer went on to challenge the all-white Mississippi delegates at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, arguing that the delegation couldn't represent the state when Black Democrats had been excluded from the selection process. President Lyndon Johnson held an impromptu press conference to prevent television coverage of her graphic testimony, in which she detailed her beating, but it aired anyway and sparked outrage. Eventually the credentials committee offered the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which included white and Black people, two at-large seats with no voting power. Hamer's response: "We didn't come all this way for no two seats." Four years later, she would become a member of Mississippi's first integrated delegation.

As readers take in Hamer's life story throughout this rallying cry of a book, they will find that her message still resounds today: "You are not free whether you are white or black, until I am free."

—Priscilla Kipp



ONE MAN, 14 PEAKS, and the mountaineering achievement of a lifetime.



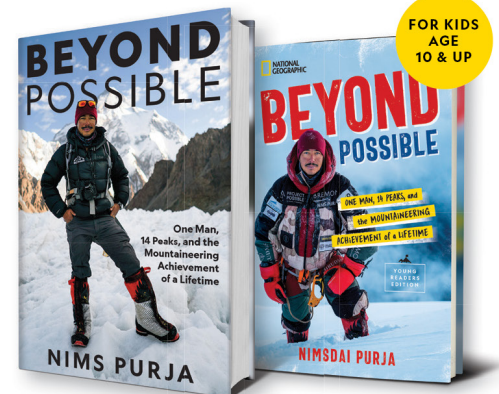
The incredible story of world-record-setting Nepalese mountaineer Nims Purja.

"A fascinating and inspiring look at a life lived on the edge."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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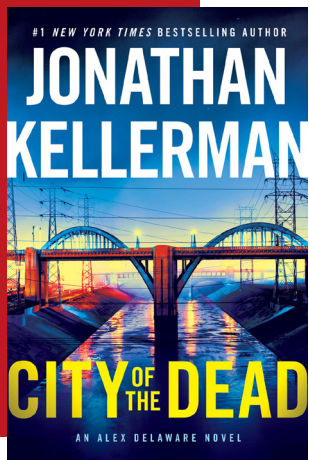
Learn how Nims's attitude, leadership skills, and willingness to learn from mistakes took him to the top.



I AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

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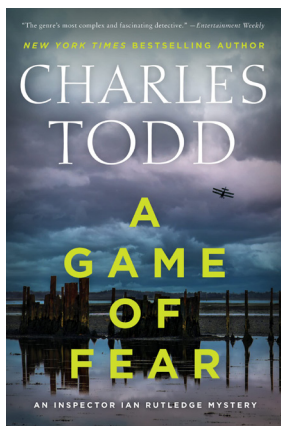
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



City of the Dead

Author Jonathan Kellerman published his first Alex Delaware mystery more than 35 years ago, but entries such as the stellar *City of the Dead* (Ballantine, \$28.99, 9780525618584) prove that this popular series has done anything but run out of steam. In the wee hours of the morning, in a tony neighborhood of Los Angeles, a naked man is struck headfirst by a moving van, rendering the now-corpse's facial features totally unrecognizable. Meanwhile, a few doors down, a woman is found murdered in her bedroom. Veteran Los Angeles police homicide detective Milo Sturgis does not believe in coincidences, and as he is wont to do in these situations, he quickly solicits the aid of his longtime friend, forensic psychologist Alex Delaware. Alex is quite surprised to discover that he knew the murdered woman, Cordelia Gannett, a popular self-help influencer who once appeared as an expert witness in a court case Alex was involved in. Unfortunately for her, she was subsequently exposed as a charlatan who had created fake credentials in

order to pose as a licensed psychologist. Despite this fraud, there is remarkably little evidence to suggest a motive for someone to kill either Cordelia or the unknown man. This, of course, is where Alex steps in, probing the psychological profiles of everyone involved in the case, pulling on loose threads to see which ones might unravel and turning up damning evidence of previous murders in the process.



A Game of Fear

Charles Todd's latest Ian Rutledge mystery, *A Game of Fear* (William Morrow, \$28.99, 9780062905598), finds the intrepid Scotland Yard investigator chasing ghosts. This is fitting in a way, as Rutledge is no stranger to the otherworldly. The World War I veteran carries with him the "presence" of Corporal Hamish MacLeod, a man he was forced to execute for insubordination on the battlefield who now provides a snarky counterpoint to every one of Rutledge's moods, reflections and decisions. An Essex noblewoman, Lady Benton, claimed she witnessed a murder. She has positively (-ish) identified the killer as one Captain Nelson—but Captain Nelson is deceased, having died during the war. In 1921 England, even an unlikely claim made by a member of nobility warrants at least a token investigation, so Rutledge heads to the seaside town of Walmer to investigate. Another murder follows, seemingly unrelated save for proximity, and then there's a too-convenient, evidence-erasing fire. The tension ratchets

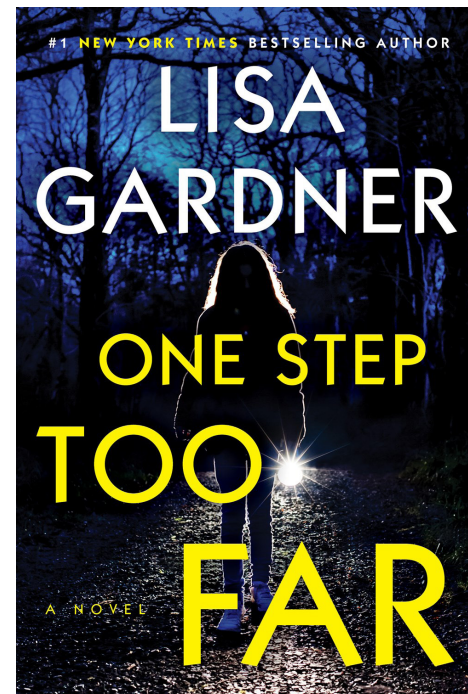
up when Rutledge himself bears witness to an event that seems to mirror Lady Benton's apparition. Perhaps it's a warning that he is getting too close for the comfort of resident evildoers, whichever side of the shadowy spectral divide they may inhabit.



Marion Lane and the Deadly Rose

T.A. Willberg's debut, *Marion Lane and the Midnight Murder*, generated a fair bit of buzz in literary circles and among mystery aficionados. Now she returns with the second volume in the series: *Marion Lane and the Deadly Rose* (Park Row, \$27.99, 9780778311942), named for "the Florist," a serial killer who brands his victims with a rose. The aforementioned Marion is an apprentice at Miss Brickett's Investigations & Inquiries, an underground (literally) and quite clandestine detective agency in 1959 London. In the grand tradition of English mysteries dating back to Sherlock Holmes, Miss Brickett's serves as consultant to Scotland Yard when a case proves too baffling for the authorities' plodding detective work. This time out, Marion is summoned to assist in bringing the Florist to justice. *Marion Lane and the Deadly Rose's* central mystery is as strong as that of any traditional, beloved whodunit. The book also features a cast of well-crafted characters, including a delightfully despicable villain, and a

host of unexpected twists and misdirections. But the similarities to other mysteries end there, as Willberg takes readers on a wild, genre-bending ride with touches of steampunk, a dash of sci-fi tech wizardry and plenty of dry British humor. Willberg has noted in an interview that her first book was rejected numerous times for not fitting neatly into any category. I trust that the authors of those rejections have since sought more appropriate employment opportunities.



★ One Step Too Far

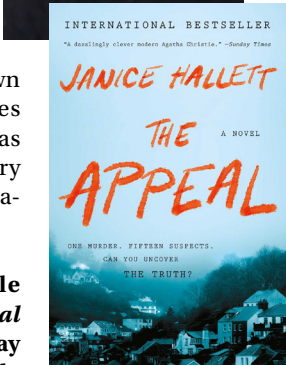
In my review of Lisa Gardner's first Frankie Elkin novel, I opined, "*Before She Disappeared* is billed as a standalone, but I'm thinking it would be the perfect setup for a terrific series." In revisiting that sentence, the only thing I would change is to replace the word *setup* with *springboard*. As good as that first book was, *One Step Too Far* (Dutton, \$27, 9780593185414) is better in every regard, a tour de force in suspense and red herrings with a twist ending I did not even begin to anticipate. Frankie Elkin is a finder of lost persons. She does this on an ad hoc basis, for the satisfaction of doing some good but also to atone for some of the damage wrought in her 20s, when she was addicted to alcohol. Frankie, who has no fixed address, no car and no possessions to speak of, is a Jack Reacher-esque loner (minus the military connections and the musculature). This time, she joins a search party about to embark on their fifth expedition into the Wyoming wilderness to search for the remains of Tim O'Day, who went missing during his bachelor party camping trip, never to be seen again. Other members of the party include Tim's father; his companions the night he went missing; a well-respected wilderness guide; a cadaver dog trainer and her golden retriever; and a noted, albeit thus far unsuccessful, Bigfoot hunter. Virtually all of them have secrets and underlying motives, as Frankie will find out, initially to her dismay and then to her peril.

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.

Amateur theatrics turned deadly serious

The curtain rises on a wickedly funny novel of suspense.

Janice Hallett's debut novel, **The Appeal** (Atria, \$27.99, 9781982187453), is an inventive and darkly funny epistolary mystery set in the drama-filled world of amateur theater. In this Q&A, Hallett revisits her own theatrical experiences and reveals what it was like to construct a story with no fewer than 15 viable suspects.



exposed are aspects of your true self, such as your empathy, your attention to detail and how you really feel about the person you're "speaking" to. I'm quite sad to see texting and messaging take over from good old-fashioned email.

The many plausible suspects in *The Appeal* make it great fun to play amateur sleuth while reading. Was it fun to write? Did you always know whodunit?

It was huge fun, not least because I wrote it entirely on spec, with no deadline except a vague feeling that I didn't want to spend longer than a year working on it. At the start, I had no idea who the victim or murderer was going to be. I let the story evolve as it went along, then did some intricate reverse engineering to make what I wrote in the end fit the beginning.

How did you keep track of all of the messages, notes, transcripts, etc., that you created? Did you hearken back to any of your own correspondence as you created your characters' varied communication styles? Strangely, I made very few notes. I did a lot of scrolling back and forth though, and paid particular attention to how each character opened and signed off, so I had a lot of information to keep in my head. I most certainly took inspiration from 20 years of email correspondence, both professional and personal. Email communication is a great leveler. What we don't write speaks just as loudly as anything we do. What's

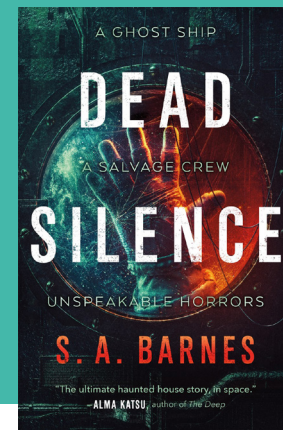
Tight bonds are formed in theater troupes, whether via growing into roles together, shared nervousness as the premiere approaches or camaraderie after a show well done. What drew you to exploring what happens when such strong bonds begin to fray?

A drama group becomes like a family, with emotional bonds among the members—and just like in a family, the stakes can suddenly become much higher. Even when things are falling apart, you can't just walk away: The show must go on.

***The Appeal* is often very funny, with insights into the ways in which people ingratiate themselves, manipulate a situation or gleefully gossip. Does writing humor come naturally to you? Do you consider yourself a funny person?**

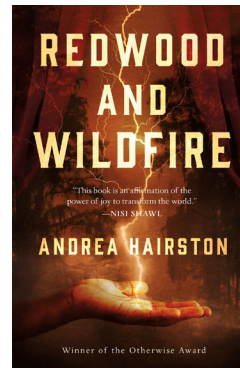
If you want to empty a room in double-quick time, get me to tell a joke. While I wouldn't say I'm funny in person, I gravitate toward comedy when I'm writing. Making people laugh is a powerful tool to help you engage them with your story. Having said that, if you're writing a thriller in which the aim is to build tension, you have to be very careful how you use humor, because laughter in that instance will disperse the tension immediately. It's a tricky balance!

—Linda M. Castellitto



★ Dead Silence

A small crew discovering a long-lost ship sounds like an interesting enough premise. But what if that long-lost ship holds a gruesome and unexplainable secret? Now you've got my attention. S.A. Barnes' **Dead Silence** (Tor Nightfire, \$26.99, 9781250819994) mixes horror, mystery and sci-fi into a thrill ride sure to shock you out of your reading rut. The crew of a small repair ship at the edge of space picks up an unexpected signal. It leads them to the *Aurora*, a luxury space cruiser lost 20 years ago. Team leader Claire Kovalik decides they should salvage the wreck. Once aboard, however, the crew discovers that something went very, very wrong on the *Aurora*. What follows is a claustrophobic race against time as the ship's horrors begin to affect the crew one by one. Dread slowly builds as small, frightening moments inside the *Aurora* multiply, showcasing Barnes' patient plotting and steady pacing. This is one of those time-warp books—the ones where you look away from the clock, then look back and it's suddenly way past your bedtime.



★ Redwood and Wildfire

Sometimes reading a book is like paddling a rushing river: You just have to jump in and see where it takes you. Such is the case with Andrea Hairston's richly layered **Redwood and Wildfire** (TorDotCom, \$27.99, 9781250808707). In early 1900s America, magic is as old as the swamps, the woods and the bayous. Some people, descended from those who have lived for generations under canopies of cypress trees and Spanish moss, can harness that magic. In Peach Grove, Georgia, a Black woman named Redwood and a Seminole Irish man named Aidan both have this talent. The two kindred spirits set out on a grand adventure in search of a place of their own, with Chicago as their final destination. Hairston describes a country at the tipping point between an ancient past and an electrified, dazzling future. The reader will feel this tension within the prose, as well as these two misfits' yearning to create a life in which they can be their fullest selves. It's immediate, it's unflinching, and it's wonderful.



Hunt the Stars

Jessie Mihalik's thrilling first entry in her Starlight's Shadow series, **Hunt the Stars** (Harper Voyager, \$16.99, 9780063051034), is a perfect example of why bounty hunters are such classic sci-fi characters. It's hard to find a more compelling conflict between getting paid and doing the right thing. War veteran-turned-ship's captain Octavia "Tavi" Zarola gets a job offer that could make her and her crew rich for years. The problem is that the one paying is Torran Fletcher, a ruthless alien general that Tavi once fought against. Despite her misgivings, Tavi brings Torran and his crew of fellow telepathic Valoffs on board. During the job, Tavi and her crew discover a plot that threatens peace in the galaxy, forcing her to choose a side even as she grows closer to Torran. Amid all the action and adventure, Mihalik also shows how a group of people in close quarters can become a family. Fans of "The Mandalorian" or "Firefly" will love this sci-fi romance.

Chris Pickens is a Nashville-based fantasy and sci-fi superfan who loves channeling his enthusiasm into reviews of the best new books the genre has to offer.



Visit BookPage.com to read an extended version of this Q&A and our review of *The Appeal*.

Hope springs eternal

The details may change, but one thing in romance remains guaranteed: a happily ever after.

Stories that chronicle the discovery and cementing of a soul-mate are unfailingly popular, whether they spring from mythic origins or feature a dramatically foiled kidnapping. The endings are no surprise, but it's the endless ways to reach that happy moment that make romance fans come back again and again and again.

★ Electric Idol

Neon Gods author Katee Robert returns with another contemporary take on Greek mythology in **Electric Idol** (Sourcebooks Casablanca, \$14.99, 9781728231761). Psyche, the daughter of Demeter, is being groomed to take her place in the city of Olympus' hierarchy when she encounters Aphrodite's son, Eros. He's as deadly as he is beautiful, and his work as his mother's ruthless fixer has made him a legend. But when Psyche does him a good turn, she attracts not only Eros but also the lethal intentions of his mother. Robert employs one of the most beloved romance tropes, the marriage of convenience, when Eros offers to marry Psyche in order to protect her. Two strangers becoming quickly but intimately acquainted, then falling in love and finally committing to each other, is not only delicious, it's practically a microcosm of the entire romance genre. **Electric Idol** has danger, a clever heroine and just enough world building to not weigh down its best feature: the emotional metamorphosis of the seemingly monstrous Eros into a kind and adoring lover. Don't miss this sexy and sensational book.

This Valentine's Day, make a date with one of these five fabulous love stories.

