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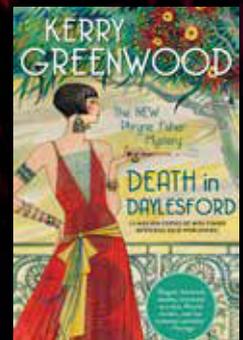
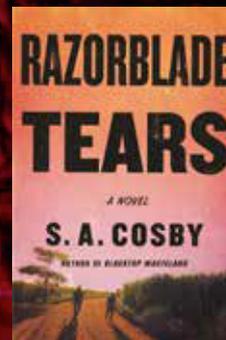
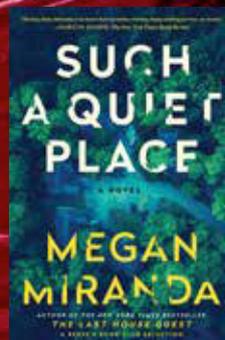
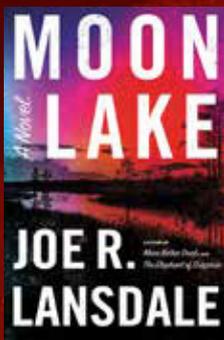
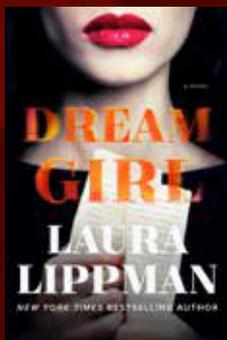
DISCOVER YOUR NEXT GREAT BOOK

JULY 2021

## BE CAREFUL OUT THERE

Watch out for Andrea Bartz's *We Were Never Here* + 25 other dangerously good new books

PRIVATE EYE JULY



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Cover includes art from **We Were Never Here** (Ballantine), designed by Sarah Horgan. Image by Iliana Simeonova/Trevillion Images.

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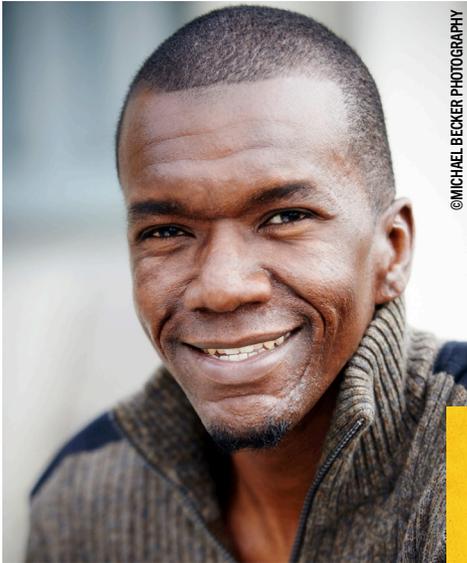
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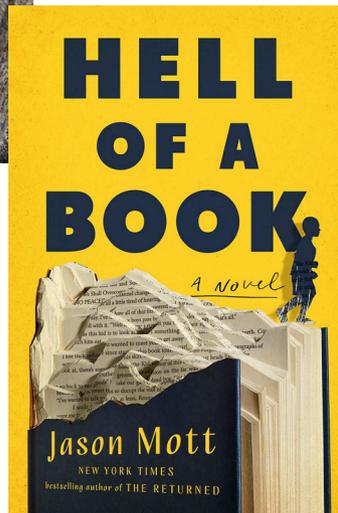
# Creativity unleashed

Bestselling author Jason Mott embraces comedy, absurdity and catharsis in his revelatory new novel.



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**Hell of a Book** (Dutton, \$27, 9780593330968) is a dazzling, perfectly balanced novel that mixes fantasy with devastating reality, wit with sorrow, loss with hope. Jason Mott discusses how he crafted this novel about an unnamed author who encounters a possibly imaginary boy while on tour for his own novel, which is also titled *Hell of a Book*.



Visit [BookPage.com](http://BookPage.com) to read our starred review of *Hell of a Book*.

**Your protagonist has an unusual relationship with his own imagination. Does this sense of fantasy and reality bleeding together come from your own experience as a writer?**

Most definitely. For myself, and for many others I'd bet, the real world gets a bit overwhelming most days. That's what led me to books and, later, to writing. The real world was more bearable if I could escape into imagination on a regular basis. I've been living in imaginary worlds so often and for so long that, well, it's sorta hard to turn the dream machine off! But I wouldn't change that for anything. I feel bad for people who only live in the real world when there are entire universes waiting to be imagined.

**The novel's descriptions of book touring are surreal. What's the strangest tour experience you've had as an author?**

Oh man . . . this is a loaded question. I've had quite a few strange book tour experiences ranging from a man very obsessed with my teeth, to finding love—briefly—to passing out in the middle of an airplane aisle from exhaustion. I should save some of the strangest stories for future writing projects, so how about a more heartwarming story about a mix-up caused by the letter “e”?

I was in St. Louis, and this woman comes out to my event with her 11-year-old son, dressed in a beautiful St. Louis Cardinals jersey. Everyone takes their seats, and the bookstore owner gives me a wonderful introduction. As soon as I step up to the podium, the boy wearing the baseball jersey raises his hand. He says, with a mixture of confusion and annoyance in his voice, “You're not Jason Mott.”

And well, obviously I was Jason Mott. But it turned out that I wasn't Jason Motte, the relief pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals whom the boy had convinced his mother to bring him out to see in the hopes of getting his baseball signed. Pretty strange how something as small as an “e” at the end of a name can ruin a boy's dreams for the evening.

**What did you learn about yourself through the writing of this book?**

Honestly, I'm still unpacking what I learned from this novel. If I had to give an answer, I would say that I've learned to lean into who I am as a person and as a writer. I've wanted to write this type of novel for years but avoided it for various reasons. I've gained a new confidence, and I hope that it leads to more creative exploration and new paths of storytelling in the future.

***Hell of a Book* is contending with a lot of Black Americans' pain at various points in the story. How did the writing of this novel serve you?**

There was a lot of meditation and catharsis in this novel. A massive amount of its creation was simply the act of me trying to figure out my thoughts on life as a Black American. While countless others have added to this conversation, I felt that there were still parts of this topic going undiscussed and, even more, not explored through fantasy/absurdist methods. So this novel served to help me find my own way of—hopefully—contributing to America's ongoing conversations on race, identity and healing.

**The snappiness of the novel's language sometimes feels like the story is set within the world of a black-and-white film, like *His Girl Friday*. Tell us about this style.**

Film noir is a beautiful time capsule of language. Its use of slang, its pacing and cadence—film noir treats the American English lexicon in ways that few other media have, and that fascinates me.

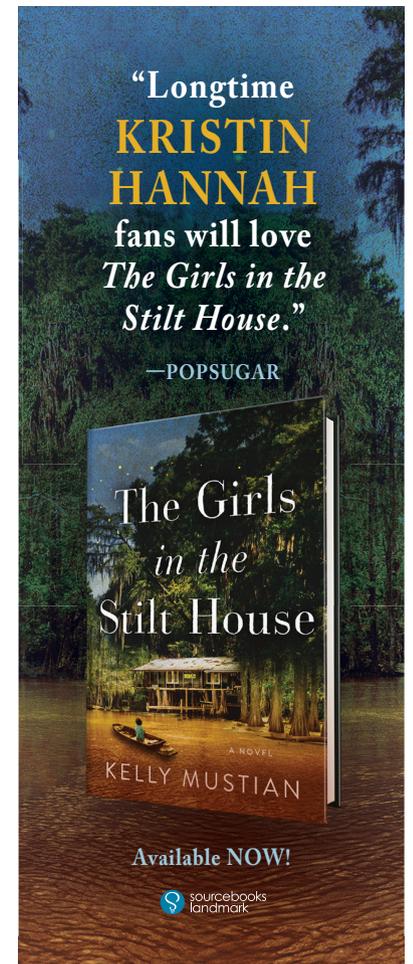
***Hell of a Book* allowed me, finally, to play with language in a way that I hadn't been able to before, which made for some of the most challenging and fun writing I've ever done.**

**How do you hope readers will approach this book, and then leave it?**

One of the mottos I live by is that you have to be willing to meet others where they live. I believe that mindset leads to better understanding and empathy overall. So I hope that readers come to this book willing to meet it where it lives, which is a place of absurdity, tragedy and uncertainty. I know that can be a lot to ask of a reader, which is why I worked hard to offer something rewarding: sometimes comedy, sometimes catharsis, or if I got lucky enough in the writing, maybe even joy once in a while.

As for when the reader leaves? Well, I hope they never leave. I hope this book stays with people. Because, if that happens, maybe the real-world events that these characters are so haunted by can be changed in the real world. And then maybe these types of stories won't need to be written anymore. Wouldn't that be something?

—Matthew Jackson



“Longtime KRISTIN HANNAH fans will love *The Girls in the Stilt House*.”

—POPSUGAR

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## Take my hand

In these love stories, mental health and the path to treatment are just as important as the journey toward a happily ever after.

Many readers turn to romance novels because they're a bastion of enduring hope, as things are guaranteed to end well. But another draw is the way romance novels depict how characters who have experienced trauma and anxiety can find ways to heal and cope, with the added bonus of finding a partner who exudes support and acceptance. In these two contemporary romances, authors Sonali Dev and Roni Loren introduce characters whose lives have been changed by violence and fear and who carefully chart their paths toward recovery as well as true love.

Sonali Dev continues her Rajes series of Jane Austen retellings with **Incense and Sensibility** (William Morrow, \$16.99, 9780063051805). Indian American politician Yash Raje has launched himself into the race to become California's next governor, but while attending a campaign rally, he is the victim of a racist assassination attempt. Although the plot is foiled and he is unharmed, Yash is deeply traumatized. Being the direct target of gun violence leaves him anxious and fearful, despite the boost it's giving him in the polls.

Yash wants to treat his anxiety and PTSD before their severity is made public, so he seeks help from India Dashwood, a stress-management coach and yoga teacher. The situation is complicated by the fact that India isn't a stranger to Yash; the two had a passionate affair 10 years ago, and he hasn't forgotten her since.

As with many of Dev's central couples, Yash and India are endearingly bighearted. Their closed-off, protective demeanors cloak how much they're seeking to be loved and understood by someone willing to make the effort. Dev masterfully

explores the darker moments of being human while leading the reader to a realistic, hard-won romantic ending. **Incense and Sensibility** shares its source text's focus on family, but it also launches Austen's novel into

the 21st century with its emotional, complex survey of racial identity in America.

Roni Loren's **What If You & Me** (Sourcebooks Casablanca, \$14.99, 9781492693253) also puts mental health front and center. Andi Lockley's life is shaped by a traumatic experience she had as a teenager,

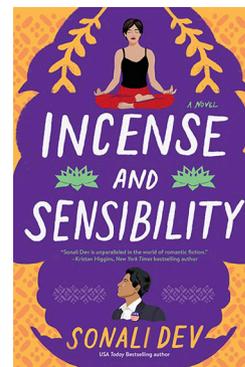
the details of which Loren carefully and sensitively spoils out later in the novel. Despite her isolated lifestyle, Andi is still able to pursue her passions and work as a horror writer and true crime podcaster. But there's one thing currently disturbing her carefully constructed

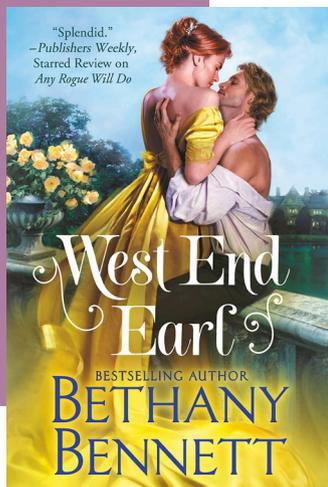
peace: her neighbor, Hill Dawson, whose insomnia is annoying audible through the thin walls of his and Andi's duplex.

To call Hill a grump is putting it mildly, but the former firefighter has a good reason for his standoffishness. He's grieving the loss of his career and part of his leg following a disastrous rescue mission. When Andi and Hill finally come face-to-face, the two prickly neighbors feel something unexpected, and their instant attraction kicks off a casual arrangement.

Both Andi and Hill have issues to work through, and **What If You & Me** emphasizes that when it comes to healing from trauma, you don't have to go it alone. This love story heaps on the yearning; Andi and Hill smolder through their agonizingly slow-burning romance. Loren's unparalleled ability to plumb the depths of her characters is on full display in this multilayered and emotional romance.

—Amanda Diehl

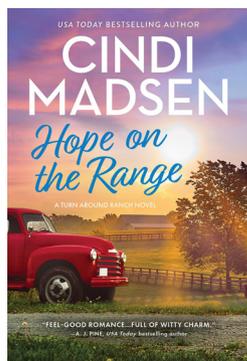




## ★ West End Earl

A Regency-era aristocrat finds love right under his nose in **West End Earl** (Forever, \$8.99, 9781538735701) by Bethany Bennett. Calvin, Earl of Carlyle, enjoys his life and his friends, one of whom is Adam Hardwick, a young man whom he took under his wing. After a childhood of scandals, handsome and clever Cal works to keep his days drama-free. Then he discovers that “Adam” is actually Ophelia, who created the disguise to save herself from a dangerous uncle. This revelation turns Cal’s world on its axis, and as he takes a second and then third look at his friend, his feelings become the opposite

of platonic. Between Cal’s wayward younger sister and his father’s attempts to marry him off, all looks lost for true love. Ophelia is just as clever as Cal (as a particularly delightful stratagem near the end of the book more than proves), but can they overcome all the obstacles standing in the way of happily ever after? Damsels donning trousers to hide their identities is a beloved romance novel trope—*These Old Shades* by Georgette Heyer springs to mind—and it provides delicious, sexy fun in **West End Earl**.



## Hope on the Range

**Hope on the Range** (Sourcebooks Casablanca, \$8.99, 9781492689201) by Cindi Madsen takes readers west to find love as next-ranch neighbors Tanya Greer and Brady Dawson finally discover that just being buddies isn’t enough. But they’re not in clover quite yet, as Tanya dreams of a career that might take her away from home . . . and away from Brady. Beyond the central love story, there’s also romance between the teens at Brady’s horse therapy ranch, rodeo events to win and heart-tugging horses in need of rescue. Madsen writes with an assured,

warm voice that matches this life-affirming love story. Optimism abounds in this sunny romance that will surely leave Western romance fans smiling.



## A Duke in Time

A veteran duke is determined to help his fellow soldiers in **A Duke in Time** (St. Martin’s, \$8.99, 9781250761590) by Janna MacGregor. But first, Christian, Duke of Randford, must deal with the mess his deceased half-brother, Meri, left behind: three wives, each unaware that her husband had married other women. Their scandalous predicament can’t be ignored, and neither can Christian’s attraction to Katherine “Kat” Vareck, Meri’s first wife. While Christian would prefer to focus on helping his regiment, he’s distracted by Kat, a self-made

businesswoman who sells fine linens to the aristocracy. But after he realizes Kat’s expertise might help his charity efforts, they spend more time together and begin to fall in love. Kat, Christian and Meri’s other two “widows” have their reputations and livelihoods to worry about, as well as past sorrows to come to terms with. This excellent Regency romance, the first in the Widow Rules series, stands out thanks to its detailed love scenes and swoon-inducing dialogue.

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

# Sizzling

## SUMMER READS



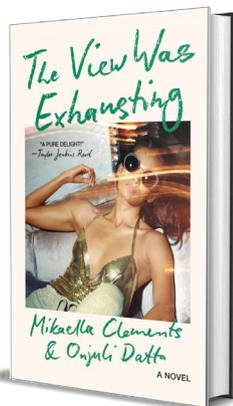
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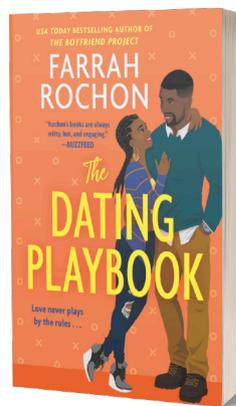
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## ALL SUMMER LONG

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# A 'celebrity' librarian hiding in plain sight

Two beloved novelists shed light on another notable partnership—between J.P. Morgan and his librarian, a captivating woman with a big secret.

"What has this got to do with me?" wondered Victoria Christopher Murray. The award-winning author of more than 20 novels had received a request from historical novelist Marie Benedict to collaborate on a novel. Murray quickly glanced at the first page of the pitch, which described financier J.P. Morgan's opulent New York City library. She chuckled, thinking, "The only thing I have in common [with him] is a Chase account"—referring to the modern-day banking company with historical ties to Morgan.

Weeks later, when Murray's literary agent pestered her to take a closer look at Benedict's proposal, Murray's attitude changed. Morgan's librarian, a woman named Belle da Costa Greene, was one of the most important librarians in American history. She was also a Black woman who passed as white. Greene's father was the first Black graduate of Harvard College as well as a professor, diplomat and prominent racial justice activist. Once Murray digested this new information, she quickly got in touch with Benedict.

Their resulting collaboration, **The Personal Librarian** (Berkley, \$27, 9780593101537), imagines the sacrifices and struggles that Greene surely endured to protect her secret.

Benedict and Murray's team—**"I feel like she chose us."** work also produced a deep, enduring friendship, and the two writers now call themselves sisters. As we chat via Zoom—with Murray in Washington, D.C., and Benedict in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—their admiration for each other is evident, as is their esteem for Greene.

"I feel her presence a lot," Murray says. "I can't believe how much I still think about her. I feel like she chose us and we did a good job, and now she's just sitting there with her arms folded, tapping her foot, waiting for the book to come out." Benedict agrees, adding that of all the women she's written about—Agatha Christie, Hedy Lamarr, Clementine Churchill and others—Greene is the one she'd most like to meet.

Greene ran the Morgan Library for 43 years, first helping Morgan to amass an important collection of rare books and manuscripts and, after his death in 1913, transforming his private collection into a public resource. "As time went on," Benedict says, "Belle and J.P. became closer and closer, just

like Victoria and me. Their relationship really defied description."

Like Morgan, Greene was extremely charismatic. "It's hard for us to convey how much of a celebrity she really was," Benedict says. Greene ran in multiple social circles and had numerous affairs. She was known for her flamboyant fashion, famously saying, "Just because I am a librarian doesn't mean I have to dress like one."

Once on board with the novel, Murray brought a whole new perspective to Greene's story. During one of their earliest meetings, the two writers made a quick stop at the Morgan Library. Benedict knew the space well; it had been a place of refuge when she worked as a corporate lawyer for more than 10 years before turning to fiction. She describes its stunning interior as being like a jewel box. However, this was Murray's first visit. As she looked around Morgan's study, she pointed to an oil painting and said, "What is that Black man doing up there?"

Benedict had never noticed the portrait of a Moorish ambassador to the Venetian court, painted around 1600. But the ambassador bore a resemblance to Greene's father, and the authors began to speculate that Greene bought the portrait as an homage to him. "That is something that I would have never seen without Victoria," Benedict says. "And in many ways, as time went on, that really became a symbol of Belle. Here she was, this African American woman in the room that nobody saw."

"And I think that's why she put the painting there," Murray says. "One of the themes that Marie and I put in the book was that Belle was hiding in plain sight."

Both writers agree that Morgan likely had suspicions about Greene's race that he chose to ignore. "He didn't want to be known in society as the man who had been duped by a Black woman," Murray says. She describes showing



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a photograph of Greene to her friends, who responded with surprise. "How did she pass?" they asked. "How in the world did that happen?"

Such questions, inherent to the creation of the novel, sparked a childhood memory for Murray of a time when her younger sister looked at a photograph on their mantle

and asked, "Who is that white woman?" It was their grandmother, who on at least one occasion had passed as white during a train trip from North Carolina to New York. "Writing this book, I really began to understand what that must've been like," Murray says.

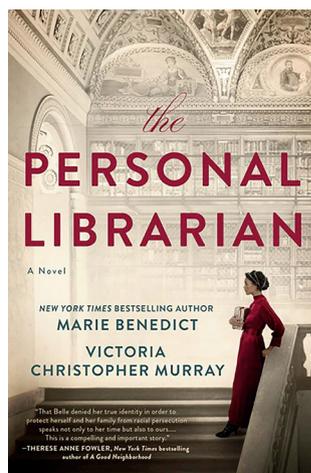
Greene burned her personal papers before she died, no doubt to protect her secret, so much must be imagined about her life. But as daunting a task as re-creating her story may have been, the two authors render it with gusto, from Greene's defiant wit to the drama and danger that surrounded her.

The success of Benedict and Murray's partnership is in part due to a difficult reality: surviving a pandemic while coping with the horror of George Floyd's and Breonna Taylor's murders in 2020. They spent hours on Zoom each day, often discussing race issues vital to both their novel and current events. The experience sent them on a "fast track to sisterhood," they agree.

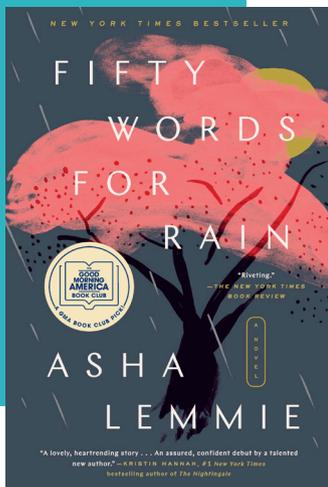
"I think it was a gift for me to work with an author who was not African American," Murray says, "because I got to see all kinds of perspectives. I had wider eyes. We hope that African American book clubs and white book clubs will get together and talk about our book together the same way [Marie] and I did."

Benedict chimes in, "During her lifetime, Belle knew that her story couldn't be told because it might eviscerate the impact of her legacy. But now we're at a point where her legacy can be known and celebrated. It's time."

—Alice Cary



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



## Roads less traveled

In Asha Lemmie's debut novel, **Fifty Words for Rain** (Dutton, \$17, 9781524746384), young Nori Kamiza—daughter of a well-born Japanese woman and her lover, a Black American soldier—is raised by her abusive grandmother in post-World War II Japan. Kept in the attic because her grandparents are ashamed of her, Nori becomes accustomed to a lonely existence. But her world widens when she bonds with her half-brother, Akira, and senses the possibilities for a new life. Lemmie constructs a moving, dramatic narrative that examines family, loyalty and prejudice through both Nori's

coming-of-age and her experiences as a biracial woman.

**Call Your Daughter Home** (Park Row, \$17.99, 9780778309796) by Deb Spera is an unforgettable tale of female friendship set in the small town of Branchville, South Carolina, during the 1920s. Single mother Gertrude is desperate to provide for her children. She's aided by Annie, a member of a powerful local family, who gives her a job, and by Annie's Black housekeeper, Retta, who offers to look after Gertrude's

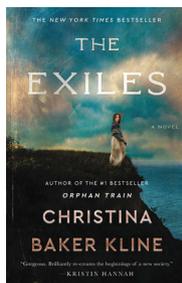
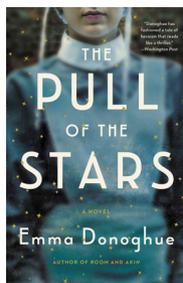
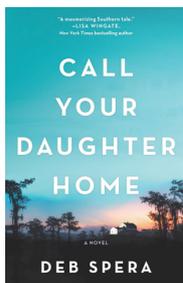
**No Tudor England here—these four historical novels are set in less familiar but no less fascinating eras and places.**

children. The novel's Southern backdrop and indomitable female protagonists will draw readers in, and Spera's exploration of race, class and history will provide plenty to talk about.

Set in 1918 Dublin, Emma Donoghue's **The Pull of the Stars** (Back Bay, \$16.99, 9780316499033) tells the story of Julia Power, a nurse struggling to help pregnant female patients who have become infected and subsequently quarantined during the influenza epidemic that devastated the city. Julia's narrow life of work and survival is forever changed by the arrivals of volunteer Bridie McSweeney and Dr. Kathleen Lynn, a possible Irish nationalist who may be wanted by the

authorities. Donoghue's compelling, compassionate novel unfolds over three days as the women face incredible challenges together. With its themes of female bonding, Irish politics and the nature of identity, this novel makes for a rewarding book club selection.

Christina Baker Kline's **The Exiles** (Custom House, \$16.99, 9780062356338) is a powerful tale of female friendship set in 19th-century Australia. After being falsely accused of theft, London governess Evangeline Stokes—pregnant and alone—is sent by ship to the Australian penal colony of Van Diemen's Land. Facing a future of uncertainty and hardship, Evangeline connects with Hazel Ferguson, a teenage midwife, and Mathinna, a young Aboriginal woman adopted by the governor of Van Diemen's Land. From the intertwined stories of the three women, Kline spins an epic saga with excellent discussion topics such as female agency and the rights of Indigenous communities.



# BOOK CLUB READS FOR SUMMER



## ISLAND QUEEN by Vanessa Riley

"Richly detailed, vividly depicted, and sweeping in scope, it is historical fiction at its absolute finest. **A stunning must-read!**"

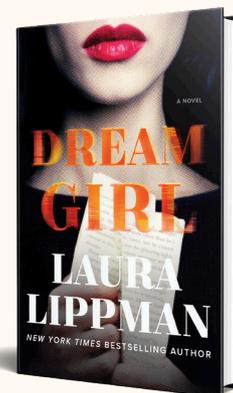
—CHANEL CLEETON,  
New York Times bestselling author

## DREAM GIRL

by Laura Lippman

"My dream novel. I devoured this in three days. Plus: enthralling."

—MEGAN ABBOTT,  
Edgar Award-winning author



## SUMMER ON THE BLUFFS by Sunny Hostin

"This beautiful novel will have you turning the pages long into a summer night."

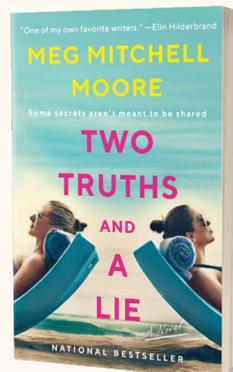
—ADRIANA TRIGIANI,  
New York Times bestselling author



## TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE by Meg Mitchell Moore

"A fast-paced, witty beach read... Perfect for fans of *Big Little Lies* and *Little Fires Everywhere*."

—BOOKLIST



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William Morrow

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

# Putting the 'cult' in culture

## Why we're more susceptible to cultish groups than we think

A cultish group is one that promises to improve your life if you follow its regimen, buy its products or obey its leader. In *Cultish* (Harper Wave, \$27.99, 9780062993151), Amanda Montell peels back the linguistic layers of these groups and demonstrates that even mainstream brands and organizations use “cultish language” to draw people in.

### Your father spent part of his childhood in a cult. How did his story prompt your interest in cultish language?

I grew up on my dad's absolutely riveting tales of the four years he spent in a notorious socialist “utopia” in the Bay Area called Synanon, which started out as an alternative drug rehabilitation facility and later came to accommodate “lifestylers” who just wanted in on this unique communal way of living.

To me, the most fascinating part of my dad's stories was the special language they used in Synanon—buzzwords, slogans and terms that would sound utterly inscrutable to an outsider (like *lifestylers*, for example). The language was clearly meant to separate members from the outside world in a powerful psychological way. It prompted me to wonder: How exactly does cult language work to lure people into fanatical fringe groups? How does it make them stay?

### Why do you think cults are a pop culture obsession at the moment? (*The Girls* by Emma Cline, *Godshot* by Chelsea Bieker, “The Path,” the “Escaping NXIVM” podcast, etc.)

In American culture now, much like in the 1960s and '70s (another peak cult era), we're experiencing a great deal of social tumult and mistrust of mainstream institutions such as government, religion and health care. So we're looking to alternative sources to fill these voids.

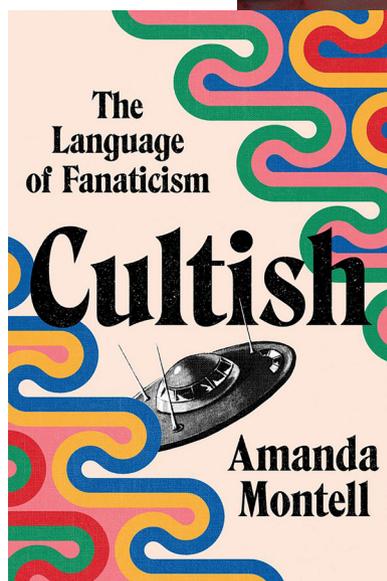
Fringe groups are spooky and fascinating, but they're also very much afoot in our culture right now, so we find ourselves falling down these culty rabbit holes, unable to look away, almost like a car accident. We're rubbernecking, scanning these stories to tell whether or not these groups are a threat to us. My argument in the book is that to some degree, we're all under cultish influence. The proof is in how we speak every day.

### Why are phrases like *brainwashing* or *mind control* insufficient to describe how people get involved in cults?

This was one of my first and favorite discoveries of the book. Popular media tends to explain how people end up in cults by talking about brainwashing, but I learned from cult scholars like Eileen Barker and Rebecca Moore that brainwashing is nothing but a metaphor (no one cuts open the brain and scrubs it clean) and a pseudoscientific concept (you can't prove brainwashing *doesn't* exist). In fact, using the word *brainwash* often does nothing but morally divide us: “You're brainwashed!” “No, *you're* brainwashed.” Once shots like these are fired, they choke the conversation, making it impossible to figure out what *actually* motivates people to become involved in cultish ideology, which is a much more interesting question and the one my book aims to answer.

### It's a stereotype that cultish groups prey on the weak. But research shows that cults usually exploit people who are idealistic, optimistic and hardworking. How can someone's good intentions become the inroad to cultish groups?

Cult recruiters don't want people who are liable to break down quickly or get antsy and quit right away. Being an active member of a cult is hard work,



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

so they want the best and brightest—people who hopefully have money to spare, are service-minded enough to give it to the group, and have enough optimism and perseverance to remain loyal even after things inevitably go sour.