★ Seoulmates

Seoulmates (Berkley, \$16, 9780593100165) completes Jen Frederick's lovely and lyrical duology about Hara Wilson and her journey to Seoul, South Korea, to find her roots. In the first book, *Heart and Seoul*, Hara found her birth mother and fell in love with the charming and rich Yujun—only to learn that he is her stepbrother. (In Korean culture, a romantic relationship between stepsiblings is completely taboo.) As **Seoulmates** begins, the pair are trying to decide if being together is worth becoming outcasts from both their family and society. Hara feels conflicted, but not about her love for Yujun or her fascination with the culture and food of Seoul, which Frederick describes in lavish (and delicious) detail. The intimate first-person perspective allows readers' hearts to ache and soar along with Hara's as she experiences both disaster and triumph. Learning to navigate a different culture and language as well as new relationships is a hard road, but Hara is stronger than her doubts. Even though a happily ever after looks out of reach, Hara learns to trust herself and the people she's let into her life in this highly enjoyable read.

Highland Wolf

Love blossoms for a laird's daughter after she's saved from an unwanted marriage in **Highland Wolf** (Avon, \$9.99,

9780062855435) by Lynsay Sands. On the verge of being forced to marry one of her uncle's friends, Lady Claray MacFarlane considers leaping to her death, but she's rescued by a mercenary known as the Wolf. He plans to return her to her father, but he also has a secret—he's her betrothed, Bryson MacDonald, who was thought to have perished years ago. Though Claray initially befuddles her no-nonsense husband-to-be with her soft spot for wounded animals, she ultimately proves herself to be the stalwart partner he needs. Danger lurks, but that doesn't stop the lusty pair from finding time for each other in smoking-hot scenes. Sands keeps the action moving, and readers will fall head-over-heels for the ferocious Wolf and his growing tenderness for his lady. The detailed descriptions of medieval life and well-drawn characters make **Highland Wolf** a standout historical romance.

On a Night Like This

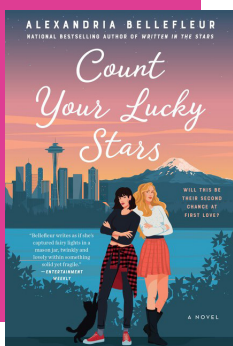
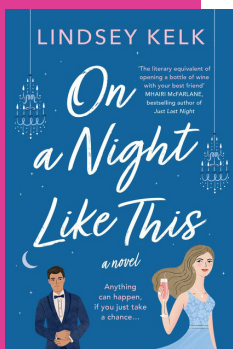
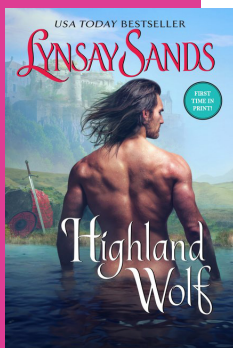
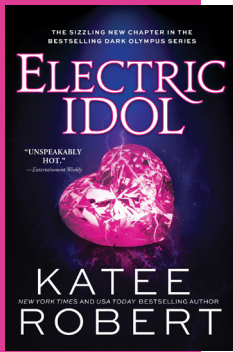
There's something enchanting going on in Lindsey Kelk's **On a Night Like This** (HarperCollins, \$15.99, 9780008496753). Told in a breezy first-person voice, this charming British rom-com finds

personal assistant Fran Cooper taking on a temporary assignment that involves spending the night on an Italian island that is playing host to an over-the-top celebrity- and billionaire-studded event

known as the Crystal Ball. Tired of stewing over her cheating fiancé and stalled life, Fran decides to sneak into the party. Once there, she meets Evan, who seems to have stepped out of her most romantic daydreams. Their eyes meet and it's magic, but Evan insists they have this one night of friendly fun without thoughts of the future. This is sigh-worthy, entertaining escapism, all dressed up in sequins. The exotic locale and Cinderella touches add to the kisses-only fun.

Count Your Lucky Stars

Old friends find good fortune in **Count Your Lucky Stars** (Avon, \$15.99, 9780063000889) by Alexandria Bellefleur. Olivia Grant is still recovering from the end of her relationship with her high school sweetheart when she gets a golden opportunity for career advancement: planning a last-minute wedding between local VIPs. Color her shocked when the best woman is none other than her childhood BFF Margot Cooper, with whom she had a spring break fling during her senior year. The two avoided discussing their feelings when they parted, but 11 years later, sparks still fly between them. This extremely sexy rom-com is full of lingering glances and fiery love scenes, and there's an awesome circle of found family helping the old friends and sort of new lovers sort through their feelings. While there are obligatory scenes played for laughs, Bellefleur also makes the sincere observation that the person who sees you the clearest is often the person who scares you the most. Thoughtful conversations about relationships balance the comedy in this ultra-satisfying read.



Recipe for romance

With a dash of sweetness and a pinch of spice, Anita Kelly's debut rom-com has all the right ingredients.

As a contestant on the reality cooking competition show "Chef's Special," Dahlia Woodson is looking to reinvent herself. London Parker, the show's first nonbinary contestant, wants to show the world what they can do. In *Love & Other Disasters* (Forever, \$15.99, 9781538754849), Dahlia and London's chemistry is dynamic . . . but the course of love and reality TV never runs smoothly. In this Q&A, author Anita Kelly shares the secret sauce of their storytelling.

At multiple points in the book, Dahlia focuses on the building blocks of cooking—starting with something simple. Do you have an equivalent of that for writing? When you start with the basics of a story, what does that look like for you?

For me, stories always begin with characters. I usually think of one main character and a problem they're struggling with, and then it's like, all right, who are they going to meet who's going to help them keep moving? Who's going to tell them they're OK? I can never start a story until I know my people.

While filming "Chef's Special" in Los Angeles, Dahlia spends a lot of time thinking about "LA Dahlia" and how she's different from the person she is at home on the East Coast. Was that something you wanted to tap into, how coming to a new place can open us up to new things?

LA Dahlia was probably the most personal part of this book, when I think about it. I grew up in a small town on the East Coast, and as an angsty teen, I used to fantasize about breaking out and escaping to California, which seemed like the epitome of romance and adventure and freedom. I think the idea of LA Dahlia was probably me manifesting my deepest teenage desires.

LA Dahlia is, of course, the same person as Maryland Dahlia, the same person as Massachusetts Dahlia. They all matter, and they are all her. But allowing ourselves to dream big, to live out untold versions of ourselves, is something that traveling to a new place can absolutely help unlock.

Sex is often idealized in romance novels—perfect bodies, perfect synchronicity, sweeping waves

of passion with nothing messy or awkward or unsure. But in one of their very first sexual encounters, Dahlia argues for the importance of recognizing her and London's individual imperfections. What went into making that choice?

I could talk about this topic for a long time, but painting sex—and bodies—as imperfect and messy and funny is one of the most important parts of writing romance to me. Because that's what sex is! Bodies and sex are so freaking weird! Sex can be all of those things—messy and funny and imperfect—and it can be sensual and serious and hot.

Of course, I am as much of a sucker in my own romance reading life for toned bodies, hunky muscles and magically perfect sex as anyone. Seriously, I am always down for beautiful people really knowing how to please their partners. But I think it's not only more honest but also simply more interesting to write about the more diverse realities of bodies and sex.

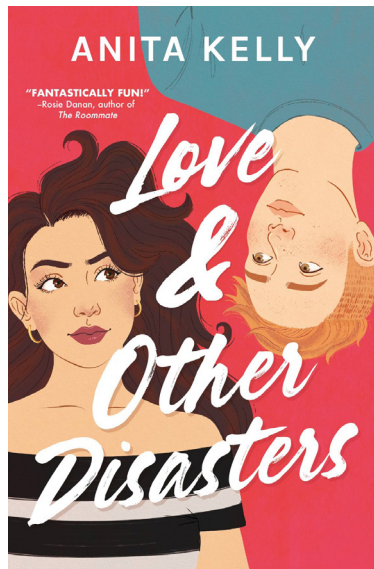
The more we normalize talking through sex, laughing through sex and doing whatever the hell we want during sex (with consent), the better our relationships with our bodies, our partners and our sexualities will be.

There's a deeply personal and moving scene in which London sees messages of support and gratitude on their social media accounts for the representation they offer. Does that mirror your own experience with responses to your stories?

Readers have mentioned that section as being particularly moving, and when I read it now,

I agree. But it's funny because writing those messages was so hard when I first drafted this book. I was cringing the whole time I typed them out, like oh my god, this is so cheesy, help. There's something difficult about accepting simple, genuine kindness and support. We have all been so hardened. But I'm glad I forced myself to write them. Because you can find simple, genuine kindness and support, even on the internet. You just have to force yourself past all the trash fires to let yourself accept it.

I'm no London Parker—I would never survive on reality television—but I have been incredibly humbled and moved by the response to this



"I think love should feel a lot like comfort food."



Visit [BookPage.com](https://www.bookpage.com) to read our starred review of *Love & Other Disasters* and an extended version of this Q&A.

book. People have mentioned it being the first book they've read with a nonbinary character, and I actually love when people mention that it took them a while to get used to reading they/them pronouns for London, but that by the end, they got the hang of it. Because for a lot of people, that's an honest experience! And the only way to normalize something is to have access to it. I am by no means the first romance author to write a nonbinary character, but it still feels like a privilege to be able to provide that first experience on the page for some people.

I also love when Dahlia's storyline hits with people—that desire to want something different and meaningful for yourself but not knowing quite how to find it—because I think that's a part of so many of us. I was so anxious to put this book out there, and the response so far has meant more than I could ever possibly express.

Dahlia and London compare notes on their chosen comfort foods. Is your own favorite comfort food hidden in their answers?

Funnily enough, not really. For London, I have to give credit to my brother-in-law, who really knows food. I asked him what he would consider a great meal and he was super enthusiastic about how much he loves just browning up a bunch of Brussels sprouts with a ton of butter, and I was like, now there's something I would never do. But London Parker would.

I think love should feel a lot like comfort food, which is probably why I put such emphasis on it in this story. A healthy relationship and our favorite foods are both deeply personal and full of reliable joy.

—Elizabeth Mazer

A romance of revisions

Emily Wibberley and Austin Siegemund-Broka's adult debut is a cerebral yet swoony love story.

The authors of four acclaimed young adult novels, Emily Wibberley and Austin Siegemund-Broka enjoy a friends-to-lovers romance that is better than fiction. Long before they even thought of writing romance, they were childhood rivals-turned-friends who fell in love. But the characters in their adult debut, **The Roughest Draft**, have a far thornier path to happily ever after.

Nathan Van Huysen and Katrina Freeling were once close friends and writing partners. Their relationship fell apart shortly after releasing a bestselling novel, and the pair haven't spoken in three years. But unfortunately for them, they signed a two-book deal, and the deadline for their second novel is looming. Nathan and Katrina return to Key Largo, Florida, where they wrote their first book, to fulfill the requirements of their contract and write one final love story together. But the line between a polite peace and real affection proves slippery and hard to maintain.

In a call to their home in Los Angeles, Wibberley and Siegemund-Broka readily admit that they've known each other so long that it's hard for them to pinpoint when they first met. Their literary doppelgängers in **The Roughest Draft**, on the other hand, had a far more turbulent start to their relationship. Nathan and Katrina had amazing innate chemistry at first, but they met at a complicated stage of life and never enjoyed good timing. Whatever pining bubbled up as they wrote during intense, secluded periods was suppressed in real life, only to be expressed through their fiction.

You can see the imprint of Wibberley's and Siegemund-Broka's personalities, palpable chemistry and, most of all, interests stamped onto these characters. That's very much intentional, and both authors describe the metafictional commentary on narrative in **The Roughest Draft** as an essential part of the book's premise. "We liked the idea from the beginning that writing is putting yourself on the page," Wibberley explains. "So you're sharing . . . a layer of yourself there that you wouldn't normally."

That, Siegemund-Broka says, is "the thematic wellspring of this book. . . . You are creating professionally, and you're doing it to write for an audience and to craft stories that you think people will engage with. But at the same time, there's no avoiding the degree to which it also springs from your own passions, your own preferences, the things that you think are exciting and lovable."

Wibberley and Siegemund-Broka's collaborative, reflective and intellectually curious sensibility comes through loud and clear on the page, especially in their approach to tropes. Both authors are very conscious of storytelling traditions and structures, and **The Roughest Draft**

"Writing is putting yourself on the page."

leans on beloved conventions such as estranged friends, friends to lovers and a second chance at love.

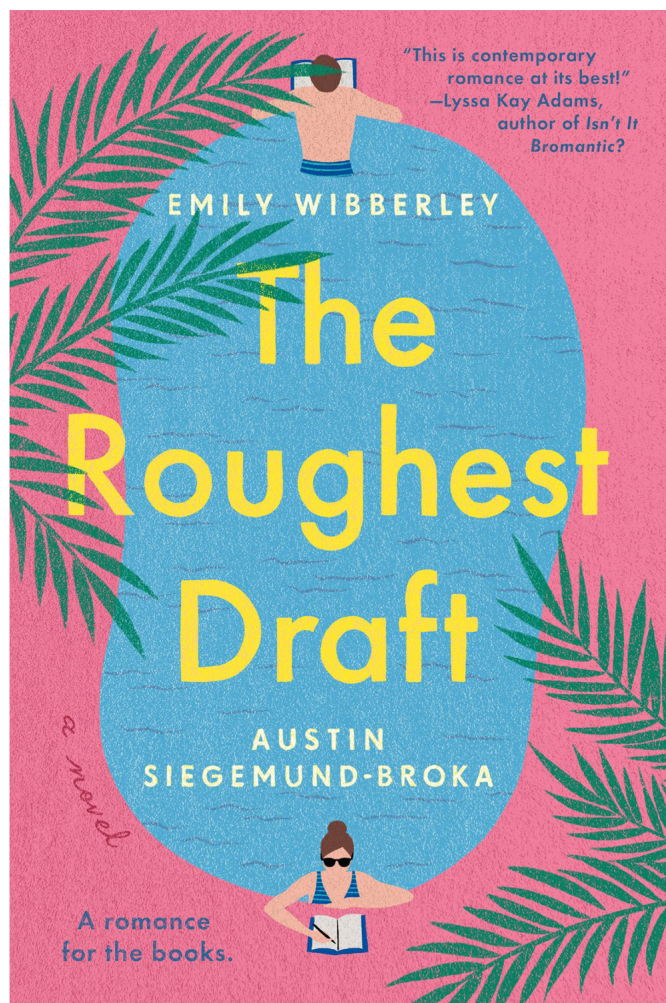
Nathan and Katrina's relationship at the beginning of **The Roughest Draft** is similar to fake dating, but rather than performing a relationship for others, they're performing a friendship for themselves. To diffuse tensions at the start of their time in Key Largo, Katrina suggests that they should, in essence, fake it till they make it: "You and I will be creating fiction together. So let's embrace it. Let's live a fiction." This creates a safe space to enjoy each other's company without having to address the tensions that broke up their partnership in the first place.

The Roughest Draft explores this dynamic in extremely effective ways. Here, it's not simply about getting the characters into close proximity or forcing them to go through the motions. It's about giving them permission to do things that they wouldn't feel they had license to do otherwise. Siegemund-Broka points to a scene in which Katrina acts out choreography for a love scene in front of Nathan. "She's performing for a very logistical, clear reason," he says. "But the actions are what they are, and [so are] the feelings."

Speaking of love scenes, what is it like writing them with your life partner? "It was the hardest part of the book for us," Wibberley says.

Siegemund-Broka agrees. "It's too [much] like you're being watched while you're trying to channel those feelings," he says. "It makes it difficult to write and difficult to edit and difficult to negotiate." These are the only parts of the book they wrote separately from each other, and this potential for awkwardness when writing about sex with another person carries over for the characters in **The Roughest Draft**. "We wanted to include those moments in the book, both for the obvious character tension but also for the humor, because of course, you have them sitting on the couch being incredibly awkward together," says Siegemund-Broka.

These sorts of layered interactions between fiction, the craft of storytelling and real life are at the heart of **The Roughest Draft**, and it's a cerebral yet swoony way to depict a love story.



The Roughest Draft
Berkley, \$16, 9780593201930

Romance



 Visit [BookPage.com](https://www.bookpage.com) to read our review of *The Roughest Draft*.