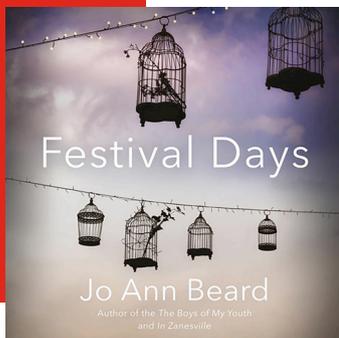
### What are some of the features of cultish language used by Q, the supposed leader of QAnon?

The language of QAnon has now spread far beyond the terms initially used by the group's faceless “leader,” Q. QAnon has since melded with New Age wellness communities and anti-vax/anti-mask circles, so the language has several dialects, if you will. It's basically a weird hybrid of conspiratorial speak (“deep state,” “liberal elite,” countless code words, acronyms and hashtags) and woo-woo talk of “vibrations” and “great awakenings.” And it's always changing, in order to accommodate new QAnon offshoots and to outrun social media algorithms, which become trained to recognize QAnon language and disable the accounts using it.

### Toward the conclusion of *Cultish*, you say that writing this book led you to have a “stronger sense of compassion” for people who get involved in cultish groups. Why is that?

Ironically, when talking about cults and cult followers, a lot of us do the same thing that people in cults are trained to do, which is to morally and intellectually separate ourselves from *those people*. But I've found that oftentimes the people who are the most judgmental of cult followers (which is a subjective term anyway) are people who are involved with pretty culty groups themselves—whether it's a startup that puts the “cult” in company culture or some all-consuming online community. None of us is above cultish influence, not even me. And in general, I find that understanding the psychological motivations underlying people's seemingly bizarre behaviors makes you feel calmer and more compassionate. Knowledge is power, but knowledge is also empathy.

—Jessica Wakeman



## ★ Festival Days

Essayist Jo Ann Beard explores life, death and the craft of writing in **Festival Days** (Hachette Audio, 7.5 hours). Actor Suehyla El-Attar, known for her roles in *Ant-Man and the Wasp* and *Green Book*, reads in a calm, steady voice that emphasizes the collection's sweeping gravitas, but she also gives personality to each unique piece. In "Werner," a story about a man escaping an apartment fire, she creates a

flowing contrast between firm descriptions of pain and the wistfulness of memory. And in "Close," a discussion of craft, she is animated and personal, making the listener feel like they are learning from the author herself.

—Tami Orendain

## The Rose Code

In **The Rose Code** (HarperAudio, 16 hours), historical novelist Kate Quinn vividly conjures Bletchley Park, the mansion where Oxford dons and crossword puzzlers cracked the German Enigma code, through the tale of three friends from very different backgrounds. All the characters receive narrator Saskia Maarleveld's full devotion, as she re-creates the complexity and chaos of war-torn Britain. This is a terrific story, brilliantly performed.

—Deborah Mason

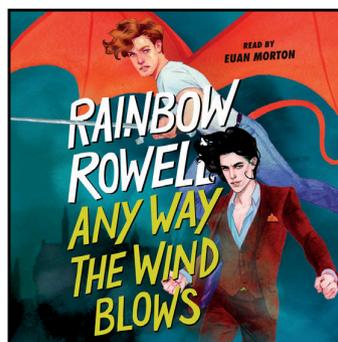
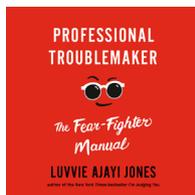
## Professional Troublemaker

**Professional Troublemaker** (Penguin Audio, 8 hours) is a candid, can-do guide to making the world a better place by cultivating a better you. Narrated by bestselling author Luvvie Ajayi Jones, the book details steps toward understanding the core of yourself and making decisions based on those crucial personal values. Drawing inspiration from her Nigerian heritage and showing what it looks like to live authentically in a judgmental world, Jones will hype up even the most fearful listener with her commanding, cheerful voice.

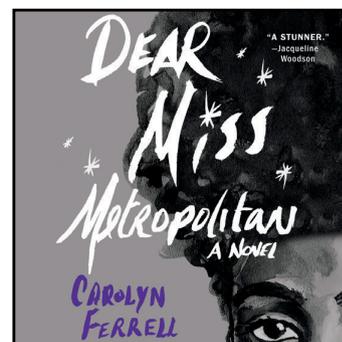
—Mari Carlson



READ BY EUAN MORTON



READ BY EUAN MORTON

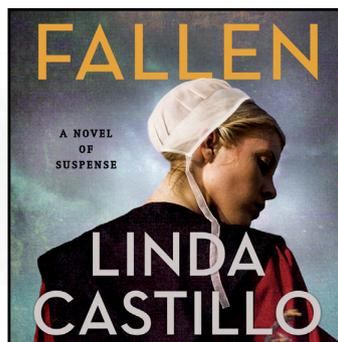
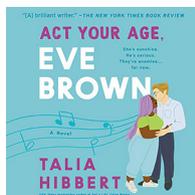


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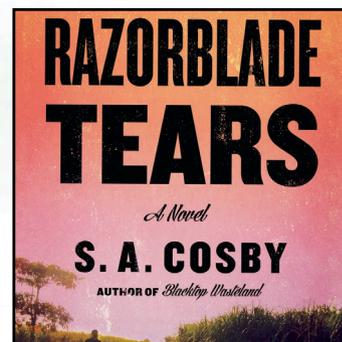
## Act Your Age, Eve Brown

In the delightful third installment of Talia Hibbert's Brown Sisters trilogy, **Act Your Age, Eve Brown** (HarperAudio, 11 hours), Eve Brown accidentally runs over bed-and-breakfast owner Jacob with her car, and she winds up working for him while he heals. Prolific voice-over actor Ione Butler delivers both comedy and romance, going straight for the heart but never losing the humor.

—Anna Zeitlin



READ BY KATHLEEN McINERNEY

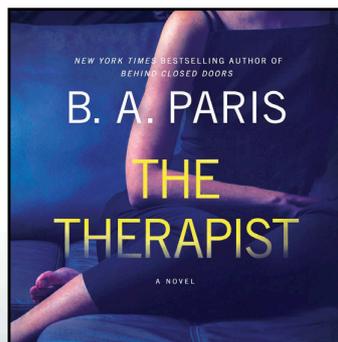


READ BY ADAM LAZARRE-WHITE

## Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing

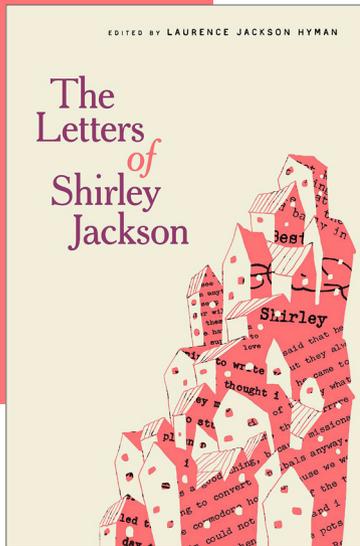
In her collection of intensely personal essays, **Leaving Isn't the Hardest Thing** (Random House Audio, 9 hours), Lauren Hough explores her identities—lesbian, Air Force airman, blue-collar worker and cult survivor—and uses them to critique systemic issues in contemporary American culture. The audiobook's narration is shared by Hough and actor-producer Cate Blanchett, and together they create a heartbreaking and intimate experience for listeners, inviting them to reflect on the possibility and value of genuine human connection.

—Tami Orendain



READ BY OLIVIA DOWD & THOMAS JUDD

FROM  
**MACMILLAN**  
AUDIO



## The Letters of Shirley Jackson

On the strength of the short story “The Lottery” alone, Shirley Jackson endures as one of our most important American writers. More devoted fans also cherish her novels, such as *The Haunting at Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, or the inspired domestic comedy of *Life Among the Savages*. Yet because she wrote in such wildly different modes—gothic, comic, stark realism—it can be hard to pin Jackson down, and the woman behind the work has remained something of an enigma. **The Letters of Shirley**

**Jackson** (Random House, \$35, 9780593134641), edited by her son, Laurence Jackson Hyman, makes some headway into our understanding of what made this one-of-a-kind writer tick.

Hyman reports that his mother loved writing letters as much as she loved writing fiction and essays and that she fully expected her correspondence to be published one day. (She implored her parents to save everything she wrote

**A capacious collection of never-before-published letters from one of America’s most enigmatic writers**

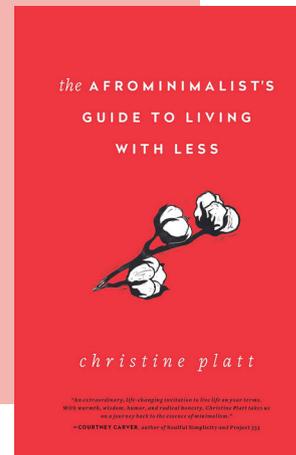
to them.) Despite this forward glance toward posterity, the letters are never ponderous or myth-building. Indeed, Hyman attests that they perfectly convey his mother’s natural voice, which seems a congenial mix of insouciance, sardonic wit and exasperation. Jackson wrote these letters on her trusty manual typewriter in a kind of conversational stream of consciousness, mostly in lowercase (which requires some adjustment by the reader).

Of the 500 or so extant letters Hyman could locate, he chose about 300 for this collection, written to some 20 recipients. He has made a bit of a miscalculation, perhaps, by including so many of the early love letters Shirley wrote to her future husband (Hyman’s father, *New Yorker* writer and critic Stanley Edgar Hyman); the kooky, unconventional tone of their courtship could have been equally well captured in fewer pages. Once the Hymans are married and settled into their own brand of domestic and professional chaos, however, the letters become more engaging.

While the letters are largely quotidian in their concerns (Jackson learns to drive or frets about the household bills or enjoys a martini lunch with her editor), her take on life is generally entertaining and occasionally hilarious. She adroitly expresses the frustrations of trying to write amid the exigencies of motherhood and midcentury housewifery, although her prolific talents seem to win out in the end. On another, obviously unintentional level, the letters beautifully capture a bygone era when one could make a solid living writing short stories—solid enough to raise four children in a rambling house with a domestic attendant or two in ever-changing rotation.

Jackson, who died at 48, never wrote an autobiography, so her letters must stand in for a more polished view. While one feels suspicious of this collection’s elusiveness around revealing certain difficult truths about her personal life, the rough spontaneity of the letters nonetheless make this view into Jackson’s simultaneously conventional and unconventional life extremely intriguing.

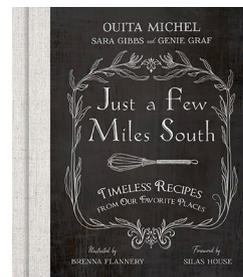
Robert Weibezahl is a publishing industry veteran, playwright and novelist. Each month, he takes an in-depth look at a recent book of literary significance.



## ★ The Afrominimalist’s Guide to Living With Less

Christine Platt never imagined herself as a minimalist. A deal-hunter? A clothes-horse? Yes and yes. But when circumstances demanded she pare down, Platt found that a conscious, intentional approach to consumption had its pleasures—and didn’t have to mean white paint everywhere and surfaces whisked free of treasured belongings. In **The Afrominimalist’s Guide to Living With Less** (Tiller, \$21.99, 9781982168049), Platt, who has amassed

more than 50,000 followers on Instagram, shares her story and espouses living with less, starting with doing the tough work of examining one’s deeply ingrained feelings about spending, saving, self-worth and joy. Another aspect that makes this a standout in the world of minimalism guides: Platt speaks directly to and for her fellow Black readers in sections throughout the book labeled “For the Culture.” As she notes, the “simple life” has been projected as white for too long—in more than one way.



## Just a Few Miles South

Who doesn’t love a really good sandwich? At Wallace Station, the Windy Corner Market and others in the Ouita Michel family of Kentucky restaurants, guests come back again and again for the life-changing sammies, and now they can create them at home. **Just a Few Miles South** (Fireside Industries, \$24.95, 9781950564095) features next-level fixings such as pimiento blue cheese, bourbon white cheddar

cheese spread, Benedictine (a Kentucky staple) and bourbon mayo, sure to jazz up even the most desultory work-from-home lunch. Also in these pages are recipes for biscuits and gravy, po’boys, burgers, quiche, quick breads and other sweets, as well as for the sandwich bread itself. Brenna Flannery’s line drawings make this a strikingly beautiful book in black and white, but it’s also as deliciously down-to-earth as can be.



## A Room of Her Own

**A Room of Her Own** (Thames & Hudson, \$45, 9781760761745) is something of a fever dream dance through luxurious trappings, a lush portrait of the “personal and professional domains” of 20 extraordinary women, all of them powerhouse artists who “share a drive to infuse all aspects of their lives with their creativity.” With author and photographer Robyn Lea as your guide, step into their colorful palaces, ateliers, closets and studios. Gasp quietly at wall murals, enormous picture win-

dows, rococo furnishings, gardens and courtyards. Imagine yourself into these rarefied settings in Milan, London, New York, Florence and Auvergne. This is a look at great privilege, to be sure, as much as it is a showcase of artists’ habitats, though many of these women have lived through great trauma, some facets of which are revealed in short narratives. The book’s feast of visuals—pattern, color, texture, light, symmetry, juxtaposition—suggests, in the end, the regenerative energy of the creative spirit.

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

# Embracing a practice that doesn't make perfect

Jessamyn Stanley's guide to the ancient practice of yoga turned out to be deeper and more demanding than she ever imagined.

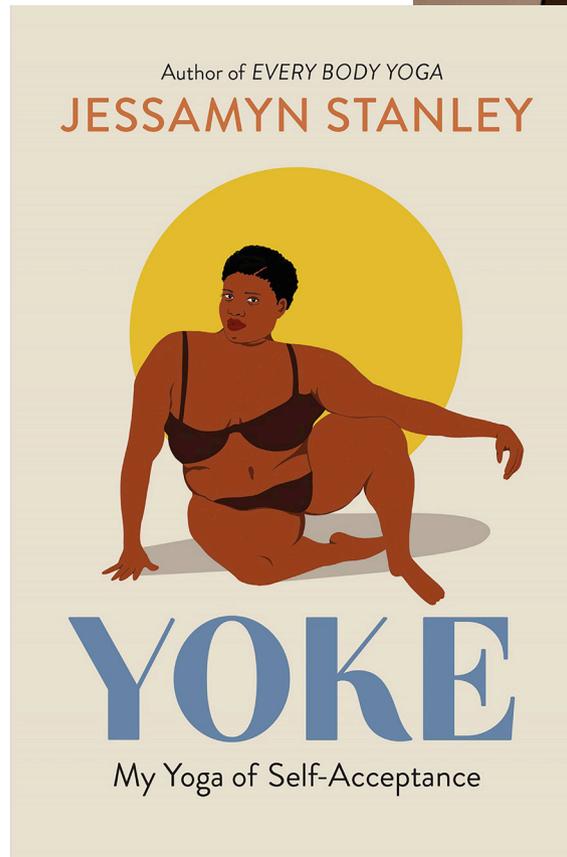
When I pitched *Yoke: My Yoga of Self-Acceptance* to my publisher, I thought I knew what it would contain. I knew I would have to talk about internalized racism, sexual assault, capitalism and cultural appropriation. Mind you, this was in 2017, before George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were murdered for all the world to see and before white people were forced to stop pretending racism doesn't exist. But when I actually started tickling the keys, the book became about much more than what a marketing pitch could contain.