“It’s a very ‘us’ preoccupation, these kinds of meta questions of how stories resemble life, but also how, in life, we are often telling stories,” says Siegemund-Broka. “They are spinning a fiction within their own lives, pretending that they are co-workers who are completely fine with each other.”

As Wibberley points out, we all tell stories, smoothing out the rough parts or blowing up the things we find significant. Even “people who don’t write novels . . . might see themselves [in the book] and be like, OK, yeah, sometimes you [do] tell yourself a story to get through the day.”

“It’s a very ‘us’ preoccupation . . . how, in life, we are often telling stories.”

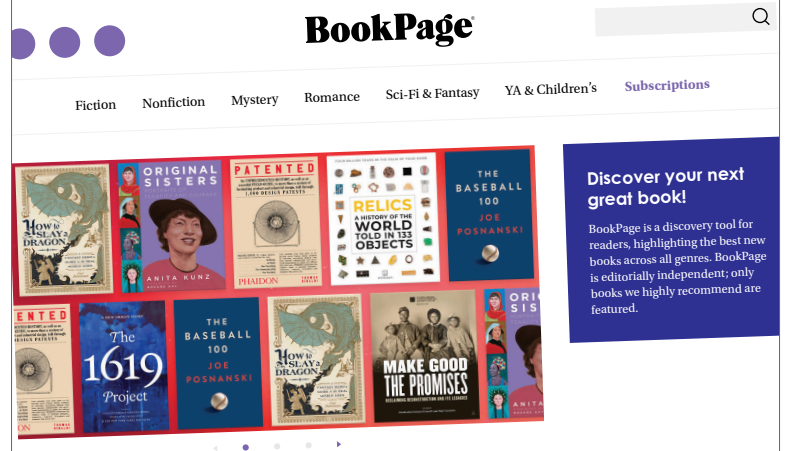
Wibberley and Siegemund-Broka plan to continue writing adult romance that explores long-term relationships. As Wibberley points out, they certainly have a lot of experience to draw from, having been together since they were 17.

The idea of characters who have seen many different versions of each other is creatively inspiring, Siegemund-Broka says. “We are very attracted right now to writing characters who’ve been in each other’s lives a long time . . . whether it creates tension or longing or, alternatively, stasis, and figuring out how you deal with that weight of time.”

After reading **The Roughest Draft**, many readers will make a similarly long-term commitment to having Wibberley and Siegemund-Broka’s work on their shelves for years to come.

—Carole V. Bell

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Queen of (broken) hearts

When science writer Florence Williams' marriage ended, she looked to lab technicians and researchers to help soothe her heartache.

Everyone has experienced some form of heartbreak—in love, at home, on the job or in the star-crossed universe. When this happens, many of us kick-start our recovery by eating a solo pint of ice cream, lolling on the couch in tatty pajamas, shout-singing to newly cruel love songs or taking long, tearful walks in the rain.

These familiar remedies do help temper our emotions, as well as add hits of humor to romantic comedies. But what about new bodily pain that lingers? Unusual aches that confound? After all, heartbreak affects us physically, too. We cannot truly separate mind from body, head from heart.

Florence Williams knows this all too well. As she writes in her fascinating, frequently funny and altogether life-affirming new book, **Heartbreak: A Personal and Scientific Journey**, when her husband of 25 years informed her that their marriage was over, “I felt like I’d been axed in the heart, like I was missing a limb, set adrift in an ocean, loosed in a terrifying wood.”

Post-romance ruination wasn’t something Williams had previously encountered, having met her husband on her first day of college. “I was drawn to him,” she said in a call to her home in Washington, D.C. When their marriage ended, since she’d spent her entire adulthood side by side with him, “I had to learn lessons in my 50s that people normally learn from dating in their 20s and 30s.”

Williams is the author of two previous popular science books, *Breasts: A Natural and Unnatural History* (2012) and *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* (2017), as well as a contributing editor for *Outside* magazine and a science writer for the *New York Times*. So when heartbreak engulfed her personal life, she became an assiduous and motivated student of the science of devastation. “It’s my mode of trying to understand what’s going on,” Williams says. “I’m the sort of person who wants to know what my body is doing; I want to know test results. I believe knowledge is power.”

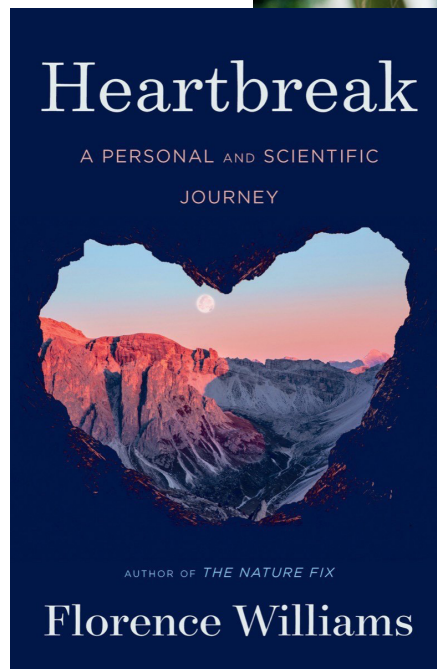
In pursuit of that knowledge, Williams traveled across America and overseas to numerous laboratories, scrutinizing her very cells, analyzing the changes in her health and spelunking the hallucinatory hollows of her own mind. (Indeed, the supervised use of MDMA was involved.) She even interviewed the U.K.’s Minister of Loneliness and took a moving and illuminating tour of the Museum of Broken Relationships in Croatia.

As scientists, researchers and other intellectually curious sorts gave Williams access to their work, they shared not only their findings on the risks of chronic loneliness (it increases the risk of early death by 26%) but also the fallout from their own painful romantic experiences. “There’s something about heartbreak and meeting people from this vulnerable place that makes people want to help,” Williams says. “A lot of barriers come down when you’re real with people, and that felt true when I talked to the scientists. I was really moved by how many of them shared their own vulnerabilities.”

In particular, a rather poetic comment from a genomics researcher bore out Williams’ persistent sense of urgency. “When Steve Cole said to me that heartbreak is one of the hidden land mines of human existence, and that it can



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Heartbreak
Norton, \$30, 9781324003489

Science

“A sense of curiosity is really helpful for emotional resilience.”



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

put us on a path to early death, that was so arresting!” she says. “It made me want to drop everything and focus on getting better.” It also made her want to share what she had discovered with others. “Everyone else needs to know this, too. This is important.”

It was also vitally important for Williams, who says she “grew up spending summers living in a van with my dad, driving out West and canoeing every day,” to recenter herself in nature. Her husband had been a similarly adventurous partner, taking regular wilderness treks with Williams and their two children, who are now 18 and 20. But running rivers and hiking through forests on her own was something she’d never considered doing.

Williams explains, “When you live your life with a certain set of expectations, and all of a sudden the ground falls away . . . it challenges everything you think you know

about yourself and the world, but it’s ultimately this wonderful opportunity to figure out who you are.” Williams has now completed a solo whitewater rafting trip.

Time and time again, Williams’ research makes the case “that a sense of curiosity is really helpful for emotional resilience. Learning to be more open, to cultivate beauty even when emotions are difficult, that kind of self-understanding is really helpful.”

When it comes to heartbreak (and *Heartbreak*), Williams adds, “Grief is a very human emotion, and sometimes we’re not very good at paying attention to our emotional state. . . . We’re so good at glossing over and distracting ourselves—at saying, ‘Everything’s fine here.’ But when life forces us to put down that delusion, it enriches our capacity to connect with other people. Ultimately, that’s what it’s all about, you know?”

—Linda M. Castelletto

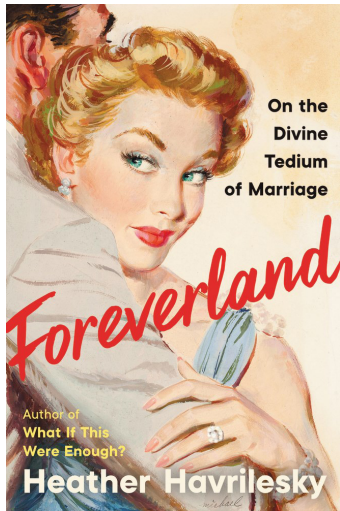


Sweet selections for Valentine's Day



Four perceptive nonfiction reads focus on matters of the heart.

If you're searching for clarity regarding the elusive emotion that is love (and who isn't?), then we have some books for you.



Foreverland

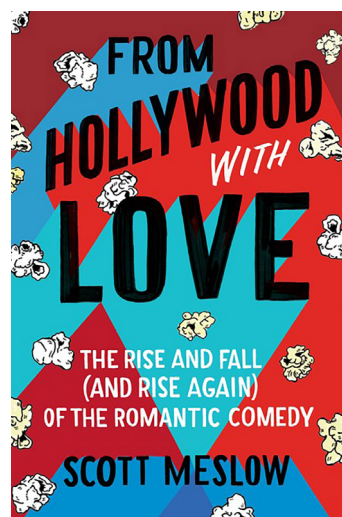
Heather Havrilesky delivers a funny, forthright chronicle of modern wifehood in **Foreverland: On the Divine Tedium of Marriage** (Ecco, \$27.99, 9780062984463). As she recounts in the book, Havrilesky met and married her professor-husband, Bill, while in her mid-30s, and 15 years of marriage have disabused her of any fairy-tale notions about the institution. “A divine catastrophe” is how she now views the union. “Having someone by your side every minute of your life sounds so romantic before he’s actually there, making noises, emitting smells, undoing what you’ve just done,” she writes.

In **Foreverland**, Havrilesky considers the ups and downs of married life, writing with candor about its undeviating dullness and surprising upsides, about trading the high fire of early passion for the slow burn of long-term love. Havrilesky, a journalist whose beloved “Ask Polly” advice column now appears on Substack, has a gift for highlighting moments of comedy and absurdity in the midst of major life milestones. With Bill, she starts a family, buys a house in the Los Angeles suburbs and endures the COVID-19 lockdown, learning along the way to savor the mixed blessings of marriage. “It’s the hardest thing to do, sometimes: just to stand still and be loved,” she writes. Whether single or spoken for, readers are sure to fall for Havrilesky’s charming memoir.

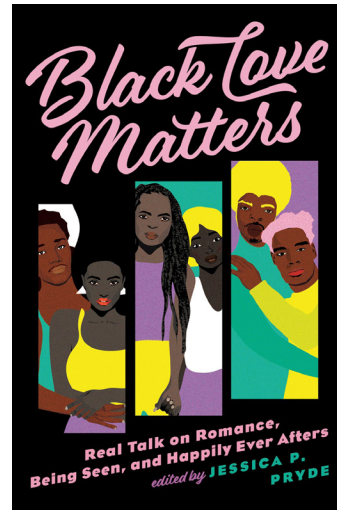
From Hollywood With Love

Scott Meslow’s **From Hollywood With Love: The Rise and Fall (and Rise Again) of the Romantic Comedy** (Dey Street, \$27.99, 9780063026292) pays tribute to a seemingly imperishable cinematic category. The romantic comedy is something of a hybrid, a mashup of moods and emotions that hold forth the promise of a happy ending. In his delightful homage to the genre, Meslow notes that a romantic comedy’s “goal is to make you laugh at least as much as the goal is to make you cry.” Through an insightful survey of modern rom-com classics, Meslow explores the durability of the form, which peaked in popularity during the 1990s and early 2000s. Along the way, he looks at the careers of some of the category’s standout stars, including Meg Ryan, Hugh Grant, Jennifer Lopez and Will Smith.

Meslow writes with sparkle and wit, and in recounting three decades of rom-com history, he brings fresh perspectives to old favorites like *When Harry Met Sally*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Waiting to Exhale*. Meslow also takes stock of the genre’s recent resurgence, with a new generation of movies



cropping up on Netflix and other streaming platforms. As **From Hollywood With Love** proves, our love for the romantic comedy is here to stay.



Black Love Matters

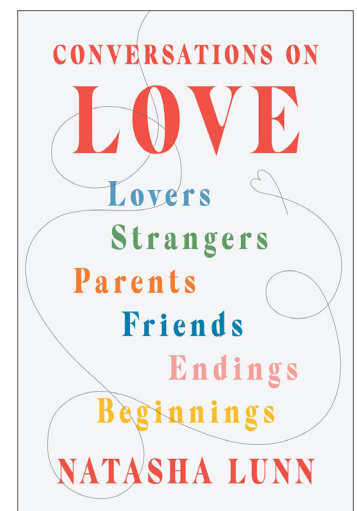
For the anthology **Black Love Matters: Real Talk on Romance, Being Seen, and Happily Ever Afters** (Berkley, \$17, 9780593335772), editor Jessica P. Pryde enlisted a stellar lineup of essayists to share their perspectives on Black love and the ways it’s portrayed in popular media. Pryde is a librarian, contributing editor at Book Riot and die-hard romance fan who has long been aware of the lack of romantic narratives featuring Black protagonists and blissful endings. As she notes in the book’s introduction, more than 90% of the titles produced by mainstream publishers in the romance category don’t focus on Black people’s experiences.

In “Finding Queer Black Women in Romance. Finding Bits and Pieces of Me,” novelist Nicole M. Jackson writes about looking for relatable figures in the romance genre. Author Piper Huguley explores the expectations and stereotypes surrounding Black leading men in her essay “In Search of the Black Historical Hottie Hero.” Other authors, scholars and critics who contributed to the anthology include Julie Moody-Freeman, Da’Shaun L. Harrison, Allie Parker and Carole V. Bell (who’s also a BookPage contributor). From astute cultural critiques to introspective first-person essays, these 14 pieces form a revealing mosaic that will fundamentally change how readers engage with love stories.

Conversations on Love

Love is the one thing most of us say we can’t do without, yet putting it into action—whether as a sibling, spouse or friend—can be one of life’s greatest tests. Journalist Natasha Lunn helps readers make sense of this important emotion in **Conversations on Love: Lovers, Strangers, Parents, Friends, Endings, Beginnings** (Viking, \$27, 9780593296585). An offshoot of her popular *Conversations on Love* email newsletter, Lunn’s book features candid Q&As with authors and experts who provide guidance on the subject of love, including suggestions about how to find it, cultivate it and keep it alive.

Lunn’s roster of interviewees includes writer Roxane Gay, psychotherapist Susie Orbach and author Juno Dawson. While her book tackles topics that will resonate with committed couples, such as dealing with infidelity and working to maintain passion while raising kids, **Conversations on Love** also covers issues outside the realm of romance, such as sibling dynamics, self-love, identity and strategies for coping with the loss of a loved one. “Just as we change, our challenges in love change too,” Lunn writes. Her book is a thoughtful guide to meeting those challenges—and getting more love out of life.



—Julie Hale

SLICE OF LOVE

Rooted in memories of her family, Charmaine Wilkerson's debut novel explores an island of mysteries and a cake full of surprises.

"I never intended to write a story with a cake in it," says Charmaine Wilkerson, former broadcast journalist and, with **Black Cake**, first-time novelist. "It just sort of walked into the story."

And what a remarkable story it is. Wilkerson's exquisitely written novel is a globe-trotting, multigenerational family saga set in the Caribbean, California, London, Scotland and Rome. Its rich plot—which includes a suspected murder—unfolds at an enthralling pace.

The novel begins with a short, enigmatic prologue set in 1965, then jumps ahead to 2018, when an attorney summons Byron Bennett and his estranged sister, Benny, to listen to a lengthy recording made by their late mother, Eleanor, who divulges startling secrets about her life. "Please forgive me for not telling you any of this before," she says.

When Benny was growing up, her mother taught her to make the special titular black cake, saying, "This is island food. This is your heritage." Wilkerson, who grew up in

Jamaica and New York and now lives in Rome, explains during a video call that the Caribbean fruitcake known as black cake has long been

a family favorite, a descendant of "the good old-fashioned English plum pudding . . . transformed, over time, by tropical ingredients."

Long ago, Wilkerson's mother mailed her a copy of her recipe, filled with comments and instructions. Later, after Wilkerson's mother died, a younger relative asked her for a copy. "I don't think I'd looked at it for years," Wilkerson recalls, "but I knew exactly where to find it. I've moved a number of times in my life. I am not the neatest person in the world, but I have always kept that recipe in a place where I keep precious things."