I definitely *thought* *Yoke* would be about offering tips and tricks for navigating an ancient practice in modern times. But in the process of writing it, I realized the most important way to teach yoga has nothing to do with other people. The way to teach yoga is by authentically living it. Even the most gifted and inspiring teachers will only lead you to the teacher inside yourself, and they can only do that by being fully themselves.

Writing *Yoke* led me down a lot of philosophical rabbit holes. I ended up spending a solid year of the manuscript-writing process solely on research. I dove headfirst into American yoga's history and theory, and I was forced to come to terms with the intersection between American history and American *yoga* history—how both have bloomed in the soil of white supremacy. I gained a deeper respect for the differences between American yoga and Classical yoga, and all the while, I was forced to interrogate myself.

For example, I was excited to write about cultural appropriation among yoga practitioners, and if I'm honest, I was excited to tell other people how to best live their lives. I've always been a know-it-all in that way. But once the dust settled, I realized I don't have anything to offer readers beyond being open and honest about the ways that I appropriate other cultures.

Similarly, I was excited to write about racism and the ways it crops up in the yoga world, mostly because I was excited to air my grievances against all the white yoga people who have annoyed me over the years. But it didn't take long to recognize that I have nothing to say to white people that I don't first need to say to myself. I found that I needed to accept the ways in which I embody racism—first against myself and then against others.



**Yoke**

Workman, \$15.95, 9781523505210

**Body, Mind & Spirit**

**“I didn't know writing the truth would feel like disemboweling myself. I didn't realize there'd be so much crying.”**

©CORNELL WATSON



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

Writing *Yoke* made me examine parts of myself I've never wanted to acknowledge and generally prefer to ignore. I didn't know what it would take to get real about this shit. I didn't realize there'd be so much crying. I didn't know writing the truth would feel like disemboweling myself. I thought the whole thing would be a little more dignified than bawling into my laptop for weeks on end. But accepting my shame was the price I paid in pursuit of my truth.

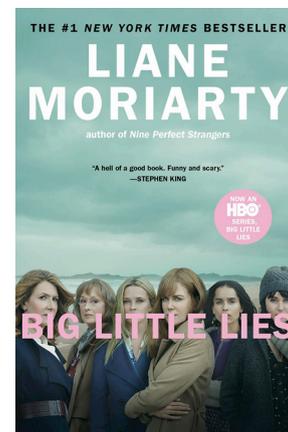
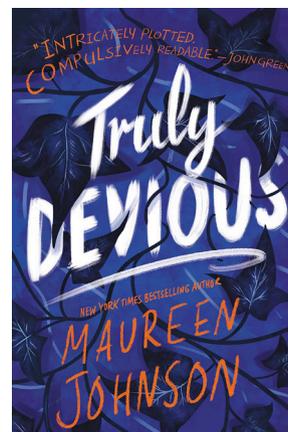
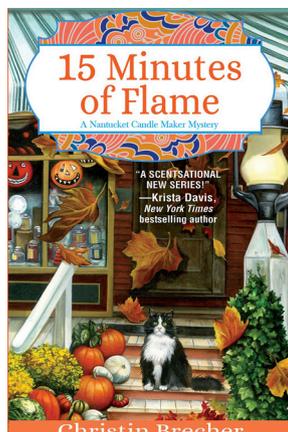
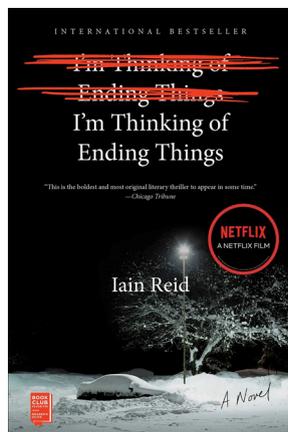
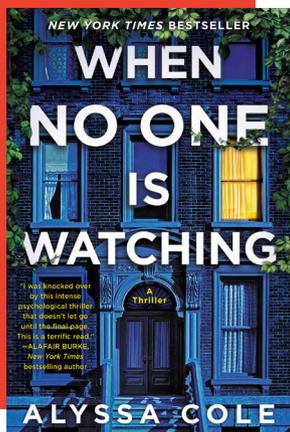
I will say, though: It's one thing to accept that you're a messy bitch. It's completely different to ask other people to read about it.

Some of *Yoke* cuts very close to the bone for me. Yoga may be about accepting the truth of yourself, but the truth I tell in *Yoke* is one I was always told *not* to tell. The truth that I've been running from. The truth that no one wants to see in the light. And reading the truth without rose-tinted glasses can be painful.

I think *Yoke* will be inspiring even to people who have never practiced yoga, people who are not Black, fat or queer and people who've never been sexually assaulted. No matter your background, we all embody contradictions and feel pain. We all find identity at the heart of intersections. But our intersections are also founts of compassion—first for ourselves, then for others. This is true now more than ever, when we're being asked as a society to reckon with the sins of our collective past in order to move forward. *Yoke* is a microexample of a process that's needed on a *very* macro level.

I wrote this book because I had to tell the truth, even if I came out on the other end looking like an asshole. That's who I am. I am problematic. I say the wrong thing. I am offensive. But I think that by letting my stank-ass baggage hang out, I can make space for a lot of other people to accept themselves as well.

—Jessamyn Stanley



## GET A CLUE

BookPage readers look forward to Private Eye July all year long, and this year we're getting swept away in the spirit of the (somewhat grisly) celebration, too. Here are the mysteries, thrillers and good old-fashioned whodunits on our reading lists this July.

### When No One Is Watching

It feels vital this summer that I check out Alyssa Cole's first thriller, which emerged—kicked in the door, more like—as the literary answer to the seminal Black horror film *Get Out*, by way of *Rear Window*. Cole uses the premise upon which countless domestic thrillers are built: A woman who questions her own sanity starts to wonder if something is very, very wrong in her neighborhood. Mortgage and rental rates are skyrocketing, and then strange stuff—bad stuff—starts happening to longtime Black residents who don't want to sell their homes to predatory realtors. Because Cole has a background in writing historical romance, she also illuminates how the gentrification of predominantly Black neighborhoods is preceded by a long racist history of displacement, redlining and social control. Horror and reality are definitely shacking up in this tale, and I'm ready for the whole ride.

—Cat, Deputy Editor

### I'm Thinking of Ending Things

One of my favorite films of 2020 was Charlie Kaufman's *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, a weird, wild movie that gets stranger and bolder with each passing minute and that provided one of the absolute best "What on earth did I just watch?" viewing experiences I've had in a long while. I had always planned to read the book, but I bumped up Iain Reid's wintry, experimental 2016 thriller to the top spot on my reading list once I learned its ending reportedly goes in a very different direction than Kaufman's film. I usually prefer my Private Eye July picks to be on the fluffier end of the spectrum—I do my best summer reading poolside, cold drink in hand—but I think I'll have to make an exception to see where Reid takes me. There's a perverse pleasure to be found in reading books set in frigid environments while enjoying the summer heat, but hopefully I'll get goosebumps all the same.

—Savanna, Associate Editor

### 15 Minutes of Flame

I wanted to read this book before I even knew what it was about. I took one look at the cover, said aloud, "I would like to live inside this picture of a New England candle store steeped in autumnal frivolity, with a little cat," and added it to my TBR. Other books have since buried it on my bedside table, but I'm digging it out for Private Eye July. **15 Minutes of Flame** is the third book in Christin Brecher's Nantucket Candle Maker Mystery series, about Stella Wright's idyllic life as a candle store owner and, of course, the murders she solves along the way. In true cozy mystery fashion, Brecher's series keeps the pages turning without raising the stakes high enough that your pulse quickens. This is the exact right speed for my anxiety, which otherwise keeps me from engaging with murder-based stories at all. And since **15 Minutes of Flame** takes place in October, I'm hoping the fictional nip in the air will help get me through the rest of summer.

—Christy, Associate Editor

### Truly Devious

I wasn't reading many mysteries in 2018 when bestselling young adult author Maureen Johnson published **Truly Devious**, her first book about teen detective Stevie Bell. So when I picked up *The Box in the Woods*, Johnson's fourth book featuring Stevie, to consider it for this issue of BookPage (check the YA mystery feature for more), it wasn't as a committed fan of the brilliant sleuth but as a novice. Needless to say, I'm a fan now. Johnson's sparkling prose and Stevie's droll humor had me cackling and eager to read aloud especially delightful passages to my very patient partner. This July, I can't wait to bury myself in the story of Stevie's first great triumph against a decades-old cold case at the exclusive Ellingham Academy. Best of all, I know the story of the investigation unfolds across three whole books, and for a reader who's always a little sad that great books have to end, there's nothing better.

—Stephanie, Associate Editor

### Big Little Lies

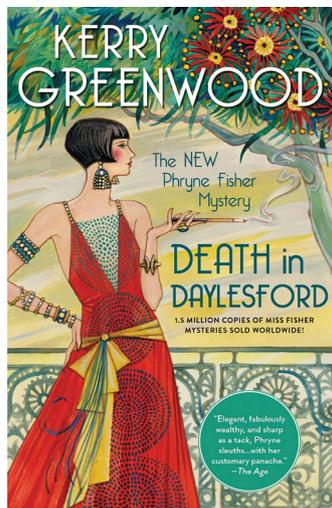
Typically, if you're a hardcore bibliophile, you're supposed to read the book before you watch the adaptation. In this case, I came to the TV series first—and with career-defining performances from Reese Witherspoon, Laura Dern and Nicole Kidman, how could I resist? From what I've heard, the show and the book are actually very different. Several characters in the book, including Madeline and Renata, had roles that were too small for such powerful actors, so the adaptation expanded their involvement—and their flaws—to make them more dynamic on the screen. Even if this is true, the book had to run in order for the show to fly. I'm interested in seeing whether the book provides a clearer motive for the main murder and if the story's concern with domestic abuse is more pronounced. I may even try reading the book and watching the show at the same time to spot the differences. Only then will I decide which I think is better.

—Eric, Editorial Intern

Each month, BookPage staff share special reading lists—our personal favorites, old and new.

# UNFLAPPABLE AMATEUR SLEUTHS

Two mysteries explore the glamour and ugliness of the 1920s.



Ah, the eternal allure of the citizen sleuth, with their uncanny ability to suss out lies and turn mystery into clarity—all without a badge or uniform. In these two 1920s-set mysteries, brave, intelligent women solve murder cases despite societal strictures, the people (mostly men) rooting for them to fail and the slippery piles of red herrings that do not look good with a cloche hat or beaded gown.

Australian author Kerry Greenwood's witty and creative **Death in Daylesford** (Poisoned Pen, \$26.99, 9781728234564) stars the particularly fabulous Phryne Fisher, with her exquisite and exquisitely expensive clothes, malachite bathtub and Hispano-Suiza luxury car. She has a hearty sexual appetite and a penchant for wearing trousers, and she delights in ignoring the scandalized gasps she leaves in her wake.

Miss Fisher's 21st adventure has been eagerly awaited by fans, who most likely passed the time since 2014's *Murder and Mendelssohn* by rewatching episodes of the TV adaptation of the series, "Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries," and its companion film, *Miss Fisher and the Crypt of Tears*.

This time around, the crimes find Phryne. She has left her opulent Melbourne home for a trip to the countryside with her

faithful assistant, Dot. In Daylesford, Phryne meets Captain Spencer and tours his spa, which serves as a retreat for shellshocked World War I veterans. He's hoping for her financial support, and she's hoping to enjoy a relaxing week away from the city.

Alas, it's not long before a murder happens right before her and Dot's very eyes. And then they learn that three women have recently gone missing. Lovely, rural Daylesford is rife with secrets and liars, and Phryne and Dot resolve to figure out why evil is swirling around the local Temperance Hotel and two of its employees.

Back in Melbourne, Dot's police-sergeant fiancé, Hugh, is keeping an eye on Phryne's three teenage wards, who become embroiled in a murder mystery of their own when a pregnant classmate is found floating in the Yarra River. Hugh enlists the teens' help, and the trio strive to make Phryne proud as they search for clues and question schoolmates with savvy aplomb.

**Death in Daylesford's** parallel storylines offer up a bounty of increasingly inventive crimes bolstered by delectable descriptions of captivating scenery and decadent meals. Additional delights come in the forms of nicely developed queer relationships and a wicked range of snarky insults. (Hugh's boss "could lose a three-round bout with a revolving door," while another character is "as plastered as a Giotto fresco.") This is a vivid and never-boring visit to 1920s Australia, led by the beloved and unconventional Miss Fisher.

Debut author Nekesa Afia's **Dead Dead Girls** (Berkley, \$16, 9780593199107) introduces Louise Lovie Lloyd, who, like Phryne Fisher, is an intelligent and beautiful woman in her 20s with an eye for fashion and a facility for solving crimes. A Black woman living in 1926 Harlem, Louise is brand-new to the investigatory game, and not by choice. While leaving the Zodiac speakeasy, where she and her girlfriend, Rosa Maria, go to drink, dance and revel in their "easy, effortless connection that she never needed to think about," Louise gets

into an altercation with a racist white police officer that ends with her punching him in the face.

After Louise is arrested, Detective Theodore Gilbert tells her that if she helps him figure out who's killing Black teenage girls in Harlem, he'll clear her record. She's loath to do so, not only because it means ceding part of her life to this imperious stranger, but also because it would thrust her into the public eye—something she's been avoiding since becoming "Harlem's Hero" 10 years ago, when she escaped a kidnapper and freed three other girls trapped with her.

Self-preservation and a desire to protect Harlem's vulnerable girls, including her teenage twin sisters, compel Louise to accept Gilbert's ruthless bargain. She employs her smarts and empathy in equal measure, adeptly navigating Harlem's criminal underworld even as the killer strikes anew and the very air is permeated with dread and terror.

Afia's Jazz Age setting, with its surges of artistic creativity, infuses the story with a crackling feeling of possibility that stands in sharp contrast to the frustrating and often devastating realities of Louise's life. While she has love and friendship, she also must contend with virulent racism and sexism; she feels constrained by those who seek to control her and hindered by her nagging self-doubt.

While Louise is just 5 feet, 2 inches tall, she is anything but diminutive in personality, bravery or determination. Afia has created a character that readers will root for—to solve the crimes, to prevail over injustice, to love herself as fiercely as she works to protect those around her.

—Linda M. Castelletto

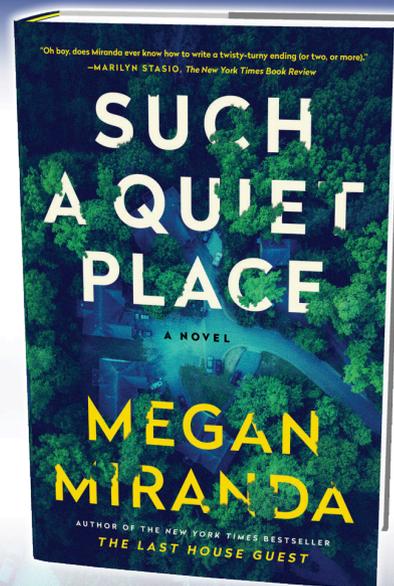
The *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Girl from Widow Hills*

**Sometimes the nicest places  
hide the darkest secrets...**

**"Oh boy, does she  
ever know how to  
write a twisty-turny  
ending (or two,  
or more)."**

—Marilyn Stasio,  
*The New York Times  
Book Review*

From the author of:



SIMON & SCHUSTER

# WRITING THE BLUES

S.A. Cosby's new thriller is as lived-in as it is complex, addressing social issues as it hums along to the energy of the rural South.

S.A. Cosby has taken the literary world by storm. His first release from a major publisher, 2020's *Blacktop Wasteland*, proved his ability to scale the professional heights without compromising his identity as a Black man raised in rural Virginia, even in an industry marred by severe inequities. Buttressed by its antiheroic protagonist, Beauregard, the car chase-strewn Southern noir made 22 best of the year lists, won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Mystery and was swiftly optioned for film, bringing Cosby a level of attention that he hadn't yet seen in his 20-plus-year career.

"The response to *Blacktop Wasteland* has been beyond my wildest dreams," Cosby says from his home in Virginia. "I've been amazed by the fact that people are willing to take a walk through the shoes of someone like Beauregard."

Now Cosby returns with **Razorblade Tears**, which centers on the unlikely partnership between two ex-convicts: Ike, who is African American, and Buddy Lee, who is white. They pair up to avenge the untimely murders of their two sons, who were married and living seemingly harmless lives. As they investigate this mysterious tragedy, which seems to be connected to both a white supremacist biker gang and a furtive young woman named Tangerine, Ike and Buddy Lee go on a thrilling journey of self-discovery and social interrogation across the book's 336 pages.

**Razorblade Tears** is a mission-driven novel that finds Cosby directly deconstructing the cultural plague of homophobia, both in larger society and in the Black community. Ike and Buddy Lee's quest for vengeance is partly fueled by the guilt they feel over their rejection of their queer-identifying sons while they were still alive. The genesis of the book was a conversation Cosby had with a Black gay friend who was struggling to decide whether to come out to his parents.

"When I was a kid, someone calling you the N-word and somebody calling you a derogatory term for someone in the LGBTQ community would cause you to fight on sight," Cosby says. "And in some instances, it was almost like people felt like it was worse to be called a derogatory name for an LGBTQ member than it was to be called the N-word. We really need to confront the issue of homophobia in our community, and as a crime writer, I decided to look at it through the prism of the genre that I love."

Ike and Buddy Lee's quest for vengeance forces them to question their complicated ideas about manhood, which have caused

harm to themselves and others throughout their lives. Masculinity is a subject that Cosby has never shied away from in either his personal and creative life. "I think there's such a convoluted sense of masculinity in the South and in rural towns and small towns," he says. "I think that we have to expand our definition of what we consider masculine. That's definitely an issue I'm exploring in **Razorblade Tears**."

The rural South is not just a backdrop but also a generative force in Cosby's writing. Through the lens of crime fiction, the author explores the contradictory nature of Southern living. Cosby grew up in Mathews County, a rural area a couple of hours away from Virginia's largest city, Virginia Beach, and home to some 8,000 residents. "I love my hometown, and every book I write is basically [about] my hometown in disguise. I love the people there. But that doesn't absolve myself or them from the truth," he says.

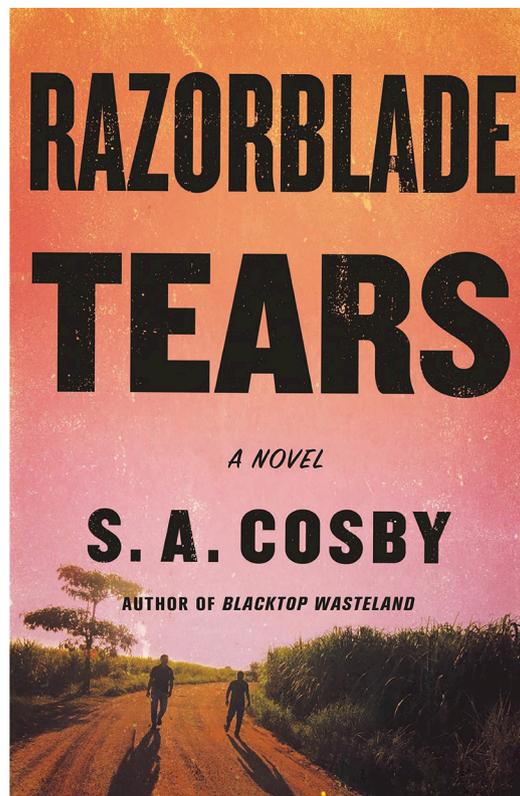
"Living in a rural environment, you have a sense of community and belonging that I don't know you get anywhere else," he continues. "At the same time, I live in a small town where there's a gigantic Confederate statue right in front of the courthouse. I'm fully aware and cognizant of these diametrically opposed ideas. I have Black love, a Black family and a sense of belonging while living in a town where some of the inhabitants still idealize racist traitors."

Cosby's writing career reflects the same type of resolve that his characters display as they navigate their arduous lives. "It was a long and circuitous route to getting published," he notes. Cosby fell in love with the craft when he first published a letter to Santa in the local newspaper at 7 years old. He studied English in college but was forced to drop out after his mother became ill. Since then, life has taken Cosby through a variety of spaces and occupations, but he always remained committed to writing. "I never gave up, I just kept plugging away at it," Cosby, who is now 47, says.

In 2011, he published a short story in a small quarterly called *Thug Lit*. "That was the beginning of my career as a crime writer," he says. "I wrote more short stories that got published. I ended up publishing a short novel called *My Darkest Prayer* through an independent publishing firm. And then from that, I took the leap and wrote *Blacktop Wasteland*!"

Like *Blacktop Wasteland*, which won acclaim for its potent mix of social commentary and white-knuckle thrills, **Razorblade Tears** also offers understated yet

"I love my hometown. . . . I love the people there. But that doesn't absolve myself or them from the truth."



**Razorblade Tears**  
Flatiron, \$26.99, 9781250252708

**Suspense**



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Visit [BookPage.com](http://BookPage.com) to read our starred review of *Razorblade Tears*.

powerful commentary about America's racial problem. Many people, from all points on the political spectrum, reduce racism to moments of interpersonal conflict and unequal access. But as Cosby demonstrates throughout the book, racism also festers in the nuances and subtexts. This can especially be seen through the adroit and well-voiced conversations between Ike and Buddy Lee, who don't like each other but are forced to work together.

"There are scenes where Buddy Lee says casually racist things to Ike, and literally in the midst of them trying to find vengeance for their children, Ike has to break it down to explain his experience," Cosby says. "There is a scene where Buddy Lee is looking at Ike's lawn care truck and is like, 'Hey man, you talk so much about racism, but you got this nice truck, and you got a business.' And Ike is like, 'Yeah, I got this nice truck, but I get pulled over like once a month. I'm doing all right, but when I go in the store, people don't respect me.' So, they're having conversations about race and what race means. They're growing in respect to their appreciation for

their sons and their sons' love, but they're also growing and changing in respect to each other."

In addition to homophobia, masculinity and race, **Razorblade Tears** examines poverty, classism and rural/urban divides. Cosby admits that grappling with such serious issues caused anxiety during the writing process. "It was terrifying, but as a writer you've got to challenge yourself," he says. "I don't think any of us are free or valued until everybody is free or valued. So I wanted to push myself and see if I could talk about those issues in a voice that was true to me."

Cosby handles such material with great care. He conducted serious research to ensure that he could address these issues without causing further harm. "I think research is 30% to 40% of your writing if you're trying to do it well," he explains. "If you're tackling something that is outside your purview, you've got to know what you're talking about. And I think not only doing my own research but also having authenticity readers or sensitivity readers is an important part of the process."

**Razorblade Tears'** commitment to addressing serious social issues is balanced by temperate pacing and a consistent rhythmic pulse that reflect the energy of rural Southern life. It's like the blues, with Cosby as a contemporary manifestation of legendary bluesmen like Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker, whom he cites as influences.

In further accordance with the bluesman aesthetic, Cosby's work also functions as creative ethnography, pulling from the everyday oral traditions of African Americans. "I grew up around a lot of backyard orators and barbecue philosophers. So I listened to my uncles and them trash talk over a spades or dominoes game. Or I would ride my bike down to the basketball court and listen to them trash talk," he says. "Listening to the way people talk is a huge influence on me."

Cosby's investment in realistic dialogue and detailed characterization is never clearer than in **Razorblade Tears'** incredibly rich and nuanced portraits of Black criminals, those who orbit them and others on the periphery of the law. Ike is a formidable character, a natural leader who commands respect in every space he enters. His temperament has been shaped, at least in part, by blood battles on the streets and in prison. Throughout the book, Ike manages his violent disposition as though it's a chronic illness: It's kept mostly at bay, but there's always risk of a flare-up.

Some may question why Cosby, a man of such immense talents, would spend his time writing about Black criminals, especially considering the way Black people have been both symbolically and physically criminalized in this country. He is fearless and candid in response. "I think the value in exploring this particular aspect

of our lives is to show that people can make mistakes, and still ultimately find redemption," he says.

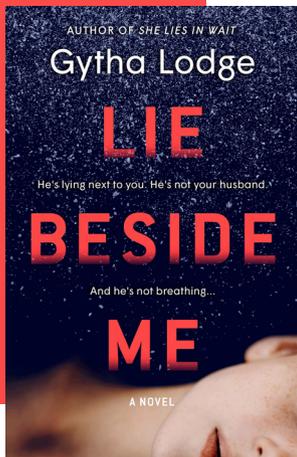
"I have family members who have rightly and wrongly been convicted

of crime, and they've come out and pulled themselves together and got second chances. If we try to hide that, then we're no better than someone who says they see no color. We have to explore the full width and breadth of the Black experience."

As a Black writer at a time of great social and political division, Cosby feels a deep sense of responsibility. "As an African American writer, your first charge is to tell the truth about your experience," says Cosby. He hopes that his own truth-telling will inspire others to do the same. "I would love for a little Black boy or girl to pick up my book and be like, 'Wow, man, this dude is doing this. If he is publishing, then I can do it, too.'"

—Langston Collin Wilkins

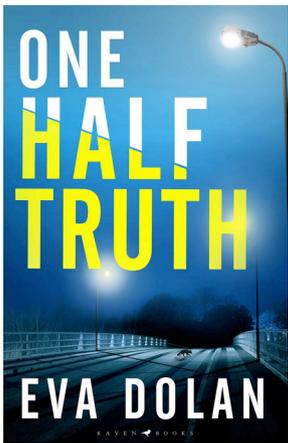
**"I grew up around a lot of backyard orators and barbecue philosophers."**



### Lie Beside Me

The two faces of Louise are as follows: Sober Louise is a classical harpist, insecure, mousy and willing to go along to get along. Drunk Louise is a whole other story. She's flirtatious, physical (both amorously and pugilistically) and something of a tabula rasa the following morning. And so it is when she wakes up next to the corpse in her bed, the sheets tacky with drying blood. Any idea who the dead man is or how he got there? Nope and nope. Although Gytha Lodge's **Lie Beside Me** (Random House, \$17, 9781984818102) is nominally a police procedural, much of the narrative is delivered in the first person by Louise, who is arguably not the person best positioned to offer an unbiased account. As Louise rehashes memories and attempts to fill in her blank spaces, the story also follows the investigators and forensics team who are putting their case together and beginning to single out Louise as the prime suspect. But the case will become a fair bit more complicated before its resolution, and another decent suspect or two will present themselves.

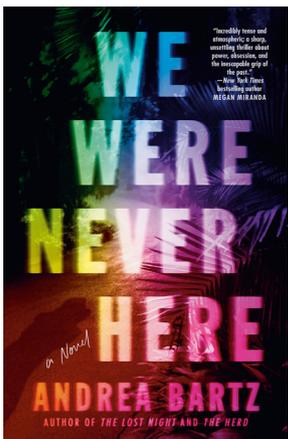
**Lie Beside Me** is clever, entertaining and peppered with the sorts of twists and turns that routinely propel suspense novels to the top of bestseller lists the world over.



### One Half Truth

In Eva Dolan's sixth entry in her cracking good Zigic and Ferreira series, **One Half Truth** (Raven, \$27, 978140886557), Detective Inspector Zigic and Detective Sergeant Ferreira are called upon to investigate the apparent execution of Jordan Radley, a young journalist who was shot at close range and left by the roadside. It bears the hallmarks of a gang-related slaying, but further investigation suggests that Jordan had been working on some sort of exposé, subject matter unknown due to the fact that someone, presumably the murderer, broke into Jordan's home and made off with his laptop, phone and anything else that might provide a clue. What Zigic and Ferreira do know is that Jordan was researching the now-defunct Greenaway Engineering company; his article was presumably going to take a critical look at the devastating effects of its closure on the community. And now, seemingly everywhere the police look, the ghost of Greenaway looms large. This series' central investigative team has morphed over the course of six books, with personalities and relationships changing and growing as one might expect in

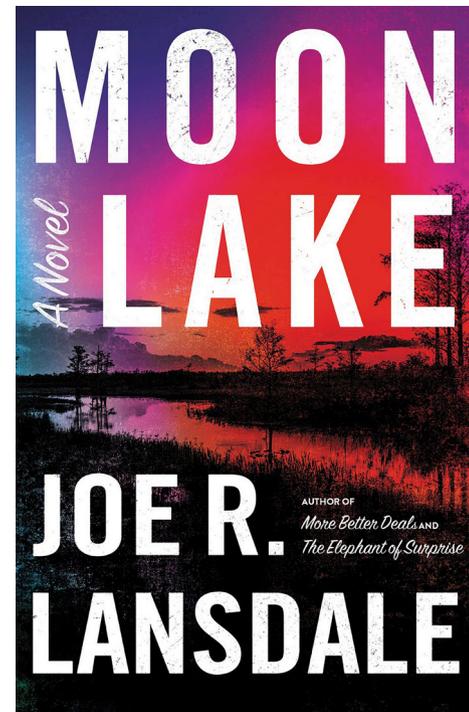
real life. That said, each book is a true standalone volume, with backstory provided where needed. Dolan's style is evocative of Mark Billingham or Peter Robinson. **One Half Truth** is a no-nonsense police procedural with purposeful plotting, compelling characters and the requisite twist or two to keep the reader guessing.