Don't expect to find the recipe within the pages of this novel, however. Wilkerson didn't want readers

to presume that this is simply a culinary tale. "It's about the idea that there's the story you tell about your life, about your family history, about your culture. And then there are the stories that are not told, or concealed, or not fully revealed," she says. "The cake symbolizes the history of this family, in which the children, who are now grown, really don't know the half of what their parents went through. Their

journey of discovery is going to actually change the way in which they see not only their parents, their family history, but their own relationships."

"I have always kept that recipe in a place where I keep precious things."

Warm, engaging

and thoughtful, Wilkerson speaks precisely and with a hint of a lilt in her voice, a remnant from her childhood in Jamaica. Although she repeatedly states that she's a private person, the handful of memories that she shares are reminiscent of her prose—sensory-filled, memorable and layered with meaning. She recalls her first taste of sugar cane during a school field trip, when the bus broke down next to a sugar cane farm and someone chopped up pieces for the children to taste. She also offers a tantalizing clue to how she ended up living in Rome: "Most people who end up moving to Italy and staying there move for two reasons: It's either art history, or it's a love story. You can guess which one."

Prior to writing this novel, Wilkerson spent several years working in short fiction—notably, flash fiction. The crafting of **Black Cake** first began when she wrote a short scene about two teenage girls swimming in Caribbean waters in the 1960s. "They were driven by this visceral ambition and connection with nature and this determination to swim, despite the fact that they were afraid," she says. Next, she wrote some seemingly unrelated scenes set in contemporary times. "At a certain point," she says, "I realized they were all the same story. And that's when I knew I had a novel, you know—that I wasn't just all over the place. I was circling an idea."

Like a shark, perhaps?

Wilkerson laughs, saying, "That's me, a shark. I don't always manage to get a bite of food, but I did this time."

She certainly has. **Black Cake** is slated to become a Hulu series with Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Films and creator Marissa Jo Cerar ("The Handmaid's Tale") at the helm—not too shabby for someone who has long dreamed of telling stories. "I've always dabbled and written and read," Wilkerson says, "but the act of writing regularly and making sure that you don't lose the thread when you have all these different voices is something that takes consistent work. I came to that fairly recently."

While Wilkerson's mother gifted her with her prized recipe, her father's work as a textile artist helped her zero in on her writerly goal. She remembers loving the smell of the dyes in his studio, and admired how he "was able to take art and turn it into a discipline." After his death in 2013, she took



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

If these walls could talk

Fiona Davis' latest novel builds upon the secrets of the Frick Collection in a delightful blend of emotion and adventure.

Imagine that countless statues all over New York City share the likeness of one young, beautiful woman. In **The Magnolia Palace** (Dutton, \$27, 9780593184011), that woman is Lillian Carter, who ends up working at the Frick mansion, now home to the revered art museum of the same name. The novel moves between Lillian's story and that of Veronica, a model who, nearly 50 years later, finds herself following a mystery via secret messages in the mansion.

In each of your novels, architectural history comes so clearly alive! Tell us a bit about your research process.

When it comes to research, the first thing I do is get a good look inside the building and then interview experts on the subject and the era. For **The Magnolia Palace**, I was able to get a wonderful behind-the-scenes tour of the Frick Collection in January 2020, from the bowling alley in the basement up to the top floor where the servants slept.

Usually I'd make several return trips as I write the first draft, but the city went into lockdown, making that impossible. So I was thrilled to discover that the Frick's website includes a wonderful floor plan with a 360-degree view of each of the public rooms. If I needed to check out what artwork was above the fireplace in the library, for example, I could find the answer with just a couple of clicks. Thank goodness, as otherwise I would've been really stuck.

When you pass by or enter an incredible old building, what's the first thing you look for?

I'm always curious as to what has changed over time. How does the building compare to the one that was originally constructed? How has the neighborhood changed over the decades? It's those contrasts that help me decide what time periods might work best for a novel. As I walk by, I can't help wondering about all of the people who walked its halls, all of the ghosts that remain.

A sense of place plays a huge role in your work. What details do you seek out to bring these spaces into such vivid relief?

I'm always looking for the strange details, the ones that are fun to describe because they will surprise the reader. It might be the grimace of a gargoyle over a doorway or the catwalks that span the enormous windows of Grand Central that end up drawing my attention and making it into the



© DEBORAH FENGOLD

novel. We New Yorkers often think we know these places so well, but it's amazing how little we "see" as we wander the streets.

I love the dimensions of these women—Lillian and Veronica, as well as Helen Frick. Where did you find inspiration for them?

As I research, I'm looking for women from history who accomplished great things but have since been forgotten. The inspiration for Lillian came from the carving of a nude woman over the entrance to the Frick. The model who posed for it was Audrey Munson, who achieved great fame in the 1910s but met a tragic end. She was gorgeous and successful and then suddenly an outcast, and I knew I wanted to include her story in the narrative.

The more I read about Helen Frick, the more I adored her. She was acerbic and smart, yet she was mocked in the press for her eccentricities. As a writer, I wondered what would've happened if Audrey and Helen crossed paths in real life, and the plot developed from there.

Then, once I decided to set part of the book in the 1960s, I thought it would be fun to have a character who is also a model, as a way to compare and contrast how women's roles have been valued (or not) over time, and Veronica bubbled up out of that.

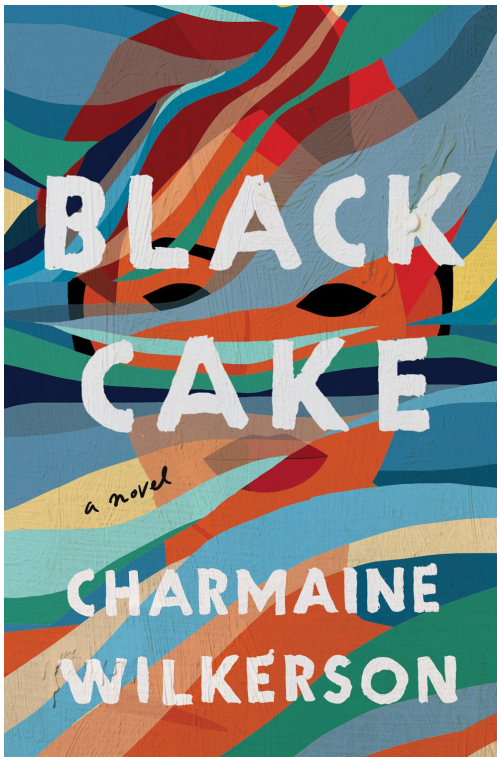
What is your ultimate day in New York City?

I've called the city home for 35 years now, and it's full of wonderful places. The Frick Collection is dear to me, to be sure. I also love grabbing a pastry at Café Sabarsky at the Neue Galerie, or heading to the Campbell Bar at Grand Central for a cocktail. Hitting all three in one day would be a dream.

—Freya Sachs



Visit BookPage.com to read an extended version of this Q&A and our review of *The Magnolia Palace*.



Black Cake

Ballantine, \$28, 9780593358337

Family Saga

one of his flannel shirts (which she still wears regularly) and finally began to write fiction. "I realized I had to stop thinking that I was being frivolous and recognize that it was work. So, I made some changes in my life."

As a child, Wilkerson watched her father swim in the ocean toward the horizon until he disappeared, and similar imagery figures prominently in **Black Cake**. (Byron is a renowned oceanographer whose mother taught him to surf, and who encourages young people to "catch the wave and ride with it.") "I think that's what we do in life," Wilkerson says. "We try to make a plan, but then life happens, and we try to use everything we've brought with us."

Undoubtedly, she has ridden her own wave like a pro. "This is what I have wanted to do for a long time," she says.

—Alice Cary

★ The Family Chao

By Lan Samantha Chang

Family Drama

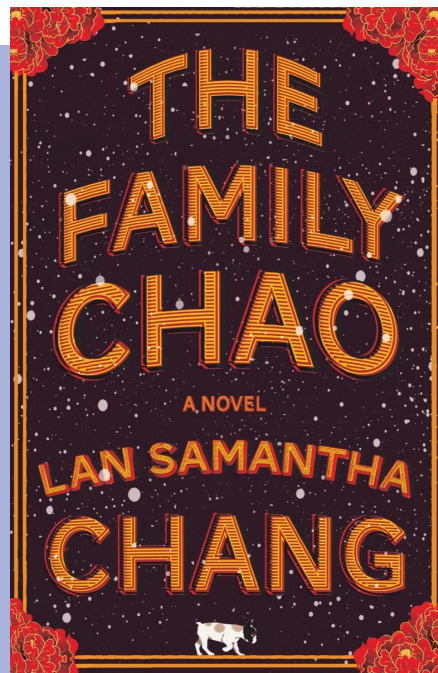
Lan Samantha Chang's fourth book, the terrific novel **The Family Chao** (Norton, \$28, 9780393868074), draws inspiration from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which three brothers struggle against their father's tyrannical behavior. Instead of 19th-century Russia, Chang's dialogue-driven novel is set in contemporary Haven, a small town in Wisconsin where larger-than-life patriarch Leo Chao and his wife, Winnie, have built a successful Chinese restaurant with the help of their three sons and O-Lan, a recent immigrant from Guangzhou who nobody seems to know much about.

The Chao family is about to gather for their annual holiday party. Dagou, the oldest son, works for Leo in the hope of eventually taking over the business. Middle son Ming is in New York pursuing a financial career, and the youngest, James, is in college. When Ming and James return to Haven

for the holidays, they find their family in chaos: Winnie has taken refuge in a Buddhist nunnery, and Dagou and Leo are feuding about the fate of the restaurant.

After the Chaos' extravagant Christmas party, attended mostly by Haven's Chinese community, Leo is found dead in the restaurant's freezer. The police suspect foul play, and Dagou is eventually charged with murder, although others, including James and Ming, have motives in the crime.

As in Dostoyevsky's novel, there is a trial in **The Family Chao**, and various family secrets come to light, but Chang uses the framework of the Russian novel to touch not only on family dynamics but also on questions of community, assimilation and prejudice. While the first half of the novel focuses on the

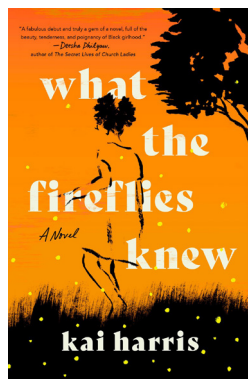


paced like a thriller, **The Family Chao** radically redefines the immigrant novel while balancing entertainment and delight.

—Lauren Bufferd

★ What the Fireflies Knew

By Kai Harris



Coming of Age

Kai Harris' debut novel is a stirring story of a transformative summer for a Black girl growing up in 1990s Michigan.

What the Fireflies Knew (Tiny Reparations, \$26, 9780593185346) drops us directly into the mind of 10-year-old

Kenyatta, known as KB, who has discovered her father's dead body in the garage of their home on a "dead-end street" in Detroit. Soon after, KB's mother leaves her and her older sister, Nia, at their grandfather's house on a "green and noiseless" street in Lansing, Michigan. Their mother offers no explanation of where she is going or when she will be back.

KB tries hard to relate to Nia and understand why she is so angry and distant. KB also attempts to parse her family's secrets—where her mother is and why she left, why people whisper about her daddy, and why her grandfather and mother don't get along. Amid these questions, KB shares moments of tenderness and closeness with her stoic grandfather, who does his best to warn KB about predatory boys and the capriciousness of the white kids who live across the street.

KB is at once intuitive and naive, vulnerable and strong. Her voice captures the wonder of youth and

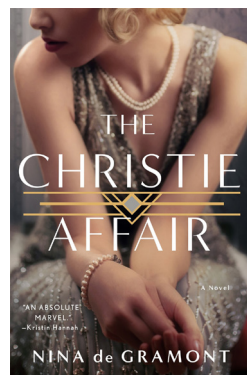
the heartache of growing up. As the summer progresses, her presence glows and grows, like the fireflies she catches with her grandfather, like her understanding of the world around her.

Harris, a Michigan native who currently teaches creative writing at Santa Clara University in California, depicts the events of KB's summer in an inspiring manner, ruminating on the nuances of racism, relationships and sexual development with quiet, mesmerizing restraint. Throughout these complicated and emotionally charged issues, **What the Fireflies Knew** celebrates the fortitude of its young protagonist. This elegant and eloquent novel is perfect for readers who loved Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

—Maya Fleischmann

The Christie Affair

By Nina de Gramont



Historical Fiction

The title of Nina de Gramont's second novel for adults, **The Christie Affair** (St. Martin's, \$27.99, 9781250274618), has a double meaning. The first is Agatha Christie's notorious disappearance in 1926, and the second is the affair her husband, Archie, is carrying

on with Nan O'Dea (the real mistress's name was Nancy Neele), the suspiciously omniscient narrator. But in the end, the story isn't really about either of these affairs; it's about motherhood.

A long list of authors has imagined what really went on when Christie left her husband and young daughter for 11 days in December 1926. In de Gramont's telling, Christie's leaving is prompted almost as much by her despair over her mother's death as it is by her fury at her husband's cheating. As for Nan, her life was blighted after being banished to a hellish Irish convent for "fallen" women when she became pregnant at 19. Nan's baby daughter was taken from her, and her goal ever since has been to find her child, or get revenge, or both.

Tying Nan's anguish with Christie's disappearance is part of the book's allure, but even a reader superficially familiar with the famous author's biography can see that de Gramont's novel is heavily fictionalized. Christie never discussed what she'd been up to those 11 days, not even with her own daughter, and this creates a lacuna for a novelist to fill up with some outlandish stuff. Indeed, at one point the story becomes a Christie-esque murder mystery: Who has poisoned that jolly newlywed couple in the hotel where Nan has chosen to hide out, and why?

Few of the characters are particularly likable in **The Christie Affair**, but all are fascinating. Archie is one of those entitled, upper-crust British military men who prides himself on not understanding the minds of women, children or even small dogs. Trauma has made Nan duplicitous. Christie, in her own way, is as arrogant as her husband. When she

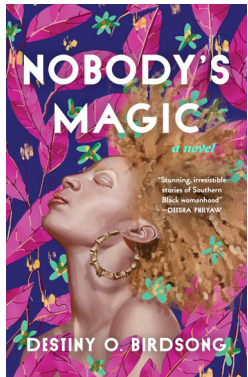
discovers that basically all of England is searching for her, she decides to extend her holiday a few more days and work on a new book. She figures her own 7-year-old daughter won't mind, since she has a nanny.

Despite these liberties and embellishments, de Gramont doesn't let her story stray too far from the basic facts, so the ending's a bit of a letdown for Nan. Still, **The Christie Affair** is an enjoyable entrant to the canon of "Agatha Christie's mysterious disappearance" novels.

—Arlene McKanic

Nobody's Magic

By *Destiny O. Birdsong*



Literary Fiction

Poet Destiny O. Birdsong's (*Negotiations*) debut novel is as much about what isn't said—what can't be said—as it is about what's actually on the page. **Nobody's Magic** (Grand Central, \$28, 9781538721391) is a masterfully crafted and sometimes painfully honest story told in triptych, centering on three Black women with albinism living in Shreveport, Louisiana.

This unusual novel is built on spaciousness and silence, with each section reading almost like a novella. Suzette lives with her wealthy parents, who shower her with gifts while keeping her sheltered from the world. After falling for a tenderhearted mechanic who works at her father's shop, she begins to express her own desires for the first time. Maple is grieving the sudden death of her mother, a straight-talking, fun-loving and beloved sex worker. And Agnes has spent most of her adult life trying to set herself apart from her sister. When she meets a man while on a temporary job in Utah, a string of impulsive choices leads her to a confrontation with her family.

These are dynamic characters, each with her own distinct narrative voice and particular way of looking at the world. Suzette's first-person narration is informal, conversational and intimate. Maple's section is raw with grief. Agnes' story, told in the third person, is slightly distant, as if she can't quite bear to face herself. But each woman experiences a major shift: Suzette makes a momentous decision, Maple experiences a catastrophic loss, and Agnes faces her conflicted relationships with her mother and sister.

Each section is bound to the others through themes of Black womanhood, familial expectations, grief and the power of self-determination, but instead of drawing straightforward conclusions about these connections, Birdsong leaves the reader to meditate on the questions and ideas she

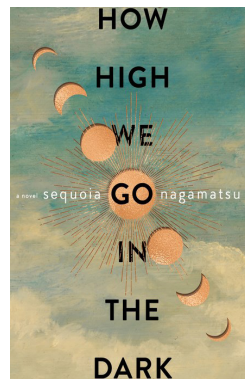
raises. What do these very different experiences of Black womanhood have to say about one another? How does Suzette's story inform our understanding of Maple's? How does Maple's relationship with her mother influence how we read Agnes' section? Buried in these pages are infinite conversations—about what it means to be labeled "other," to be a part of a community, to choose something for yourself.

Nobody's Magic is worth reading simply to spend time with these women, but the thoughtful and unexpected way that Birdsong combines their three unique stories into one is what makes the book unforgettable.

—Laura Sackton

★ How High We Go in the Dark

By *Sequoia Nagamatsu*



Speculative Fiction

It's incredible that a work of speculative fiction first outlined over a decade ago would require a content warning in its review. But it must be said that the subject matter of Sequoia Nagamatsu's ambitious debut, an

elegiac collection of interconnected stories centering on a global plague that decimates humanity, is particularly challenging in our current climate.

Beginning with a group of explorers who unwittingly unleash a mysterious virus that had long lain dormant beneath Siberian ice, **How High We Go in the Dark** (William Morrow, \$27.99, 9780063072640) chronicles humanity's battle against the "Arctic plague" in the following decades and the ways in which society adapts and changes as a result. Each chapter moves forward in time and features a different protagonist, giving readers the chance to inhabit multiple lives, realities and perspectives over the course of the narrative.

Among the varied cast of characters are a worker at a euthanasia theme park for terminally ill children; a scientist who, while cultivating organs for human transplant, unintentionally creates a talking pig; a physicist who gives humanity a second chance at life by opening a stable wormhole in his head, which will allow for interstellar space travel; and the eventual crew that leaves Earth to search for a new planet to colonize.

Early chapters feel self-contained, but as the novel progresses, it is satisfying to observe the ways the sections interconnect with and amplify one another. When the full scale of Nagamatsu's vision comes into focus in the final chapter, the narrative resonance on display is thrilling in a manner reminiscent of David Mitchell's mind-bending masterpiece, *Cloud Atlas*.

Still, despite the fantastical elements woven throughout, there is no real way of escaping or softening the novel's inherently bleak and brutal reality, in which death, loss, trauma and grief are at the forefront. And while Nagamatsu explores resilience, love and our primal need for connection, there's no denying that the process is a sad one. Any glimpses of hope are generally fleeting and bittersweet.

It's unfair to penalize a book for being too relevant and ringing too true, but for readers who turn to fiction as a means of escaping the stress and worries of real life, **How High We Go in the Dark** might be best saved for a later date. However, those courageous enough to sit with the novel's exquisite sorrows will be rewarded with gorgeous prose, memorable characters and, ultimately, catharsis.

—Stephenie Harrison

★ Real Easy

By *Marie Rutkoski*



Thriller

Bestselling young adult and children's author Marie Rutkoski's first novel for adult readers, **Real Easy** (Holt, \$26.99, 9781250788245), begins by immersing us in the atmosphere of the *Lovely Lady*, a Midwestern strip club where the dancers are at

once uninhibited and reticent, disserved by hurdles in their lives yet unapologetic about their desire to overcome them.

It's 1999, and after her shift, Samantha Lind—stage name Ruby—decides to give a ride home to the club's newest dancer, a misguided but cheerful young woman named Jolene, who calls herself Lady Jade. As they drive down a secluded road, Samantha's car is run into a ditch by the driver behind them, and the police arrive to discover a dead body in one seat and evidence of a kidnapping in the other.

Solving the murder and disappearance remains at the forefront of Rutkoski's novel, but it doesn't overshadow the other plotlines, which include a dancer who yearns for a life she could've led, a police officer grappling with the loss of a child and another officer navigating moral dilemmas in the workplace. The multiple points of view reach far and wide, allowing readers to unfold the mystery alongside Rutkoski's characters, some of whom are deeply embedded in the case, others merely on the outskirts.

There are no easy conclusions to be drawn from **Real Easy**, no clear-cut progression of events that allows the crime to be pieced together, but the novel's fast pace mitigates the frustration this may cause. Rutkoski's handling of time is masterful, and

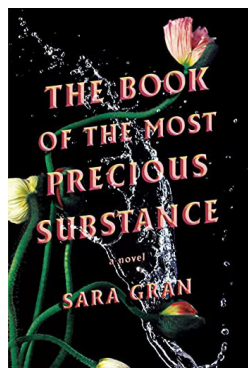
not one moment fails to meet its potential. Readers will find themselves rolling back the tape in their minds to seek out the patterns in the clues—the black paint from the car that hit Samantha and Jolene, the cut on the victim’s foot in the shape of a crown, the two phone calls to Samantha’s apartment in the middle of the night—before the climactic ending’s revelations.

Rutkoski skillfully handles the complexity of a group of individuals whose stories are rarely told, let alone told with so much humanity imbued into every detail.

—*Jessie Cobbinah*

★ The Book of the Most Precious Substance

By Sara Gran



Thriller

In Sara Gran’s sexy and captivating thriller **The Book of the Most Precious Substance** (Dreamland, \$18.95, 9780578947099), a rare books dealer embarks on an epic hunt for a shadowy tome that could change the trajectory of her life.

A few years ago, Lily Albrecht had it all: a once-in-a-lifetime love and a thriving writing career. Now Lily’s brilliant soul mate, Abel, has a neurodegenerative disease and can no longer communicate, move or even eat on his own. He is like a locked box on a high shelf, one she can guard but never reach.

Lily loves and advocates for her husband fiercely but is worn down by financial pressure, anxiety and grief for the incredible life they once shared. For years she’s been their sole breadwinner. Now her promising writing career has dissolved, and she’s caught between dedication, loneliness and frustration as she sells off their precious collection of books.

By the time she’s asked by Shyman, a fellow books dealer, to find an elusive 17th-century book about the occult and “sex magic,” Lily’s life has shrunk into a joyless routine of work, worry and care. The high six-figure finder’s fee for this magical tome—the rarest, most sought after book in the entire bibliography of the occult—could stabilize her finances and give her the means to pursue more treatment for Abel. However, Lily finds it odd that so little information is available about such a legendary book.

Then Shyman dies suddenly and violently, and with no middle man taking a cut, her commission becomes potentially even more lucrative. Lucas, a friend and colleague, becomes her partner in the quest, and their collaboration presents its own potential rewards and temptations.

Lily is a sympathetic yet formidable figure. She’s dedicated but still human, alternating between

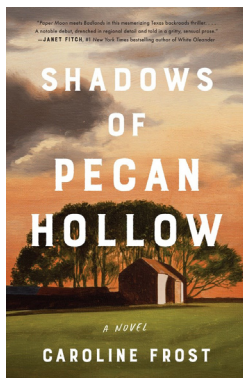
numbness and mourning, loyalty and long-sublimated desire. Gran is uniquely talented at bringing such complex feelings to life. Her writing is effective, economical and moving, and while Lily’s hunt propels the story forward, it is Gran’s frequently exquisite prose that demands investment from its audience.

Readers will ache for Lily and Abel and envy what they once had. Brief but evocative moments reveal not just Lily’s lack but also her desire, and possibly what’s to come. These scenes are just one small part of what makes Gran’s thoughtful and erotically charged thriller so well worth reading.

—*Carole V. Bell*

Shadows of Pecan Hollow

By Caroline Frost



Literary Fiction

Transformation is the hallmark of any well-drawn character, but in her heart-rending first novel, **Shadows of Pecan Hollow** (William Morrow, \$27.99, 9780063065345), author Caroline Frost asks whether real transformation is attainable for everyone.

Can a very bad man ever be redeemed? Can a lost girl find herself when she’s grown? Can people who are ridiculed or ignored by society learn to believe in their worth without relying on validation from others?

At 13, Kit has no reason to trust adults. She’s been shuffled around among a number of foster families, starved and even beaten. When an older man named Manny shows Kit simple yet unfamiliar kindness, she becomes his loyal companion. Though he gains her trust, he’s a con artist and a thief, and he’s only able to care for Kit through his ill-gotten gains.

Manny recruits Kit for small thefts and then gun-toting robberies, and over time they become notorious partners in crime, wanted by the police. Their life is not just itinerant but also dangerous, and when Kit becomes pregnant with their child, a shift in her perspective allows her to look at Manny and their violent delights with fresh eyes. Yet years later, when Manny is released from prison and comes for their daughter, Kit learns that the hard life isn’t so easy to leave behind.

Frost puts her background as a marriage and family therapist to good use in crafting Kit. Less perceptive writers may have written Kit as a cliché, but Frost guides the reader to understand Kit’s story and the reasons behind her susceptibility to a charismatic egotist. **Shadows of Pecan Hollow** will be heartbreaking for readers wiser and more experienced than young Kit, as they’ll be able to see Manny’s manipulation and violence for what

it really is: abuse. Frost’s relationship expertise also shines in crafting the dynamic between adult Kit and her untameable daughter, Charlie.

At over 400 pages, **Shadows of Pecan Hollow** takes readers on a long journey—not unlike Kit’s journey to find a home. It will especially resonate with readers who have their own hard-won stories of survival.

—*Jessica Wakeman*

★ Devil House

By John Darnielle



Literary Fiction

John Darnielle’s stories, whether on the page (*Wolf in White Van*, *Universal Harvester*) or set to music (the Mountain Goats), have a tendency to transcend easy classification and simple genre labels. And yet there’s always a clarity

to them, a feeling that the creator’s mind and heart are at work in tandem. With **Devil House** (MCD, \$28, 9780374212230), his extraordinarily ambitious third novel, Darnielle proves his versatility yet again. This remarkable shapeshifter of a tale changes form, perspective and even relative truth as it pleases, but never loses its voice.

Bestselling true crime writer Gage Chandler thinks he’s found his next book in the form of a 1980s cold case that revolves around an adult video store, a group of teens interested in the occult and two victims who never received justice after one brutal Halloween night. Hoping to absorb the atmosphere of the crime scene and drill down to the truth, Gage moves into the site of the murders, the titular “Devil House.” But the deeper he descends, the slipperier the truth becomes.

Though the novel begins with Gage’s point of view and moves seamlessly into the affable, straightforward style of a true crime writer laying out the facts, Darnielle doesn’t stop there. Chapters unfold from various perspectives, including that of the subject of one of Gage’s past books and those of the principals in the Devil House case. There are even sections that drift into stylized Middle English and an entire chapter documenting the life of a king.

And yet, **Devil House** never feels like a book steeped in gimmicks, because Darnielle steers his dark vessel with dexterity, wit and stunning inventiveness. This novel will lure in true crime fans and readers of experimental fiction alike, then blow them all away with its determined exploration of the nature of truth and what we want to hear versus what we need to hear. It’s a triumph from an always exciting storyteller.

—*Matthew Jackson*

★ Free

By Lea Ypi

Memoir

When you're a child, you know only what your parents and other adults tell you. As a small girl in the People's Socialist Republic of Albania in the 1980s, Lea Ypi was taught to love the memory of Josef Stalin and Albanian leader Enver Hoxha. She believed her country was a communist paradise protecting workers against the West's evils, and she thought her parents and beloved grandmother believed these things, too.

It turned out they were lying to Ypi, about pretty much everything, to protect her and themselves. When the communist dictatorship was forced out in 1992 and replaced by a messy transitional form of market capitalism, Ypi learned the confusing truth about her family's history. She was also forced to grapple with deeper truths about freedom, equity and broken promises.

Now a prominent professor of political theory in London, Ypi says she intended to write **Free**: A

Child and a Country at the End of History (Norton, \$27.95, 9780393867732) as a philosophy book about freedom. But her memories of people kept getting in the way: her idealist father, her tough mother, her grandmother whose stoicism hid her traumatic past. The resulting memoir feels completely fresh: a poignant, charming, thought-provoking, funny and ultimately sad exploration of Albania's journey from socialism to liberalism through a child's eyes.

Ypi's book is filled with wonderful humor: the empty Coke cans that were considered luxury home decor, the mysterious stories of relatives sent to "university" (hint: the dorms were cells), the time her mother wore a frilly nightgown to meet with Western feminists because



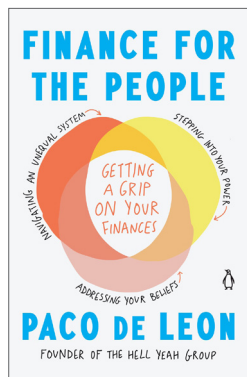
she thought it was a fancy dress. But these collected moments ultimately culminate in a terrifying chapter about the brutal civil war that erupted in 1997, during which half the population, including the Ypis, lost most of their savings in a pyramid scheme collapse. The adolescent Ypi hid in her house for weeks, reading *War and Peace* to the sound of gunfire in the street. The rest of her family shattered.

Ypi's family and friends were smart, decent people whose dreams were crushed, first by an authoritarian dictatorship, then by cowboy capitalism. Ypi herself endured and ultimately thrived, but she knows the quest for true freedom is hard and never-ending.

—Anne Bartlett

Finance for the People

By Paco de Leon



Self-Help

"The making of many books is without limit," says the book of Ecclesiastes, and that weary reaction seems appropriate when considering yet another offering on personal finance. But Paco de Leon's **Finance for the People: Getting**

a Grip on Your Finances (Penguin Life, \$16, 9780143136255) is a refreshingly original contribution to this crowded field, and one her fellow millennials will find especially valuable as they contemplate the decades of decisions that will shape their financial futures.

Founder of the Hell Yeah Group, a financial firm that emphasizes service to creatives, de Leon touches all the traditional bases, from how to handle debt to saving and investing for retirement. Much of this advice (e.g., automate savings and max out contributions to a retirement account when there's an employer match) doesn't stray far from conventional paths. But as she leads readers on the perilous ascent of what she calls the "Pyramid of Financial Awesomeness," several aspects of her approach stand out.

Acknowledging that we are all "weird about money," de Leon offers an empathetic yet concrete

perspective on overcoming the psychological barriers that prevent many people from dealing effectively with financial decision-making. And while she's not averse to discipline, she disdains some of the popular emphasis on austerity (think David Bach's *The Latte Factor*). Rejecting a worldview that chooses "scarcity over abundance," she's intent on "helping people connect to their financial power," encouraging them to think at least as hard about generating more income as they do about saving in order to balance what she calls the "personal finance equation."

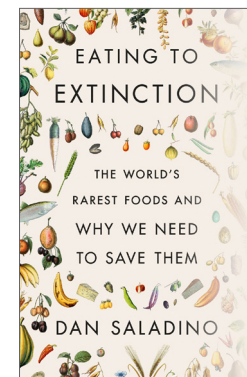
De Leon delivers her message in a breezy, conversational style, emphasizing key points with an assortment of clever cartoons. At the same time, she is eminently practical, insisting on the need to set aside 30 to 60 minutes of "weekly finance time" as a first step toward systematically establishing sound money habits. Most notably, de Leon includes some tips—including journaling as a means of "unearthing your beliefs about money" and using mindfulness meditation to develop the muscle of delayed gratification—not likely to be found in other books in this same genre. Above all, she's an engagingly self-deprecating storyteller, illustrating her advice with tales of some of her own money missteps and their hard-earned lessons.

Dealing with money is one of life's inescapable realities, and for most people there will always be some amount of pain associated with it. Having a friendly guide like **Finance for the People** can help the journey become both more bearable and more profitable.

—Harvey Freedenberg

★ Eating to Extinction

By Dan Saladino



Social Science

The terms *endangered* and *extinct* are most commonly applied to animal species, particularly as human activities encroach on wildlife habitats worldwide. But the global human population explosion has also wreaked havoc on human nutrition,

decreasing food diversity and threatening the global food supply and our environment.

Food journalist Dan Saladino spent over 10 years researching at-risk foods and food cultures, and his discoveries are outlined in **Eating to Extinction: The World's Rarest Foods and Why We Need to Save Them** (FSG, \$30, 9780374605322). The decline in food diversity isn't necessarily visible to consumers now that food is shipped all over the world, seemingly providing more variety to many of our diets. However, in order to feed an ever-increasing population, major food crops such as rice, wheat and corn have become more and more homogeneous, making them more susceptible to disease and less nutritious.