### We Were Never Here

In the mood for an eerie psychological thriller? Look no further than Andrea Bartz's **We Were Never Here** (Ballantine, \$27, 9781984820464). Meet Emily and Kristen, longtime friends who live halfway around the world from one another. Emily's in Milwaukee, Kristen's in Australia, but they meet annually for a girls trip to far-flung ports o'call: Vietnam, Uganda, Cambodia and, this year, a trip through the mountains and valleys of central Chile. The first two trips were idyllic, but things went sideways in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, when Emily was assaulted by a sadistic South African backpacker. Kristen came to her rescue, brandishing a handy floor lamp like a Louisville Slugger and connecting squarely with the attacker's head to land an instant death blow. The police were never called because the two women were terrified by perennial horror stories of being locked up abroad. After a year of nightmares, Emily has more or less recovered her equilibrium. But now, the unthinkable: History repeats itself in Chile, and another backpacker lies dead on another hotel room floor at the hands of Kristen.

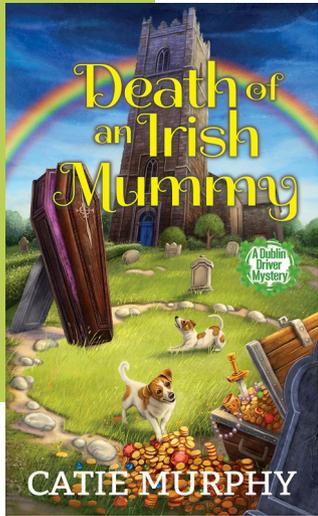
Creepy, right? It's about to get creepier. When Kristen suddenly moves back to Milwaukee, their relationship begins to show more cracks. The further Emily withdraws, the more obsessive Kristen becomes. And then things go very dark indeed. Of all the books I have read recently, **We Were Never Here** is the one that has "film adaptation" writ large upon it, with alluring locales, Hitchcockian tension and possibly the best pair of female leads since Thelma and Louise.



### ★ Moon Lake

Joe R. Lansdale, author of the popular Hap and Leonard series, has long been on my "must read ASAP (as soon as published)" list. His latest, **Moon Lake** (Mulholland, \$28, 9780316540643), is a standalone thriller, although there is wiggle room for a follow-up should readers demand it. Back in the 1960s, the East Texas town of Long Lincoln was intentionally submerged into Moon Lake, and its residents were moved to higher ground. Daniel Russell was 13 years old at the time, with a ne'er-do-well father and a mother who'd recently gone missing. One night, Daniel's father inexplicably bundled him into the family Buick and deliberately jumped a bridge guard-rail, plunging the car into Moon Lake. Daniel barely survived, and his father and the car disappeared. Ten years later, Daniel receives news that the Buick has been located, along with his father's remains and some unidentified bones in the trunk of the car. Those bones may well be his mother, who has still never been found, so Daniel returns to Long Lincoln to claim his father's remains and to research his family's disturbing history. When his questions intrude on the nefarious doings of the town's elite, Daniel quickly becomes persona non grata, and it appears likely that he is destined for a second plunge into Moon Lake if he continues his quest for the truth. Lansdale nails the storyline, nails the suspense, *seriously* nails the dialogue and has created yet another character worthy of a series.

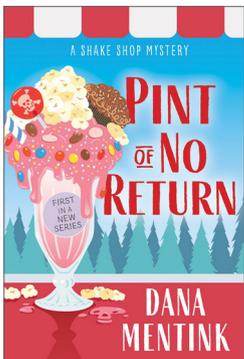
Bruce Tierney lives outside Chiang Mai, Thailand, where he bicycles through the rice paddies daily and reviews the best in mystery and suspense every month.



## Death of an Irish Mummy

Expat Megan Malone is back behind the wheel at Leprechaun Limos, this time driving a fellow Texan, Cherise, who thinks she's heir to an ancient Irish earldom but is later found dead. Megan must find out what happened, partly because she was involved from the start, but also, in a truly hilarious touch, because her boss is beginning to think she's cursed, given that dead bodies keep popping up around her. Catie Murphy's **Death of an Irish Mummy** (Kensington, \$8.99, 9781496724229) is a bright new installment in a consistently delightful series. Megan's slyly conscious

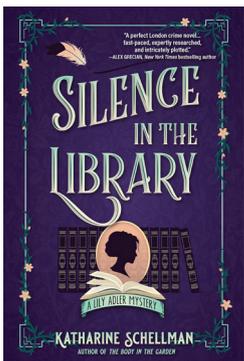
of the fact that drivers are viewed as "the help," with whom people will sometimes speak too freely, and she uses this to her advantage to accumulate useful information. Murphy balances grief and family secrets with a hunt for buried treasure, keeping things realistic even as the story flirts with the fantastical.



## Pint of No Return

Trinidad Jones is determined to make a fresh start after getting divorced. Fortunately, she received a storefront in rural Oregon in the breakup, and she moves in with plans to turn it into a homemade ice cream and milkshake emporium. When she finds a neighboring business owner dead, Trinidad must change her priorities and see justice done. Dana Mentink's series starter, **Pint of No Return** (Poisoned Pen, \$8.99, 9781728231556), takes place in a neighborhood common to cozies: a nice town full of good people, if you don't count all the lying, theft

and murder. Noodles, Trinidad's service-dog dropout who knows he should help but does so in adorably wrong ways, is likely to become a fan favorite.



## Silence in the Library

Katharine Schellman's **Silence in the Library** (Crooked Lane, \$27.99, 9781643857046) is a welcome return to the Regency world of recently widowed Lily Adler. She finds herself saddled with her ailing father as an unexpected houseguest, and he's in such a foul temper that Lily must escape by visiting Lady Wyatt, who has married Sir Charles, an old family friend. It's a shock when Sir Charles is found dead, and Bow Street constable Simon Page thinks the fall that caused his death was staged to appear like an accident. The mystery is complicated

by Arthur, one of Sir Charles' sons, who is autistic. His wealth and privilege have allowed him to escape being institutionalized, but his family has kept him hidden from public view and are quick to blame him in the search for the killer. A touching subplot about Lily tentatively coming out of mourning to embark on a newly independent life—and her father's subsequent fury at this change—illustrates the tightrope that women had to walk to gain even the smallest bit of freedom. Schellman's meticulous research puts the reader right in the heart of Regency London, and the hunt for a killer is tense and frightening.

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

## MAD, BAD SCIENTISTS

Two nonfiction books delve into nefarious crimes committed in the pursuit of knowledge.

The history of science and medicine is full of people who have done horrific things—and the bestseller lists are equally full of proof that we're fascinated by them. Are they simply bad apples? Or are there darker forces at work that turn scientists into monsters?

In **The Case of the Murderous Dr. Cream: The Hunt for a Victorian Era Serial Killer** (Algonquin, \$27.95, 9781616206895), Dean Jobb dives into

the life of Dr. Thomas Neill Cream, aka the Lambeth Poisoner, who is believed to have killed at least 10 victims, including his own wife and the husband of one of his mistresses, in three different countries. Many of his victims were prostitutes or unmarried working-class women who sought abortions from the sympathetic Dr. Cream but received fatal doses of strychnine instead. Eventually he began stalking the music halls and bordellos of London in search of victims.

Cream was hardly a criminal genius. Tall with a distinctive squint and an equally distinguishing top hat, he had a bad habit of calling attention to his crimes. He nonetheless eluded Scotland Yard for months, primarily because of police indifference to the fate of "fallen women."

Raised in a wealthy but strict religious family, Cream seemed to be an archetypal Jekyll/Hyde character—Sunday School teacher and respected physician by day, poisoner by night. It would be easy to paint him as purely evil, but Jobb creates a nuanced portrait of Cream that's much more chilling than Mr. Hyde. Yes, Cream was a remorseless killer, but he was also warped by Victorian hypocrisy, misogyny and classism—the same factors that allowed him to hide his crimes while hunting for more victims.

In **The Icepick Surgeon: Murder, Fraud, Sabotage, Piracy, and Other Dastardly Deeds Perpetrated in the Name of Science** (Little, Brown, \$29, 9780316496506), Sam Kean takes a more systemic approach to examining why good doctors and scientists go bad. Kean looks at 12 case histories of people in these professions running off the rails: patients needlessly lobotomized, individuals and communities destroyed in the name

of research, thousands of prisoners convicted on the basis of fraudulent forensic evidence and worse.

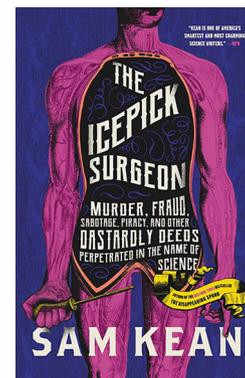
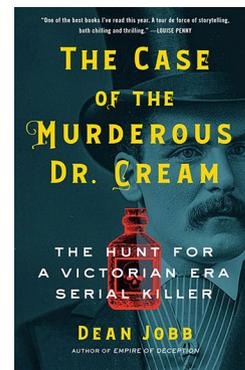
Sometimes the crime was committed by someone who just happened to be a scientist, such as a Harvard anatomist who found a grisly but scientifically sound method of dealing with an annoying creditor. Others, like

Thomas Edison, were indifferent to the pain of others in the quest for scientific glory and wealth. In many cases, the crime was the result of the scientist's fanatical devotion to finding "truth," no matter the cost. But the worst crimes included here weren't even recognized as such at the

time because society accepted them as normal, even moral. That was how Henry Smeathman, an 18th-century natural historian and abolitionist, became a trader of enslaved people to fund his expeditions.

Kean is a podcaster with a gift for making science understandable. His writing style is conversational and witty—but he never forgets the real human costs of these crimes. He argues that diverse voices, enforced standards and critical appraisal of scientific assumptions would make crimes like the ones in **The Icepick Surgeon** more detectable and preventable—and science more trustworthy.

—Deborah Mason



# EVERYONE IS WATCHING AND NO ONE IS SAFE

A cookie-cutter suburb's illusion of safety melts away in Megan Miranda's new thriller.

When I tell Megan Miranda, "I was in the woods yesterday and I thought of you," the bestselling author laughs (rather than being creeped out) and says, "I love it!"

That's because, as her millions of fans know, Miranda likes to have her characters spend quality time among the trees. From her *New York Times* bestseller *The Last House Guest* and 2020's *The Girl From Widow Hills* to her newest book, **Such a Quiet Place** (Simon & Schuster, \$26.99, 9781982147280), the liminal beauty of the forest—quiet and light-dappled by day, shadowy and ominous by night—helps set the tone for Miranda's

tense psychological thrillers. As she explains in a call to the North Carolina home she shares with her husband and two children, "I'm so inspired by settings in the woods, near water, in the mountains. There's so much atmosphere in those types of places."

In a wonderful 2016 Medium essay titled "Writing the Woods," Miranda described the woods as "a place where it's possible to believe in magic. In the myths. In monsters. Even if, all along, there was only you." That sentiment, with its appreciation for the unknowability of nature and its parallels to the human soul, is a key element of **Such a Quiet Place**, which is set at the edge of a forested lake in a lovely upper-middle-class community called Hollow's Edge.

A map at the beginning of the book offers an aerial view of one particular crescent-shaped street dotted with 10 close-set homes and a community pool. Looking at the map, it's easy to imagine residents gathering poolside for hangouts or parties, dragging a kayak through the woods and down to the sparkling water, or strolling along the street chatting to one another in the evening air.

All of those things do happen in Hollow's Edge, to be sure, but not nearly as much as they used to. Fourteen months ago, 25-year-old Ruby Fletcher left the neighborhood to begin her 20-year prison sentence for murder and Fiona Truett, a conviction aided by speculation and testimony from her neighbors. From their perspectives, Ruby never really fit in (she was younger, a renter rather than an owner, comfortable with being disliked), so the notion of her criminality didn't completely surprise them.

But since Ruby's departure, the residents have felt trapped. Tainted by the specter of the terrible murders, they're unable to sell their houses or avoid the empty Truett house, which is a

looming reminder that evil lurks among them despite their security cameras, neighborhood watch program and the popular Hollow's Edge Owners Association Message Board.

Miranda cleverly punctuates her story with excerpts from this forum, dispatches that range from informative to petty to provocative. "I thought it would be a really interesting way to show the undercurrents of each character, the things they're not saying face-to-face but that are still apparent," she says.

This is a hallmark of Miranda's thrillers: exploring the positive and negative aspects of something, then pushing the negative to its extreme. For the residents of Hollow's Edge, the message board was a helpful resource—until it became a key force in Ruby's false conviction.

Ruby has only served 14 months of her sentence when the courts determine that her "trials had been tainted, the investigation deemed unfair, the verdict thrown out," says the novel's narrator, Ruby's former frenemy and housemate, Harper Nash. Just as this news has begun to circulate, Ruby suddenly materializes in Hollow's Edge, moving back into the house with Harper, charmingly insouciant as ever and bent on, well, nobody's really sure what.

"The whole story of **Such a Quiet Place** begins as aftermath: The crime is done, the person is convicted, what happens next?" Miranda says of this deliciously nerve-fraying premise. "When Ruby pulls up on the street again, there's no illusion of safety anymore. . . . I was struck with the idea of [Ruby] knowing that the neighborhood had contributed to her conviction. She chooses, of all places, to come back [to Hollow's Edge]. It creates a really tense dynamic throughout the entire neighborhood."

Ruby's return also spurs an important question: Is she the victim, or is she the perpetrator? There are two possible answers, and neither one is good. "If she's guilty, there's a killer still in the neighborhood, and if she's not, the killer has always been there in the neighborhood," Miranda says. "[The residents] have to reevaluate all the steps that got them there, their relationship with her and their interpretation of events."

This is, of course, the opposite of relaxing at a time of year usually beloved in Hollow's Edge: summer break from the College of Lake Hollow, where nearly everyone in town is employed. "Even though you're at home, these are people who know you from a professional setting," Miranda says. "There's really no hiding from each other." And when the neighborhood's insider versus outsider designation can turn on a change of mood or a perceived slight, socializing becomes an even stickier proposition.

As **Such a Quiet Place** unfolds bit by unsettling bit over the course of just 11 pivotal days—June 29 through July 9, with a much-anticipated Fourth of July celebration smack-dab in the middle—the neighborhood's convivial closeness that was once a source of pride curdles into something much darker. It's a whodunit with lots of plausible suspects simmering away in a pressure cooker of summer heat and increasing paranoia.

Harper realizes that, in the wake of Ruby's surprise return, she's being excluded from gatherings, and side-eyed by her neighbors. But she's afraid to insist that Ruby move out—just in case she really is a dangerous murderer. Anonymous threatening notes with frustratingly cryptic messages only compound her distress. Who's been watching her, and what do they want?

As the neighbors grow increasingly anxious and indignant about the prospect of encountering Ruby on the street or even at the big Fourth of July party (something that queen-bee HOA leader Charlotte Brock does not want to happen), their polite masks begin to slip, and their true essences begin to peek

**"The crime is done, the person is convicted, what happens next?"**



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through. Nature, too, erodes in parallel. “The hidden edges of the shore had slowly been revealed, the roots and mud and dirt and debris,” Harper observes.

Harper’s tendency toward timidity and self-doubt makes her an especially interesting unreliable narrator in an insidiously unstable environment. Often, characters like Ruby take the lead in thrillers, their unrepentant and unpredictable natures placing them front and center. Here, though, people-pleasing Harper filters the goings-on through her lived experience and complicated feelings about the neighborhood.

This creates an immersive reading experience that sometimes gets frustrating when Harper doesn’t stand up for herself—and extremely tense when she decides to try out some sneaky, possibly ill-advised detective-like maneuvers. Harper’s various calculations and adventures inevitably and messily overlap with those of the other characters, offering lots of plot trails for readers to follow and theorize about.

To keep track of these myriad threads, Miranda uses spreadsheets, mapping out plots and keeping track of clues. “It’s my methodical approach to writing thrillers,” she says. This penchant for columns and rows may hark back to her past experiences in the sciences. After graduating from MIT, Miranda worked in a laboratory setting at several biotech companies and taught high school science for a few years, too.

Despite this background, Miranda doesn’t consider her transition to fiction writing to be a sharp turn but rather “a completely natural progression, a continuation of things I’ve loved my entire life,” she says. “I’ve always loved reading mysteries and thrillers and consuming stories in all their formats. . . . I also love science and never felt those were opposing parts of me.”

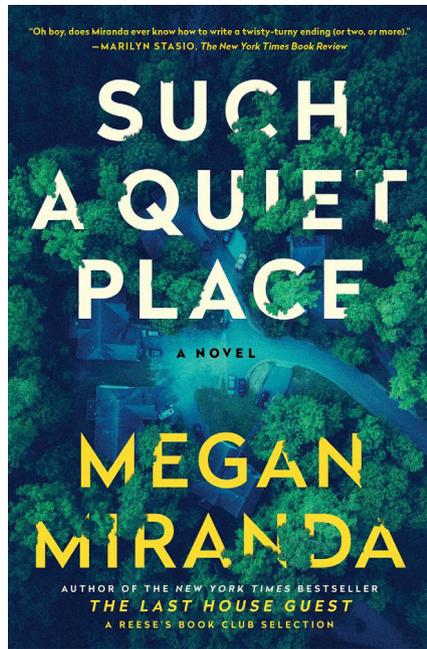
Miranda’s first published books were YA novels, some of which (like *Soulprint* and *Come Find Me*) included scientific aspects “inspired by what-if scenarios.” That what-if inquisitiveness has proven indispensable to writing adult thrillers, as well. An experiment is a step-by-step process with many variables, Miranda explains, just like “steps in the process of telling a story. That mindset definitely helps with my [writing] process.”

Miranda also maintains a bright-line boundary between work and the rest of her life to ensure that she’s able to fully inhabit the minds of her narrators. “It lets me get really deep into a story, which is important to my writing in first person,” she says. “I dive in with a character and build up the premise and discover things as I write. . . . I do surprise myself sometimes.”

Certainly, there are surprises in *Such a Quiet Place* from start to finish—from seemingly minor to decidedly deadly. “I love those little shifts of perspective!” Miranda says. “I try to [include] them in my books throughout the story, those elements that change the way you see things.”

It’s just that sort of unsteady ground, destabilized by trepidation and doubt, that moves beneath the Hollow’s Edge community as its story comes to a shocking conclusion. Miranda says she likes to “channel [my characters’] uncertainty,” and she does that to fine effect while challenging readers to cast a more critical eye on their own neighborhoods. Perhaps that’s a good way to pass the time until her next thriller, which is sure to have plenty of trees for characters to appreciate (and maybe even lurk behind).

—Linda M. Castellitto



 Visit [BookPage.com](http://BookPage.com) to read our starred review of *Such a Quiet Place*.

## MURDER, SHE SOLVED

Criminals’ days of freedom are numbered when these two women are on the case.

Murder, deceit and corruption are all in a day’s work for Detective Maggie D’arcy and Sheriff Heidi Kick, who hunt down killers while wrangling with office politics, family matters and the patriarchy.

Sarah Stewart Taylor’s *A Distant Grave* (Minotaur, \$27.99, 9781250256447) is a complex, slow-burning follow-up to 2020’s *The Mountains Wild*, wherein readers learned of the family tragedy that inspired Maggie D’arcy to become a homicide detective. The aftereffects still linger for Maggie, but she has reengaged in the rhythms of Long Island daily life.

When the body of Irish citizen Gabriel Treacy is found in affluent Bay Shore Manor Park, Maggie’s detective brain snaps into focus. The district attorney believes the victim is a casualty of gang warfare, but there must be more to the story. Why was he murdered in an area to which he has no ties? Are the horrific scars on his back related to his death?

Maggie thinks the answers are in Ireland, where her boyfriend, Conor, lives. She travels there and teams up with Roly Byrne of the Irish Garda (the national police). In the county Clare countryside, they learn Treacy was an international aid worker who was kidnapped and tortured in Afghanistan years ago and had recently been searching for the brother placed for adoption by his mother years before Treacy was born.

Just as the disparate puzzle pieces begin to fit together, the DA orders Maggie back to Long Island. Determined to get justice for Treacy, she navigates naysayers and shrugs off looming danger as she closes in on the complicated, sad truth of his demise. With painstaking investigative work and conflicted internal monologues from a protagonist who is something of an enigma, even to herself, Taylor has crafted another

believable and intriguing installment of Maggie’s story.

A thousand miles away in John Galligan’s fictional Bad Axe County, Wisconsin, another person is found dead: a homeless young man with two gunshot wounds and no identification who, Sheriff Heidi Kick is appalled to learn, was buried alive.

That’s just one of the myriad things Heidi’s got on her precariously overloaded plate as *Bad Moon Rising* (Atria, \$17, 9781982166533) opens.

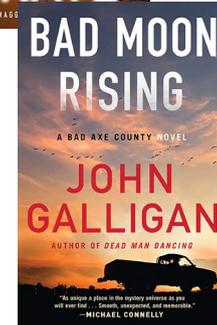
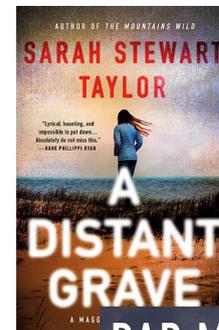
To paraphrase one of her what-on-earth-is-going-on mental tallies: Her period is 17 days late; in 87 days she’s up for reelection against the deplorable Barry Rickreiner; and an anonymous emailer is offering supposedly damning information about her opponent.

When more victims are found and other crimes unearthed, Larry “Grape” Fanta, Vietnam veteran and editor of the *Bad Axe Broadcaster* for 43 years, proffers assistance to “his favorite sheriff.” He has a hunch that the increasingly disturbing letters and calls he’s fielded over the years might be related to the murders.

Heidi’s investigation takes her through off-hostile and dangerously rugged country, with a relentless heatwave and toxic political machinations ramping up the tension. The author’s trademark dark humor is in fine form here, whether through Heidi’s irrepressible dispatcher, Denise, or well-wrought descriptions like “torrid mist of atomized manure.”

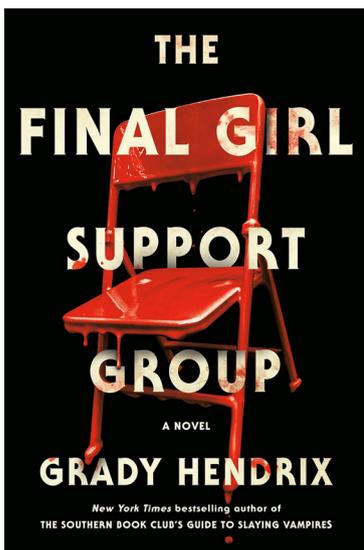
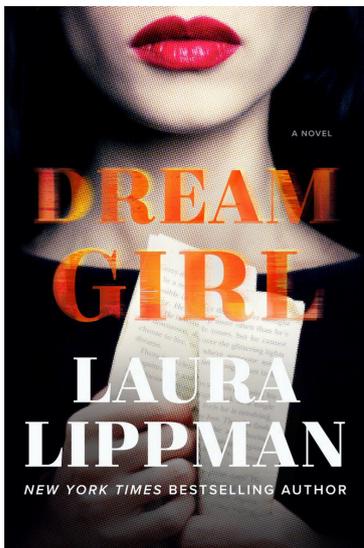
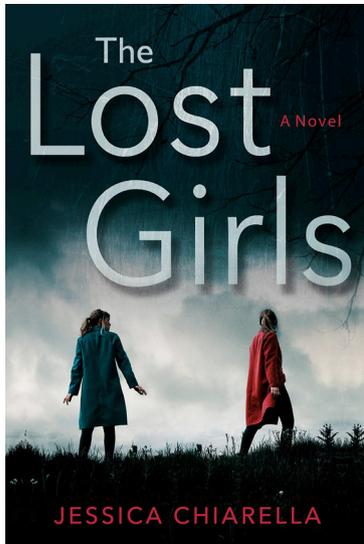
As the pages turn, the author prompts readers to consider a range of timely issues (climate change, homelessness, corrosive wealth) via masterfully executed and action-packed storylines that coalesce in a shockingly memorable final act sure to leave readers eager for the next Bad Axe County thriller.

—Linda M. Castellitto



# DEAD GIRLS, DREAM GIRLS AND FINAL GIRLS

Three psychological thrillers subvert clichés of women as mere victims or villains.



Crime fiction has no shortage of misogynistic stereotypes, from idealized victims to nastier tropes of vindictive harpies and one-dimensional femmes fatales. These thrillers refuse to deify or demonize the women at their hearts, diving instead into the darkness that only complexity affords.

## THE LOST GIRLS

Marti Reese has all but given up on finding out what really happened to her older sister, Maggie. When Marti was only 8 years old, she watched Maggie get into a car, never to be seen again. Every time a new clue sparks hope that Maggie will finally be found, it always ends in disappointment. Twenty years later, Marti's obsession with finding the truth has ruined her marriage, fractured her relationship with her parents and driven her to drugs and alcohol.

Author Jessica Chiarella expertly balances Marti's emotional turmoil and sense of loss with the dark mystery at the heart of *The Lost Girls* (Putnam, \$17, 9780593191095). Chiarella plants readers firmly in Marti's mind by limiting them to her first-person narration. You can't help but feel Marti's anguish, as well as admire her tenacity to uncover the truth despite knowing what she may find.

After Marti shares her sister's story on her true crime podcast, a listener, Ava Vreeland, approaches her about the death of Sarah Ketchum, whose case has remarkable similarities to Maggie's. Marti's need for closure once again overrides logic, and she finds herself using Sarah's story on her podcast and renewing her quest for answers.

Marti and Ava are both deeply scarred individuals still longing for some sense of satisfaction after the police have given up, settling on any number of clichéd theories to explain away Maggie's disappearance and Sarah's death. But rather than making readers simply feel sorry for them and the girls they seek justice for, Chiarella celebrates Marti and Ava's strength and resolve, even as law enforcement and the women's loved ones try to dissuade them from following the clues. The result is a richly textured missing persons story that drip-drops clues with each new interview of long forgotten witnesses.

## DREAM GIRL

Spoiled by success, novelist Gerry Andersen is nevertheless having a rough go of it when we meet him in Laura Lippman's twisty *Dream Girl* (William Morrow, \$28.99, 9780062390073). A publishing deadline is looming closer, he's recently lost his mother to Alzheimer's disease, and he's been confined to his bed for weeks after a horrific fall in his luxury Baltimore apartment. But worst of all, he is being tormented by phone calls from a woman named Aubrey, who claims he has wronged her in some way. Aubrey is also the name of the central, completely fictitious character of Gerry's bestselling novel, *Dream Girl*. When Gerry wakes one night to find a woman slain on his bedroom floor, his paranoia takes on a new level of urgency.

A former reporter and the author of more than 20 novels Lippman thrilled readers last summer with her best-seller *Lady in the Lake*. With *Dream Girl*, she strikes a similarly creepy vibe to Stephen King's *Misery*, in which a fiction writer is tormented by an adoring fan, but upends it by making Gerry the bad guy. Lippman's sharp prose builds icy suspense by showing the myriad women who have come in and out of Gerry's life over the years, any of whom may be out for revenge. Aubrey effectively becomes an amalgam of them all, revealing how Gerry's misogynistic behavior is inexcusable and toxic, even if he refuses to see it that way. (Lippman fans will be happy to see her popular private eye, Tess Monaghan, make a brief but important appearance.)

## ★ THE FINAL GIRL SUPPORT GROUP

Grady Hendrix, author of 2020's darkly comedic *The Southern Book Club's Guide to Slaying Vampires*, delights traditional horror fans again with an edgy, campy follow-up, *The Final Girl Support Group* (Berkley, \$26, 9780593201237).

The six women in Lynette Tarkington's therapy group are fiercely independent and strong-willed but also tragically haunted by their past experiences. All of them survived random mass killings that later became the bases for Hollywood slasher franchises that were popular among moviegoers in the 1980s and '90s. In the book's alternate version of history, these women not only inspired the classic era of slasher horror but also profited from it by selling or outright owning the rights to their stories.

But then "America's first final girl" and keystone support group member Adrienne Butler is killed in a massacre of camp counselors at Camp Red Lake. Hendrix puts Lynette and her fellow survivors through all the typical horror tropes as they are forced to once again face a mysterious killer.

This fast-paced novel has plenty of gory thrills, but Hendrix never loses sight of the emotional fallout experienced by the women at its core, each of whom has an idiosyncratic response to the horror she endured. Lynette, for instance, is paranoid to the point of checking sightlines and exits everywhere she goes and building a state-of-the-art panic room. When she does venture into the outside world, she's armed to the teeth with a variety of weapons, just in case.

While this story's appeal should be obvious to fans of movies like *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween*, Hendrix gives the slasher genre an added level of depth and sophistication as he explores residual trauma as well as the consequences and complications of commodifying that trauma. *The Final Girl Support Group* is a quirky but refreshingly thoughtful homage to slasher films and the stalwart women who outfoxed their diabolical stalkers.

—G. Robert Frazier

# THE CASE OF THE TEENAGE GUMSHOE

Three persistent heroines pursue the truth—no matter the cost—in these exciting, memorable mysteries.

It's hard enough to be a teenager without having to deal with, say, ghosts, disappearances or murder. In this trio of YA mysteries, smart and determined girls do whatever it takes to solve the case.

Never has a supply closet been so ominous as in Emily Arsenault's slow-burning gothic mystery, **When All the Girls Are Sleeping** (Delacorte, \$17.99, 9780593180792). The site of said closet is Dearborn Hall, a dorm at Windham-Farnsworth Academy. Until last year, the closet was room 408, home to the mercurial Taylor Blakey. In the wee hours of a frigid February night, screams echoed down the hallway, and Taylor's lifeless body was found on the ground beneath her open window. Since that tragic night, Taylor's former room has become a taboo space on campus, intentionally ignored and never entered . . . or has it?