Saladino traverses the globe to find out what scientists, conservationists and food experts are doing to dial back the increasing sameness in our diets. His journalistic skills are key as he interviews

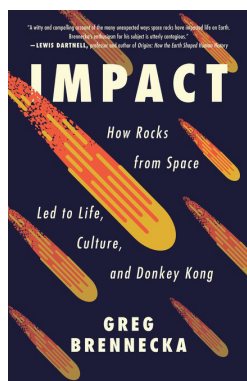
a wide range of people, from food corporation executives and government officials to botanists and farmers. Divided into 10 parts about topics such as cereals, vegetables, meat and fruit, each section covers food from many locations around the world, such as bere barley from Orkney, Scotland, and the Kayinja banana from Uganda.

Fascinating and extremely well written, **Eating to Extinction** combines comprehensive history with science, culture and geography. At 464 pages, it's a lengthy tome that undoubtedly could have been much longer, as it just scratches the surface regarding the number of foodstuffs affected by diminishing biodiversity. Saladino raises a serious issue that needs to be addressed with global urgency and cooperation.

—Becky Libourel Diamond

★ Impact

By Greg Brennecka



Science

As the subtitle of his debut work of nonfiction suggests, Dr. Greg Brennecka is a scientist with a sense of humor and a flair for making complex topics both understandable and entertaining. In **Impact: How Rocks From Space Led to**

Life, Culture, and Donkey Kong (William Morrow, \$28.99, 9780063078925), he makes the case that what connects the solar system, humanity, life on Earth and, last but not least, Donkey Kong, is meteorites.

Perhaps all meteoriticists and cosmochemists learn early on to be good communicators, but Brennecka has taken great pains to organize and write **Impact** with general readers in mind. He begins at the beginning, with explanations of what meteorites are and why scientists study them, and then he proceeds to trace the history of meteorite hits on Earth, including the impact (excuse the pun) of a meteorite called Theia that triggered the formation of the moon.

Brennecka also covers the history of the scientific understanding of meteorites, arguing that modern meteoritics crosses many disciplines, including astronomy, geology and chemistry, and that studying these rock samples are invaluable to scientific inquiry. But it's not just science at stake. Solar events, such as the appearance of comets, also have cultural and historical significance. For example, William the Conqueror and Genghis Khan took the appearance of Halley's comet as a cosmic sign in support of their military endeavors.

While the scope of **Impact** is impressive and far-reaching, Brennecka's clear, succinct narrative style makes for fascinating reading throughout. His

lighthearted approach extends to the illustrations, which include diagrams, cartoons and photos. For instance, one photo of a solar eclipse is captioned: "Solar eclipse. Time to freak out."

While Brennecka is writing for an adult audience, **Impact** will also appeal to teenagers who love space and science. As the author makes clear in his closing section, the study of meteorites takes a village, requiring researchers—and perhaps future researchers—from many fields. There is still much to be discovered about these rocks that fall out of the sky, and **Impact** will make even space novices feel eager for those discoveries to be made.

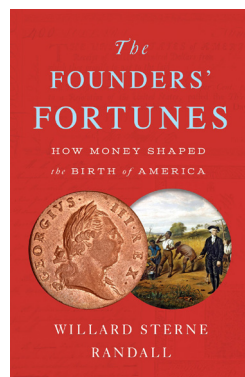
—Deborah Hopkinson



Visit BookPage.com to read our Q&A with Greg Brennecka.

The Founders' Fortunes

By Willard Sterne Randall



American History

The Founding Fathers ended their Declaration of Independence with this solemn oath: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." In his superb **The Founders' Fortunes: How Money Shaped the Birth of**

America (Dutton, \$29, 9781524745929), historian and biographer Willard Sterne Randall explores in extensive detail the economic circumstances of the budding republic.

The need for money was a major factor for individuals and governments before the American Revolution, and its importance only increased throughout the war and postwar periods. English settlers had risked their lives and fortunes for many years to establish new colonies, which vastly increased England's commerce. Yet, facing a huge debt, Parliament sought to gain even more revenue by taxing American colonists. Their opposition sparked the resistance that led to the Revolutionary War.

The 1764 Currency Act had outlawed all colonial currency. Lack of money for George Washington's troops was an ongoing problem during the war, as well as a problem for keeping promises to veterans afterward. When the war ended, the new country was in a depression that prevented them from being financially independent. In addition to these highlights, Randall covers smuggling, war profiteering and privateering, establishing a stable currency, economic diplomacy and much more.

The personal stories of the Founding Fathers' wealth are especially interesting. For example, Washington and Thomas Jefferson were land rich

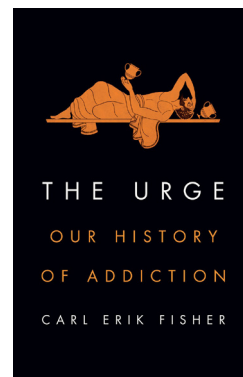
but cash poor, despite their possession of hundreds of enslaved people. Randall explores less well-known figures, as well, such as three patriotic and wealthy men named Robert Morris, Silas Deane and James Wilson. They (and their money) played important roles in winning the war and securing America's government, but each died in debt.

Randall is a biographer of Washington, Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, so he knows his territory well. **The Founders' Fortunes** will hold readers' interests with its carefully drawn portraits of personalities and insightful analyses of events.

—Roger Bishop

★ The Urge

By Carl Erik Fisher



History

Dr. Carl Erik Fisher's impressive debut tackles the cultural history of addiction, offering a nuanced, personal perspective on a health crisis that remains stigmatized and misunderstood. In **The Urge** (Penguin Press, \$30, 9780525561446), Fisher

weaves together history, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, philosophy and medicine to construct a holistic, humane portrait of a condition that has baffled experts for centuries.

Fisher, an addiction specialist and assistant professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University, begins with his and his family's history with alcoholism and addiction. As a psychiatry resident at Columbia, he checked himself into treatment after he realized he was addicted to alcohol. During his time in rehab, he asked himself a simple but profound question: Why is this so hard?

Looking to history for answers, Fisher found that the earliest references to the concept of addiction were from great ancient thinkers. Aristotle, Augustine and Teng Cen, the Chinese poet from the Song dynasty, all described a compulsion to do something against one's will. As an addiction specialist, Fisher sees this same compulsion in his patients: a strong desire to stop harmful behavior and an inability to do so.

There's a strong American perspective in **The Urge**, since most of the contemporary world's ideas of addiction come from work started in the United States—from groups like Alcoholics Anonymous to movements like Prohibition and the war on drugs. Our current view of addiction is as a mental disorder or disease that exists on a spectrum, but as Fisher explains, that wasn't always the case. Rather than a medical condition, it was considered a crime, and until recently, there was no treatment.

Fisher's personal experience in rehab informed his view of addiction. He knew that he received

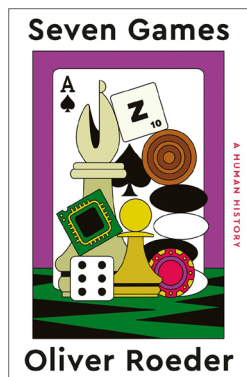
excellent, humane care because he was a doctor, and he also knew that most people who seek help for their addictions don't receive the same quality of care. He examines why effective treatment for addiction is not only hard to come by but also, Fisher argues, unequally and unfairly administered.

The Urge is several excellent books in one: a complete and sweeping history of addiction, a compassionate doctor's approach to treating people with addictions, and a blistering critique of outdated, draconian government policies around drug use and addiction.

—Sarojini Seupersad

★ Seven Games

By Oliver Roeder



History

Oliver Roeder is very serious about games. With a Ph.D. in economics with a focus on game theory, the author of **Seven Games: A Human History** (Norton, \$26.95, 9781324003779) argues that games—those activities that force us to

suspend the normal rules of life in order to overcome self-imposed obstacles in the name of fun—are what make us human. Rather than homo sapiens, we are, he says, “homo ludens”: the humans who play. To make his case, Roeder takes a fascinating look at seven enduring games: checkers, chess, Go, backgammon, poker, Scrabble and bridge.

Roeder chose these games because, despite being easy to learn (with the exception of bridge), they all require strategic skills that can take years to acquire. In fact, they call for many human qualities: forethought, the ability to see both the big picture and small details, and even, in the case of bridge, the ability to communicate efficiently but obliquely with a partner.

For Roeder's purposes, however, the main thing that unites these seven games is that they have all been conquered by artificial intelligence. A great deal of each chapter details how computer scientists seeking to make computers more “human” have taught them to play these games. Initially clumsy, the computers became more skilled as their programmers exploited the computers' ability to make astronomical calculations in a matter of seconds. This advantage eventually crushed human masters of these games, including former World Chess Champion Garry Kasparov and professional Go player Lee Sedol.

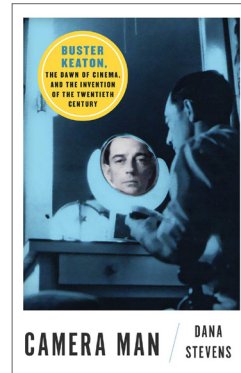
It would seem that AI's triumphs have made games for humans meaningless, but Roeder argues that they haven't. Instead, the masters of these games have harnessed the computer's power, using it to improve their skills and bring their expertise

to new levels. However, the progress of human and automated intellect is not where games' salvation lies. Instead, it's the strivers—the players among us who love the challenge of overcoming those self-imposed obstacles—who will ensure that games continue to enrich our humanity.

—Deborah Mason

Camera Man

By Dana Stevens



Biography

Regardless of where you fall on slapstick humor (pun intended), to watch Buster Keaton on film is to witness magic. The genius behind silent-era masterpieces such as *The General* and *Sherlock Jr.* is invincible on screen. It's almost

like he's from another planet—one without gravity, permanent injury or the despair that plagues life on this mortal coil.

Of course, this couldn't be further from the truth. In reality, Keaton's finesse for falling was won through family dysfunction and physical abuse. But in **Camera Man: Buster Keaton, the Dawn of Cinema, and the Invention of the Twentieth Century** (Atria, \$29.99, 9781501134197), film critic and Slate's “Culture Gabfest” host Dana Stevens decenters Keaton's hardship, using his life as a frame to explore the advent of film and its effect on visual culture today.

Keaton was born into a vaudeville family in 1895, the same year film projection technology debuted. He was performing by age 3, honing his comedic genius in a school of literal hard knocks. Buster's father threw the boy “acrobatically” around the stage, using him as a mop, among other things. The on-stage domestic abuse Keaton endured from his sometimes-sober father was the stuff of legend, drawing both large audiences and investigation from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

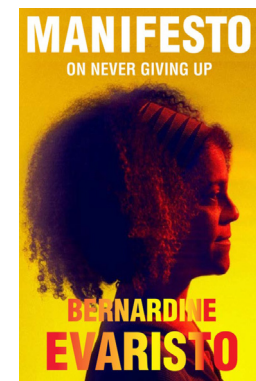
Though its historical wanderings read as windingly as one of Keaton's famous chase scenes, **Camera Man** redeems details from Keaton's life that previous biographers have misread or glossed over. For example, Buster's time in the Cirque Medrano has often been cited as a hard-times clown gig rather than what it was: an invitation from European circus royalty to be the honored guest performer at a permanent, well-respected circus frequented by Edgar Degas and Pablo Picasso.

Like the handsome, stone-faced performer himself, **Camera Man** has wide appeal. General readers, history buffs and deep-cut Keaton historians alike will laugh, cry and marvel at both the world of Buster Keaton and the effect he had on cinema.

—Sarah Carter

Manifesto

By Bernardine Evaristo



Memoir

When Bernardine Evaristo's novel *Girl, Woman, Other* won the Booker Prize in 2019, many readers, and some critics, assumed it was Evaristo's first book and that she had achieved overnight success. In fact, she had been writing fiction, poetry and

plays for 40 years at that point, and her Booker-winning novel was her eighth book. In **Manifesto: On Never Giving Up** (Grove, \$27, 9780802158901), Evaristo offers her own story.

Evaristo structures her memoir thematically rather than chronologically, in seven long sections covering topics such as family, romance, writing and activism. Born in 1959 to a Nigerian father and a white English mother, Evaristo grew up as one of eight children in a working-class suburb of London. Money was tight, and the family endured a spectrum of racist hostility, from rudeness and name-calling to bricks thrown through their home's windows. The narrative balances Evaristo's early hardships and obstacles (being poor and biracial in class-bound 1960s England) with the gifts and support (her parents' political activism, her convent school education) that laid the groundwork for her midlife success.

In her 20s, Evaristo formed a theater company with other Black women and began to write plays while living hand to mouth in cheap rentals. She also spent those years in lesbian relationships, before beginning to date men again in her 30s. With candor and even some humor, she looks back on an early abusive relationship, nicknaming her ex The Mental Dominatrix, or TMD. It's a good example of the way Evaristo can write about a heavy subject thoughtfully yet conversationally.

Throughout, Evaristo describes her development as a writer, from her first attempts at fiction to the aftermath of becoming a bestselling author at 60. “Writing became a room of my own; writing became my home,” she notes. **Manifesto** is not a self-help book, but Evaristo's long, persistent journey to becoming a lauded novelist is inspiring, especially for any writer who's struggled to get a story published. The book concludes with “Evaristo's Manifesto,” nine tenets that guide her life. Here's one: “Be wild, disobedient & daring with your creativity, take risks instead of following predictable routes; those who play it safe do not advance our culture or civilization.”

In **Manifesto**, Evaristo takes her own advice, producing a thoughtful, vivid, often funny work of nonfiction that refuses to play it safe.

—Sarah McCraw Crow

FACE-TO-FACE WITH THE PAST

Kelly McWilliams reflects on self-worth and identity in her most personal novel yet.

Mirror Girls blends historical fiction and horror to tell the story of Charlie and Magnolia, biracial twin sisters separated at birth after their parents' murder, and the unforeseen consequences of their unlikely reunion 17 years later. Author Kelly McWilliams spoke to BookPage about the deeply personal experiences that inform the novel and what it's like to write what scares you.

Can you introduce us to Charlie and Magnolia?

Magnolia has been raised to believe she's a white Southern belle, with no knowledge of her racial heritage. When her grandmother admits the truth on her deathbed, Magnolia's reflection suddenly disappears from every mirror. She's unmoored after the loss of her self-conception.

Charlie begins the story in New York City, living with her Black grandmother. It's the dawn of the civil rights movement, and she dreams of being a protester and fighting for justice. But then her grandmother falls ill and wants to be buried in the place she was born: the rural town of Eureka, Georgia, where Magnolia still lives on an old plantation.

So, at the start of the story, both girls have just lost crucial aspects of their identities. Charlie has lost her life in New York, where it was safer (though not fully safe!) for her to defy the racist status quo. Magnolia, in turn, is reeling from the revelation that despite her skin tone, she's not, in fact, white. Both girls desperately need to find each other in order to construct a new, mixed-race identity from the ashes of their old lives.

You've said that your debut novel, *Agnes at the End of the World*, was inspired by a dream you had. How did *Mirror Girls* begin?

Mirror Girls is more personal than *Agnes*, and I think I've been making my way toward writing that story for a long time—possibly decades. I grew up in a mixed-race family, and families like mine always have to fight to be seen as family. I can't tell you how many times people challenged the fact that my brother and I were blood related, just because our skin tone is different. Mixed-race families have to affirm their existence over and over to a society that often chooses not to reflect us. This story was inspired by my own childhood, my own life.

I was also inspired by the photographs of twin sisters Marcia and Millie Briggs, who made the news as infants because one baby presented as white (complete with red hair) and the other as Black. While I found these sisters sweet and inspiring, I recognized that the world was quite puzzled and uneasily fascinated by their existence. The sub-text was: What does race even mean if twins can be born with such different racial presentations? And I thought, well, I know the answer to that! In order to survive a world that is still inhospitable to mixed-race families, I had to learn the answer to reconciling my own identity, and it was hard. That journey to self-acceptance felt like a story worth telling.

***Mirror Girls* has quite a few excellent names for both people and places. How do you find the right names?**

For the most part, I just wait for names to come to me—and I know in my gut when I've found the right one. Sometimes it's instant; other times it takes months.

“I grew up in a mixed-race family, and families like mine always have to fight to be seen as family.”



© BLACK FOREST PHOTOGRAPHY

+ Visit BookPage.com to read an extended version of this Q&A and our starred review of *Mirror Girls*.

I struggled mightily with the name of the plantation in the book for one horrible reason: There are so, so many plantations that still stand in the South, if only as historical destinations or people's inherited homes, that I kept imagining names that had an analog in real life, which wasn't ideal. I probably Googled 10 different names until I found one that didn't already belong to some plantation somewhere. It gives you a sense of the devastating scale of slavery to have that particular problem.

***Mirror Girls* dives deep into daughters, mothers and grandmothers, and the ways each generation's actions ripple outward and affect future generations. What drew you to exploring these ideas in this story?**

Every Black family in America suffers from intergenerational trauma, especially along our maternal lines. I heard somewhere that 95% of Black Americans are direct descendants of enslaved people, and the crux of chattel slavery as an institution was the separation of children from their mothers on the auction block. That's an ever-present truth, an inherited cultural memory for every Black mother.

But intergenerational trauma also takes very personal forms. On the day I was born in a hospital in Maryland, my mother was recovering from a cesarean section when a nurse took me for a checkup. My mother is obviously Black, but I'm extremely light. That nurse didn't bring me back to my mother; they brought her a Black baby boy instead! Despite our identifying wristbands, that nurse just could not believe that we belonged together. My mother injured herself hollering in the hallway for me, and that story became a huge part of our family identity. In fact, when I gave birth, I remembered what had happened to my mother and worried that if my daughter's skin tone didn't match mine, there'd be trouble. It's a terrible thing to fear that the world will deny your family their basic right to be a family.

Of course, terrible things happen to Black mothers in hospitals every single day, considering the horrible mortality rate. I firmly believe that every

bit of maternal suffering causes intergenerational trauma down the line. Grandmothers, mothers and daughters bear so much of that pain. But we also tell the stories that help us to make sense of those traumas. It's our heritage, and it's also what we must pass down to help our descendants survive.

Mirror Girls is set in Georgia in 1953, with lots of references to Charlie's life in Harlem. What sort of research did you do for the book? Were you able to do any travel- or interview-based research?

While deciding on a setting, I read *Remembering Jim Crow: African-Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South*, which is a collection of oral histories. Hearing those voices, I knew I would set the story during this time of struggle, when survival depended in part on Black folks' own belief in their self-worth. At this time, elders worked so hard to imbue Black children, who were looked down upon by white society, with a sense of pride.

What I really loved about those oral histories, though, was the amazing specificity. Who knew that Coca-Cola once advertised itself in the South for being a "whites-only" drink in some states? And the segregated water fountains just came up over and over as a source of humiliation. It was really a deep laceration to the soul, to be segregated in those mundane ways.

I had desperately hoped to get down South for this project, but the pandemic prevented me from traveling. I did reach out to a sensitivity reader from the South to help with my understanding of the place.

As for interviews, I guess I did sort of interview my own family! We have a family legend that our last enslaved ancestor, a grandmother, walked off a Georgia plantation after emancipation, which is why I set the story there. Black families have long memories, but you do sometimes have to specifically ask the elders in your life to tell them. There's quite a bit that the older generation often keeps to themselves because the stories are so painful to speak out loud.

I loved the book's references to three real-life figures: Caleb Hill, Walter White and Ella Baker. Why was including each of these figures important to you and to the story?

My book is in part about an imagined lynching, that of Charlie and Magnolia's parents. I included Caleb Hill's name and tragic fate because it's so important that we remember that lynchings really happened, en masse, in the real world. Caleb Hill died at a time when New York's NAACP headquarters was keeping very careful track of Southern lynchings, so it was also the exact type of event that would have formed a bridge between the South and New York at the time. Northern brothers and sisters never stopped decrying Southern brutalities, and lynchings especially.

As for Ella Baker, she's Charlie's role model, because she's not only an activist, she's also a leader in a sexist time. I imagine Charlie following in her footsteps.

Finally, as I'm a woman light enough to pass for white, Walter Francis White is perhaps my very favorite historical figure of all time. Naturally, he becomes Magnolia's as well, as she's establishing her identity as a biracial person. Walter White could easily pass, but he chose not to. This brother had blond hair and blue eyes! In his early years, he acted as a sort of spy, investigating Southern lynchings for the NAACP. He put himself

in grave danger pretending to be white to extract information from murderers. There's a story that, at one point, he had to jump onto a moving train to save his own life. I just love that although he could have chosen the easy way out—pretending to be white to further his own opportunities—he dedicated his life to the Black community. And he used his light-skinned privilege to do something good for others.

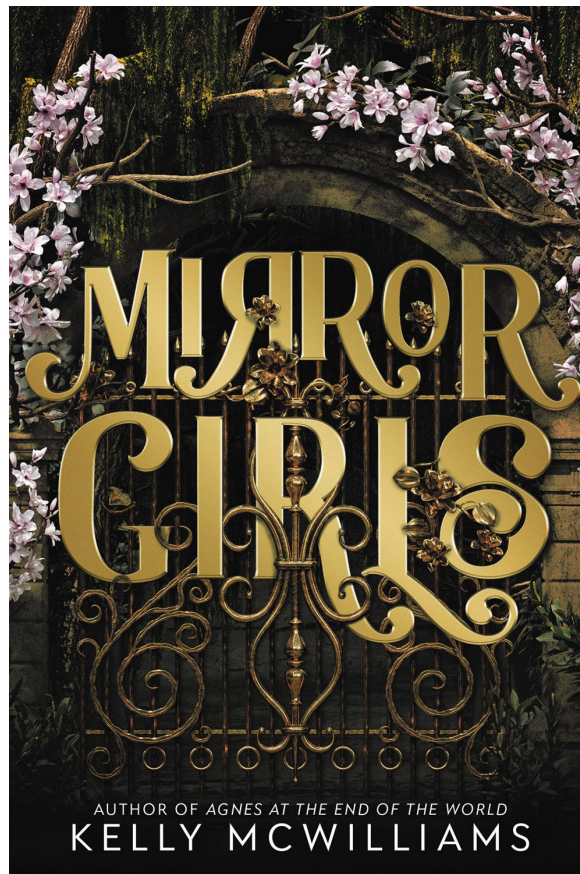
Your first book combined the "cult escape" narrative with a pandemic story, and Mirror Girls seamlessly blends historical fiction and horror. What do you enjoy about stirring different genres together? Are there other genres you'd love to combine in the future?

I love to stir up genres, and I think it's because I genuinely feel that life is too messy to be captured by one genre alone. There's also a tension

that two distinct genres place on each other that leads to fruitful and interesting narratives. Genre mashups also help you to avoid writing plot points that are too cliché.

I do have some combos I hope to write one day! One is a Western combined with a spy novel (actually based on the life of Walter White), but my next project is a single genre: a contemporary social satire. Genre mashups, while rewarding, are hard to pull off, and I need a short break!

"Knowledge is power, and feeling empowered leads to feeling less scared, in the end."



Mirror Girls

Little, Brown, \$17.99, 9780759553873

Young Adult

experience. It's been absolutely revelatory. I've never felt so at peace with my own racial ambiguity, and I'm finally beginning to process and even speak about the core traumas of my mixed childhood. My book is dedicated to mirror girls of every color, everywhere—and come to think of it, that includes me.

—Alice Cary



TWITTERPATED

Three YA novels capture the agony and the ecstasy of being young and in love.



Readers who revel in sweet and swoony stories will be won over by this trio of tales that celebrate adoration and affection.

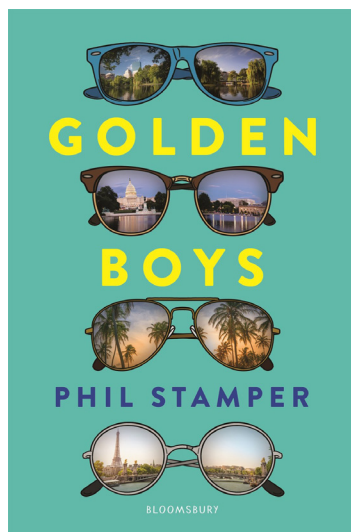
GOLDEN BOYS

Gabe, Sal, Reese and Heath have been best friends for as long as they can remember. They're all high achievers and the only openly gay boys at Gracemont High School. But the summer before their senior year, the **Golden Boys** (Bloomsbury, \$18.99, 9781547607372) are heading off in different directions for the first time. Gabe is volunteering with an environmental nonprofit in Boston; Reese is jetting off to Paris for graphic design classes; Sal's mom got him an internship with a U.S. senator in Washington, D.C.; and Heath is the newest employee at his aunt's arcade in Daytona Beach, Florida.

The summer holds plenty to look forward to—even for Heath, whose trip is also an escape from his parents' impending divorce. But as their group chats indicate, the boys' futures loom large and nerve-wracking. Might their travels help them figure out what they want to do with their lives, or at least with their last year of high school? Will their tightly knit bonds loosen, fray or even completely unravel?

As in his previous novels, *The Gravity of Us* and *As Far As You'll Take Me*, bestselling author Phil Stamper creates winningly realistic characters who earnestly explore the muzzy space between youth and young adulthood. Readers will root for the foursome to find joy and purpose. Stamper's detailed depictions of the boys' summer gigs are fascinating, and their interlocking stories give the narrative a buoyant momentum.

Naturally, there are romantic entanglements afoot as well. Gabe and Sal question whether their friends-with-benefits arrangement is sustainable, while unrequited crushes blossom into real love for . . . no spoilers here! Suffice it to say, there is some smooching amid all the moments of inspiration and revelation as the four boys make their way through a perspective-changing, horizon-broadening summer.



FOOLS IN LOVE

Do you like your love stories fantastical, or perhaps futuristic? Are you a sucker for a superhero, tantalized by time travel or convinced that one day you'll have your very own meet-cute with a royal in disguise? Whatever your fancy, **Fools in Love: Fresh Twists on Romantic Tales** (Running Press, \$17.99, 9780762472345) is sure to satisfy. It's a delightful assemblage of 15 swoonworthy short stories that put fresh spins on classic romance fiction tropes such as "mutual pining" and "the grumpy one and the soft one." The settings are refreshingly varied, ranging from a space station to a fairy-themed sleepaway camp to a sled race through snowy mountains. There are puppeteers, golf champions, novice magical investigators and an aspiring starship repair engineer, too.

The stories in this romantic treasury were written by a mix of acclaimed and up-and-coming authors including Natasha Ngan, Mason Deaver, Lilliam Rivera, Julian Winters and 2021 National Book Award winner Malinda Lo. Editors

Ashley Herring Blake and Rebecca Podos also contribute a story each. The table of contents helpfully delineates not only each author but also the trope included in their story, so that readers can search out their favorites. Of course, they can also just dive right in and let themselves be swept along into the wildly creative worlds the writers have created.

And what worlds they are! In "Boys Noise" by Mason Deaver, two boy band members take an undercover trip to New York City, where they realize love songs just might be in their shared future. A modern-day annoyance—mistaking someone's car for your rideshare—sets the stage for a shyly sweet flirtation in Amy Spalding's "Five Stars." Time travel is both suspenseful and achingly beautiful in Rebecca Barrow's "Bloom," while *cheesy* takes on a hilariously adorable new meaning in Laura Silverman's "The Passover Date." **Fools in Love** truly has something to please anyone and everyone who loves love.

ONE TRUE LOVES

Lenore Bennett's parents are the epitome of Black excellence. They know the power of a plan and have instilled that ethos in their kids: Wally, their oldest, is going to law school; Lenore is off to New York University; and 10-year-old Etta is taking college classes.

But as Elise Bryant's **One True Loves** (Balzer + Bray, \$17.99, 9780062982865) opens, Lenore, a talented artist with fashion sense to spare, has other things on her mind. First, there's senior prom, which she'll attend dateless while dodging her jerk of an ex. After graduation, her family is embarking on a European cruise, which sounds wonderful but also stressful. Lenore's parents already disparage her for trying lots of things instead of mastering one. What will they say if they discover that she's been concealing the fact that she is still (gasp!) undecided about her college major?

While on the cruise, Lenore guards her secret and fends off her irrepressible best friend Tessa's well-intended text-message advice about all things romance, which Lenore treats with great skepticism. She's also highly irritated when she meets handsome Alex Lee, whose parents hit it off with hers. Lenore's folks are, naturally, impressed by his carefully laid-out plans for medical school. As the cruise sails on, Lenore's secret weighs ever heavier on her mind, even as her eye-rolling at Alex turns into meaningful glances. Might there be hope for Lenore to find love and fulfillment?

One True Loves is a heartfelt look at what it's like to feel different from those closest to you and a cautionary tale about the ways in which people-pleasing affects mental health. It's a winning companion to Bryant's 2021 debut, *Happily Ever After*, that stands easily on its own, though fans will enjoy the glimpses into familiar characters' futures. **One True Loves** offers warm empathy and wise perspective to readers who, like Lenore, are trying to figure out where—and with whom—they might fit in the big wide world.

—Linda M. Castellitto



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From Dust, a Flame

By Rebecca Podos

Speculative Fiction

The nightly transformations begin on Hannah's 17th birthday. First, she awakens in the bedroom of her family's Boston apartment with the eyes of a snake. The next morning, she has a wolf's teeth. Six weeks after Hannah's mother leaves in search of a cure, an envelope arrives in the mail. It contains an obituary for Jitka Eggers, the maternal grandmother Hannah has never met.

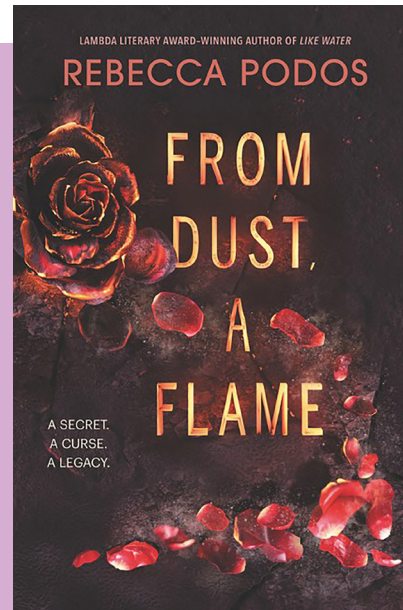
Hannah and her brother, Gabe, are desperate to find their mother and get some answers to what's happening to Hannah. They travel to Jitka's village in upstate New York, where the large Jewish family they never knew they had welcomes them into shiva, a Jewish period of mourning.

As Hannah, Gabe and their new friend Ari keep digging, they stumble onto family secrets; meet a folk healer called an opshprekherke; discover a golem and a vengeful, demonic sheyd; and find that, like the present and the past, the real and the

fantastical aren't as far apart as they might seem.

Author Rebecca Podos packs a lot into **From Dust, a Flame** (Balzer + Bray, \$17.99, 9780062699060), including lovingly detailed descriptions of traditional Jewish practices, tales of creatures from Jewish mysticism and depictions of life in Prague during the Nazi invasion. Its narrative encompasses two time periods plus assorted letters, dreams and folktales—and references to everything from the legends of King Solomon to Disney's *The Little Mermaid*.

Throughout the novel, Podos explores themes typical of YA literature, including self-image and self-discovery, as well as more mature questions, such as when to protect children and when to let them go. A mystery component encourages readers to question their initial assumptions, and a first romance found when least



expected adds queer sexuality to the range of experiences represented.

From Dust, a Flame sits comfortably beside other works of Jewish American YA literature, both classical and recent. As in Jane Yolen's 1988 novel, *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Holocaust-era visions inform a present-day teen's circumstances, and as in Gavriel Savit's *The Way Back*, published in 2020, a host of magical creatures from Jewish mythology intervene in our world and influence the destinies of young adults.

At its core, **From Dust, a Flame** is a moving story about the enduring power of telling stories.

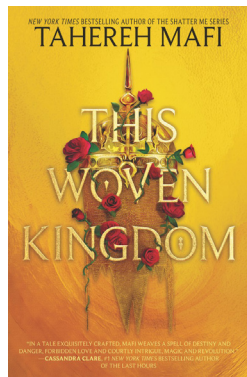
—Jill Ratzan



Visit BookPage.com to read our Q&A with Rebecca Podos.

This Woven Kingdom

By Tahereh Mafi



Fantasy

Alizeh works all day cleaning the 116 rooms of a noble estate. At night, she works on commissions as she establishes herself as a seamstress. Her supernatural strength and endurance enable her to survive this exhausting pace. Alizeh is an

inhuman Jinn, considered untrustworthy and not allowed to openly use her magic.

Alizeh has more reason than most Jinn to put up with the abuses of life among the servant class. She has been on the run since the death of her parents, and a noble house with a large staff and plentiful security is the perfect place to hide. Yet there are parts of Alizeh's story that are unknown even to her.

Kamran is destined to succeed his grandfather as king. When Kamran notices a strange interaction between a street urchin and a servant girl, he fears the girl may be a spy from a rival kingdom. His suspicions set in motion a series of events he cannot control as Alizeh becomes a wanted woman who is believed to be a threat to the king. Soon, Kamran is drawn down a path to find out the truth for himself.

A retelling of "Cinderella" complete with an aspiring seamstress on a crash course toward a fateful royal ball, **This Woven Kingdom** (HarperCollins,

\$19.99, 9780062972446) masterfully incorporates influences from Persian and Muslim history, culture and mythology.

The novel's standout feature is its language. **This Woven Kingdom** is a fairy-tale retelling that actually *sounds* like a fairy tale: Its characters speak like they're in one, using formal tones and sophisticated vocabularies. That is not to say the novel is devoid of levity. The grandiosity of Alizeh and Kamran's banter adds to the intoxicating sense of wonder and flirtation that marks their interactions.

Tightly paced, with a rollicking set of twists and revelations and a chaotic climax that leads straight to a whopping cliffhanger of an ending, **This Woven Kingdom** is an exceptional fantasy that blends its various influences to addictive effect.

—Annie Metcalf

I Must Betray You

By Ruta Sepetys



Historical Fiction

Romania 1989: Long-time leader Nicolae Ceaușescu has told the world that Romania is a land of bounty. The world believes him, but high school student Cristian Florescu knows better. For him, food scarcity, unreliable elec-

tricity and paranoia are part of daily life.

Cristian dreams of becoming a writer, but the secret police threaten him with blackmail until he agrees to report on the American diplomat whose apartment his mother cleans. Soon, Cristian begins to doubt everyone around him. Glimpses of the world beyond Romania stir feelings of curiosity and confusion as Cristian tries to make sense of the contradictory truths he uncovers. All the while, Romania rushes toward revolution.

Part espionage thriller and part bildungsroman, Ruta Sepetys' **I Must Betray You** (Philomel, \$18.99, 9781984836038) provides a window into the chilling reality of 1980s Romania, the dictator who fooled the world and the events that led to his downfall.

The book is a master class in pacing and atmosphere. It unfolds slowly, creating a foreboding sense of rising tension, until the dam suddenly breaks. Months of caution and paranoia cascade into a frightening series of bloody protests.

Sepetys' greatest strength is her dedication to research. The novel's diaristic tone and its laser focus on one boy and one country's story don't leave much space for the broader context of historical communism and Marxist ideologies within the narrative, though copious endnotes are packed with tales from Sepetys' research trips across Romania, photos from the period that offer profound visuals and plentiful source notes.

"When we don't know the full story, sometimes we create one of our own," Cristian writes in the novel's final moments. "And that can be dangerous." **I Must Betray You** makes its potent message clear: If the truth sets us free, its power comes from how we choose to wield it.

—Mariel Fehik

Black history made new

Through stories of triumph and pride, two picture books challenge widely held notions about the history of African Americans.

History lives and breathes, not only within us but also as we uncover new ways to see and understand the past. These picture books introduce young readers to fresh, vital perspectives on Black history.

★ Born on the Water

Readers are in for a sweeping history lesson that spans centuries in **The 1619 Project: Born on the Water** (Kokila, \$18.99, 9780593307359, ages 6 to 10), an illuminating extension of the educational movement begun at the *New York Times Magazine* in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and Newbery Honor author Renée Watson begin this exquisite book with a framing story about a Black girl who receives a school assignment to trace her family's roots and feels ashamed that she can go back only three generations. Upon hearing this, her grandmother gathers the whole family to explain their heritage, starting with their ancestors in West Central Africa. "Ours is no immigration story," she says. In a series of free verse poems with titles like "They Had a Language," "Stolen," "Tobacco Fields" and "Legacy," the authors convey not only facts but also feeling, a powerful mixture of pride, joy, tragedy, sorrow, perseverance and triumph.

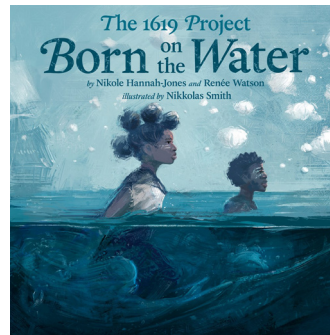
Nikkolas Smith's visceral illustrations bring all of these emotions to life, starting with joyous scenes of families living in the kingdom of Ndongo, "their bodies a song under open sky and bright sun." These pages burst with the colors of turquoise waters and grassy fields of gold and green beneath warm, sunlit skies. The images are a wonderful gift to readers, offering a sense of what life was like before enslavement.

With the suddenness of a single page turn, life changes cataclysmically as these ancestors are kidnapped from their homeland and imprisoned aboard a ship called the *White Lion*. Shadowy illustrations convey the brutality that follows: an empty, ransacked village; people in chains forced onto a ship; faces filled with sadness and fear. One image shows a person who has jumped overboard, and Grandma explains that their ancestors are those who survived the terrible journey: "We were born on the water. We come from the people who refused to die."

Grandma's history continues to the fields of Virginia, where a baby named William Tucker becomes the first Black child born in the new land, and on across centuries

of resistance and achievement. "Never forget you come from a people of great strength," Grandma says. "Be proud of our story, your story."

Born on the Water is a triumph and a history lesson that every child needs to learn.

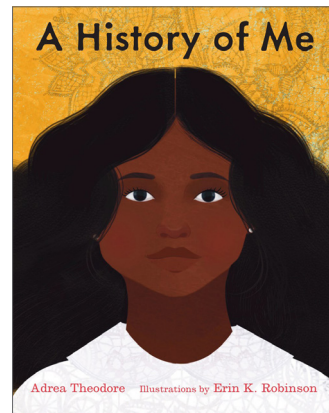


★ A History of Me

"I was the only brown person in class," begins the young narrator of Adrea Theodore and Erin K. Robinson's **A History of Me** (Neal Porter, \$18.99, 9780823442577, ages 4 to 8). She feels the eyes of her classmates on her back whenever their teacher discusses slavery

and civil rights. "I wanted to slide out of my seat and onto the floor and drift out the door," she admits. Even worse, a bully taunts her after school, "If it wasn't for Lincoln, you'd still be our slaves!"

In an author's note, Theodore describes writing this debut picture book after learning that "some *thirty years* after I had attended elementary school, the way the subject of slavery was being taught was still causing harm to young black and brown children." As the narrator of **A History of Me** shares her experiences in history



class, she also reflects on the lives of the women in her family, including her great-great-grandmother, who was enslaved, and her mother, who spent part of her childhood in the Jim Crow South. "And so I should be grateful to go to school and learn," the narrator says repeatedly, but it's clear that her feelings are more complicated than simple gratitude.

Illustrator Robinson skillfully illuminates the book's many strands of history. The narrator's historical musings appear in sepia tones, while contemporary scenes leap off the page in vivid colors, adding a dose of energy to the tale. The narrator is a quietly thoughtful force to be reckoned with. Her piercing eyes often gaze directly at readers, and she faces down the bully with her head high, striding purposefully down the sidewalk past him.

The book concludes as the narrator discusses growing up and having a daughter of her own. A wonderful spread shows her daughter reaching triumphantly toward the sky, surrounded by a sunburst of rainbow color and empowered with the knowledge "that she is free to be anything she wants to be."

"What happens when you are proud of where you come from?" asks Theodore in her author's note. **A History of Me** is a moving reminder of what we gain when we draw strength and inspiration from the past.

—Alice Cary

MAGICAL
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ENDLESS
ADVENTURE.

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★ "Wholesome, delightful, and jam-packed with adventure."

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"Absolutely enchanting!"

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author of *Ghost Squad*

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★ Love in the Library

By Maggie Tokuda-Hall
Illustrated by Yas Imamura

Picture Book

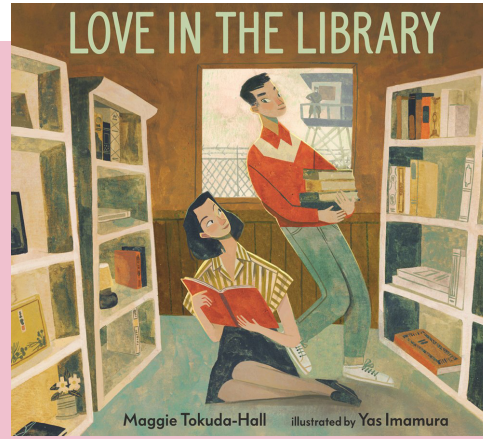
Love grows in the face of fear in **Love in the Library** (Candlewick, \$17.99, 9781536204308, ages 6 to 9), a picture book based on the experiences of author Maggie Tokuda-Hall's maternal grandparents in Minidoka, a World War II incarceration camp in Idaho.

As the book opens, a young woman named Tama has been forced to live at Minidoka for the past year, because in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor, being Japanese American is "treated like a crime." Though she finds the camp unsettling, she makes the most of her assignment to work in the camp's library. There, she receives regular visits from a man named George. It's not until a conversation

in which George validates Tama's feelings of dread that she realizes he has been coming to the library to see *her*. "You can't possibly be reading all those books you check out," she tells him. "No," he replies. "Do you see how long they are? I'm only human, you know." They marry and have their first son while imprisoned at Minidoka.

Illustrator Yas Imamura's soft, muted, earth-tone illustrations work wonders in bringing the characters and setting to life. Her fine, smooth lines gently capture the tenderness that permeates this tale, and backlit scenes seem to lift Tama and George from the page.

Tokuda-Hall depicts Tama as vulnerable yet tough, scared but willing to seek out the miraculous in her newly limited life. That she conveys Tama's abiding spirit while also acknowledging the great



injustice of the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during this time is important: Tokuda-Hall never sugar-coats Tama's experience, and her author's note emphasizes the hate that spawned the imprisonment: "Hate is not a virus; it is an American tradition," she writes.

Love in the Library

returns again and again to Tama's search for the words to describe her experience, such as *constant*: "Constant questions. Constant worries. Constant fear." Later, when Tama realizes that George loves her, he tells her that the word for when she feels "scared and sad and confused and frustrated and lonely and hopeful" is *human*.

Love in the Library is an exquisite piece of historical fiction and a love story for the ages.

—Julie Danielson

meet NILAH MAGRUDER

How would you describe your book?



Who has been the biggest influence on your work?



Who was your childhood hero?



What books did you enjoy as a child?



What one thing would you like to learn to do?

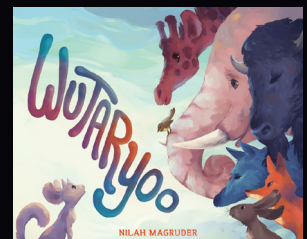


What message would you like to send to young readers?



© MICHELLE KWINE

Who are you, and what's your story? **Wutaryoo** (Versify, \$17.99, 9780358172383, ages 4 to 8) loves to listen to her friends' stories about where they came from, but she doesn't know what to say when they ask her about herself. Determined to uncover her story, she sets out on an epic journey and discovers an answer she never could have imagined. Author-illustrator Nilah Magruder has written comics for Marvel and is the author of the middle grade graphic novel *M.F.K.* and the picture book *How to Find a Fox*. She lives with her cat in Maryland.

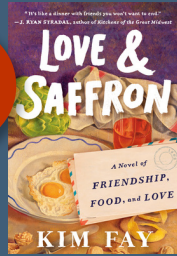




Your Next Great Read

FEBRUARY 2022

#1 PICK



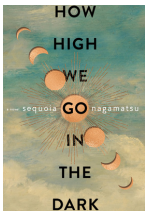
Love & Saffron: A Novel of Friendship, Food, and Love

By Kim Fay

(G.P. Putnam's Sons, 9780593419335, \$24, Feb. 8, Historical Fiction)

"Love & Saffron reminds us of the beauty of letter writing. I loved the simplicity of this book—it filled my heart with love and connection to the human spirit, and left me with the desire to kindle a friendship by sending a letter."

—Annette Avery, Bright Side Bookshop, Flagstaff, AZ



How High We Go in the Dark: A Novel

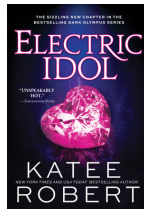
By Sequoia Nagamatsu

(William Morrow, 9780063072640, \$27.99, Jan. 18, Fiction)

"This collection of connected stories describes the world after a devastating plague. The book is beautiful—striking,

unsettling, and darkly gorgeous. It defies categorization and creates its own genre. A shimmering gem of a book."

—Debra Ginsberg, DIESEL, A Bookstore, Santa Monica, CA



Electric Idol (Dark Olympus)

By Katee Robert

(Sourcebooks Casablanca, 9781728231761, \$14.99, paperback, Jan. 18, Romance)

"A fantastic *Neon Gods* follow-up, Katee Robert's modern Olympus is full of drama, sinful men, and spice! A reimagined Eros

and Psyche with a plus-sized, cunning Psyche, fake marriage, and a murderous mother-in-law. What's not to love?"

—Kristin Saner, Fables Books, Goshen, IN



Vladimir: A Novel

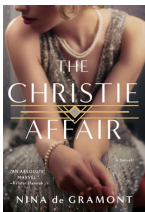
By Julia May Jonas

(Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, 9781982187637, \$27, Feb. 1, Fiction)

"Vladimir is an audacious story about gender, power, and shame told through the charged voice of an English professor at a small liberal arts college. The personal and political come to an explosive conclusion

in this clever debut."

—Linda Kass, Gramercy Books, Bexley, OH



The Christie Affair: A Novel

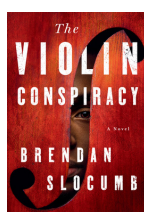
By Nina de Gramont

(St. Martin's Press, 9781250274618, \$27.99, Feb. 1, Historical Fiction)

"A fascinating look into the real-life disappearance of Agatha Christie in December, 1926. Told by her husband's

mistress, it is a story of love, loss, and revenge. You'll wonder what will happen next when you're not reading it. Excellent!"

—Nona Camuel, CoffeeTree Books, Morehead, KY



The Violin Conspiracy: A Novel

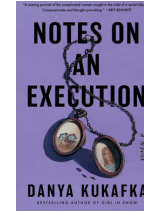
By Brendan Slocumb

(Anchor, 9780593315415, \$28, Feb. 1, Mystery)

"One of my new favorite novels. The book tells Ray's story, a young Black man who just wants to play his violin in a world set to see him fail. You'll root

for Ray, get angry on his behalf, cry with him, and triumph with him."

—Laney Sheehan, Epilogue: Books Chocolate Brews, Chapel Hill, NC



Notes on an Execution: A Novel

By Danya Kukafka

(William Morrow, 9780063052734, \$27.99, Jan. 25, Thriller)

"Notes on an Execution flows like a quiet river coming to a waterfall—lyrical, tense, and quietly explosive. This book is full of compassion for each character, even the killer to be executed. Kukafka has outdone herself with this book."

—Annie Philbrick, Bank Square Books, Mystic, CT



Shady Hollow: A Murder Mystery

By Juneau Black

(Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 9780593315712, \$16, paperback, Jan. 25, Mystery)

"In the industrious town of Shady Hollow, woodland creatures go about their lives until a brutal betrayal shatters the peace.

Vera Vixen, a tenacious reporter and cunning fox, unravels a murder mystery in this smart series debut."

—Margaret Walker, Union Avenue Books, Knoxville, TN



Joan Is Okay: A Novel

By Weike Wang

(Random House, 9780525654834, \$27, Jan. 18, Fiction)

"A smart, moving, and entertaining book. Joan is the daughter of Chinese immigrants and an ICU doctor in New York City. There's a pandemic looming, but Joan's going to be okay. A witty and insightful story."

—Claire Benedict, Bear Pond Books, Montpelier, VT



Greenwich Park: A Novel

By Katherine Faulkner

(Gallery Books, 9781982150310, \$27.99, Jan. 25, Thriller)

"Such a fun and addicting thriller! I was torn between reading slowly to catch all the nuances and speed reading to figure out what happens. The book pulls punches to the very end. Highly recommended for psychological thriller lovers!"

—Kristen Beverly, Half Price Books, Dallas, TX

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