Haley Peppler, Taylor's erstwhile best friend, isn't so sure. She's skeptical of rumors about the ghostly Winter Girl who supposedly haunts Dearborn Hall. But lately, unexplainable things have been happening around the closet (its window left open during a freeze, whispers emanating from within), and Haley is starting to think there really could be something supernatural afoot.

When Haley receives a strange video filmed the night of Taylor's death, it heightens her unease and spurs her to investigate: Is there another explanation for Taylor's demise than the flimsy story the school offered? As Haley researches Dearborn Hall's colorful history, Arsenault does an excellent job of unfurling a centuries-old mystery within the context of this contemporary tale.

Carefully timed flashbacks and revelations make for a tantalizingly suspenseful read. Using newspaper archives, social media and interviews, Haley unearths plausible motives and suspicious sorts aplenty, contributing to the book's atmosphere of increasing dread. As the anniversary of Taylor's death looms, a thought-provoking undercurrent of class conflict and unresolved anger adds urgency to Haley's quest for the truth. **When All the Girls Are Sleeping** is a spooky and compelling examination of what truly haunts us.

On prom weekend, Claire Keough and her closest friends, couple Kat and Jesse, head up to a cabin in the Catskills to celebrate their entry into adulthood. It should be a fun, secret trip, but when Claire wakes up in a forest clearing alone and seriously injured, **That Weekend** (Delacorte, \$18.99, 9781524718367) becomes the most definitive event of her life thus far. Kat and Jesse are missing, and due to Claire's head trauma, the last

36 hours are a blank. It's a horrific dilemma: "All that matters is what happened on that mountain. The only important information is what I can't remember."

This dramatic and terrifying turn of events is just the tip of the iceberg in this twisty, fast-paced mystery. Kat and Claire take turns telling the inventive story, which moves to and fro in time. The question of motive is at the heart of the novel, which offers readers a rich mine of human behavior to ponder as characters crack under the stress of the weekend's aftermath. Kat's wealthy, powerful family tries to take control, the FBI gets involved and a Nancy Grace-esque journalist seems determined

to portray Claire as a villain. The resultant media attention coupled with her nagging self-doubt compel Claire to conduct her own investigation in hopes of regaining control over her reputation, emotions and future. As we draw nearer to the truth of that fateful weekend getaway, author Kara Thomas (2018's *The Cheerleaders*, et al.) expertly layers plenty of reasons to suspect almost everyone. Whodunit lovers will be delighted.

Lies, betrayals and pulse-pounding moments abound as Claire questions whether she can ever trust or even know anyone. The book's shocking ending will surely cause readers to look upon innocuous things in their lives (friends, family, weekend jaunts) with sharper eyes.

Readers who heaved sad sighs upon reaching the end of Maureen Johnson's *The Vanishing Stair*, the final book in her Truly Devious trilogy, will be thrilled to learn that smart, funny teen sleuth Stevie Bell is back in **The Box in the Woods** (Katherine Tegen, \$18.99, 9780063032606).

Being a teenager is hard enough without ghosts, disappearances or murder.

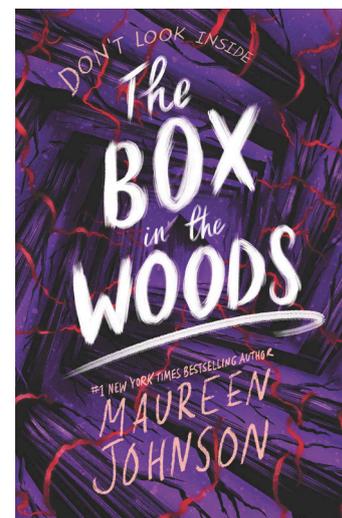
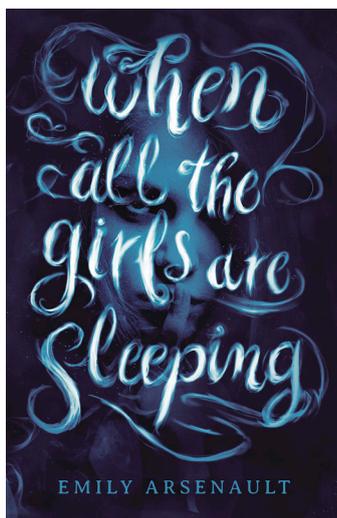
It's summertime, and Stevie is home from Ellingham Academy, the boarding school where she solved a 1930s cold case. That amazing feat made her famous for a time, but now she's pondering what's next and making the best of a deli job where the customers feel "entitled to her entire soul as she [gets] them ham."

She needn't ponder for long. Tech bro CEO Carson Buchwald makes Stevie an intriguing proposition. He recently purchased Camp Sunny Pines, formerly Camp Wonder Falls, the site of an unsolved murder committed in 1978 that devastated the town of Barlow Corners. Carson intends to make a podcast and documentary about the case, and he wants Stevie to investigate. She can even bring her friends Janelle and Nate, and they'll all work as counselors while Stevie attempts to solve the brutal crime.

As the story alternates between the present day and the 1970s, Johnson offers funny vignettes of summer-camp life and context for the deaths of the murdered camp counselors—locals whose family and friends still live in town. Readers will root for the irrepressible Stevie, who thrills to tracking down clues. Her romantic relationship is realistic and sweet, and her kindness toward the still-grieving residents of Barlow Corners is touching.

As Stevie fits pieces of the past together, the danger lurking in Barlow Corners emerges and creates irresistible tension, particularly after another murder happens mid-investigation. Can she find the truth before someone else meets an untimely end? **The Box in the Woods** is a gripping and complex mystery bolstered by its commentary on the popular fascination with true crime—and its empathetic reminder to consider the perspectives of those whom such crimes leave behind.

—Linda M. Castellitto



## ★ The Startup Wife

By Tahmima Anam

### Literary Fiction

The funny and sharp fourth novel by acclaimed Bangladesh-born British author Tahmima Anam, **The Startup Wife** (Scribner, \$26, 9781982156183), exposes the folly of looking for leadership in the startup sector, which reveres disruption in all areas except its own.

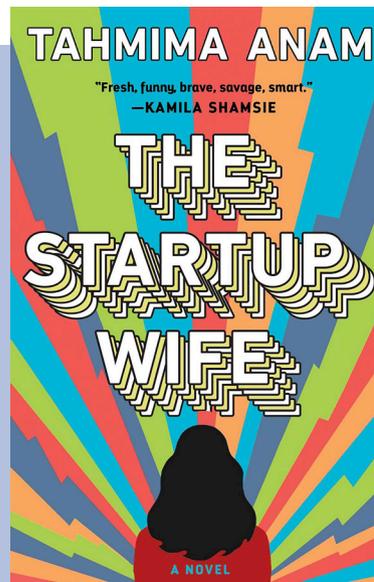
This brilliantly incisive social novel, a quasi-faith community springs from a social media platform called WAI, short for “We Are Infinite.” WAI uses an algorithm to design personalized rituals based on three meaningful elements of a person’s life—and then introduces that person to a like-minded community.

But first, the novel begins with a love story: Thirteen years after high school, Asha Ray reunites with her crush, Cyrus Jones, when they attend a memorial for their late English teacher. Asha is four years into her Ph.D. at Harvard, and Cyrus has become a charismatic spiritual polyglot. He’s traveled the world, collecting bits of philosophy and religion from an endless variety of sources, and distilled them into something people can use in their own lives. “I create rituals,” he says.

Cyrus and Asha’s intellectual connection is

intense, and soon, so is their physical relationship. The novel focuses on their all-encompassing, interconnected work-life partnership, which also includes, to a lesser extent, their best friend, Jules. When Asha’s artificial intelligence research hits a roadblock, she draws inspiration from Cyrus’ work and decides “to start a platform that [allows] people without religion to practice a form of faith.” Through Asha’s programming wizardry, WAI becomes a life-changing phenomenon. But it quickly becomes clear that the platform, intended to bring people together, is likely to blow the triad apart.

**The Startup Wife** is framed as a satirical novel about startup culture, but because Americans revere that culture, its foibles and failings are our failures, too. Tech investors subscribe to the “great man” theory of history as much as the rest of America, and this unavoidable fact begins to spoil Asha’s relationships with her two male partners. Investors are more apt to provide valuable exposure and support to a passion project fronted by a brilliant (usually white) man rather than a geeky brown woman. So



even though Asha’s research is the source of the platform’s Empathy Module algorithm, handsome Cyrus becomes the figurehead for WAI. Initially resistant to making his spiritual practice into a business, he is easily seduced into playing CEO and messiah.

While **The Startup Wife** is full of beautifully messy and enviable characters, Asha’s fierce feminism and candor stand out. Of course, she’s far from innocent. She’s a creative genius who wants her due, just as any man would. But it’s a delight to experience Asha’s first-person perspective of the world and her metamorphosis

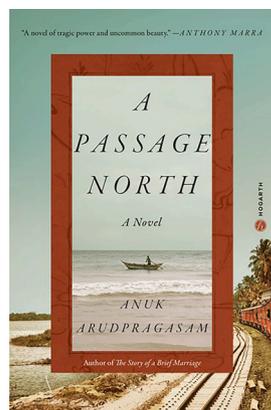
into a powerful, flawed woman.

Because **The Startup Wife** is sexy and funny and puts relationships at the forefront, it might be easy to overlook its depth and sophistication. But its priorities are right where they should be. When people create a community with their friends and lovers, it is inevitable that boundaries will dissolve and that friendship, love, ego and identity will become intertwined. **The Startup Wife**’s insights about modern relationships, gender politics, race, technology and culture are as excellent and vital as its storytelling.

—Carole V. Bell

## ★ A Passage North

By Anuk Arudpragasam



### Literary Fiction

In Anuk Arudpragasam’s elegantly discursive second novel, memory, trauma and collective action determine the arc of lives.

**A Passage North** (Hogarth, \$27, 9780593230701) begins in Colombo,

Sri Lanka, where a young man named Krishan is mulling over an email from his cryptic ex-girlfriend, an activist named Anjum, whom he dated years ago in Delhi, India. Moments later, Krishan learns his grandmother’s caretaker, Rani, has mysteriously fallen down a well and died.

These two events set the wheels in motion for Krishan’s journey to the center of himself. He boards a train to northern Sri Lanka to attend Rani’s funeral, but his journey exists more in mind than body. He meditates on his brief but engulfing love affair with Anjum and is haunted by the government-sanctioned persecution of the Tamil people.

For readers unfamiliar with the Sri Lankan Civil War, **A Passage North** offers perspective on the Sinhalese-dominated government’s conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The insurrectionist Tamil Tigers fought to form an independent state so their ethno-linguistic minority group could escape subjugation, rape and killing. Arudpragasam raises questions about unfettered devotion to higher causes as Krishan struggles to find his own true purpose, the way Anjum seemed to find hers by forming a politically active commune away from Delhi—and away from their life together.

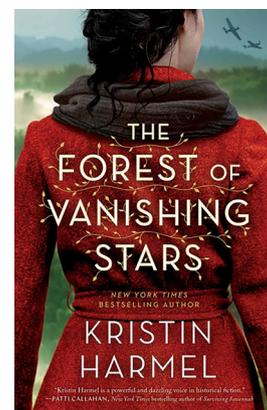
Arudpragasam expertly captures the ambiguity of romance between two young people who feel the call of the broader world even as they cling to each other. While his writing remains observational throughout, this love story adds heat and intrigue to an otherwise philosophical novel.

Flipping through the novel’s pages, the reader will notice an absence of white space and section breaks outside of chapter demarcations. There is no direct dialogue either. In this way, the novel is reminiscent of José Saramago’s work. But Arudpragasam’s writing is exceptionally graceful, which allows the text to flow despite its density. The lack of action may frustrate some readers, but this structure creates an otherwise impossible narrative reverie. Ultimately, **A Passage North** is an elegant story whose discursive nature pays off.

—Elena Britos

## The Forest of Vanishing Stars

By Kristin Harmel



### Historical Fiction

Yona, born Inge, doesn’t remember much about her parents or the world outside the forest. The day before her second birthday, Yona was stolen from her German parents by an elderly Jewish woman named Jerusza.

Jerusza was driven by intuition; she knew she must take the girl from her family and into the forest.

Yona’s childhood is unconventional, as she learns not only survival skills but also multiple languages. Jerusza’s care is practical, never maternal. The girl doesn’t know love, but she knows how to survive.

Not long after Jerusza’s death, Yona encounters other people in the forest. They’re Jewish, and they’ve fled their villages to escape persecution by the Germans. Yona knows how to help, but by sharing her skills, she’s inviting human connection like she’s never known—and risking her heart in the process.

Although Kristin Harmel's **The Forest of Vanishing Stars** (Gallery, \$28, 9781982158934) is fiction, the bestselling author's research contributes richness and authenticity to this captivating tale. During the Holocaust, Jewish people escaped from ghettos and created forest settlements, banding together to survive both genocide and the wild.

In addition to showcasing her exceptional historical research, Harmel's novel explores the frailty of human connection. Yona finds joy and sorrow in bonding with others, and in the process, she learns more about the world she was born into. Yona knows she is German, and as she tries to protect the people she's met, she begins to question whether she truly belongs in the encampment.

"In the times of greatest darkness, the light always shines through, because there are people who stand up to do brave, decent things," says one of the men Yona meets in the forest. "In moments like this, it doesn't matter what you were born to be. It matters what you choose to become."

—Carla Jean Whitley

## ★ Lorna Mott Comes Home

By Diane Johnson



Literary Fiction

Just as the protagonist of **Lorna Mott Comes Home** (Knopf, \$28, 9780525521082) returns to the United States after 18 years in France, author Diane Johnson returns to fiction 13 years after her last novel, *Lulu in Marrakech*. But while

Johnson's reemergence will be welcome news to fans of her leisurely writing style, the reception to Lorna Mott's San Francisco homecoming varies among the book's characters.

Art historian Lorna lands stateside at the time of "the handsome new president, Obama." She has left her second husband, Armand-Loup, and his "wild infidelity" back in their French town of Pontles-Puits. As Johnson memorably shows, the U.S. has changed during Lorna's absence. Astronomical property prices and increased homelessness are two of many manifestations of a widening wealth chasm.

Lorna's three grown kids from her first marriage are also different. Divorced Peggy makes crafts such as personalized dog collars to make ends meet. Ex-hippie Hams and his pregnant wife, Misty, struggle financially. Curt had "a thriving software enterprise" until a bike accident put him in a five-month coma. He's now in Southeast Asia, trying to find himself. Complicating the picture further are Lorna's first husband, Ran; his wife, Amy; and their daughter, 15-year-old Gilda, who gets pregnant by a Stanford-bound 20-year-old.

Sound complicated? It is, but delightfully so, and that's before an unusual complexity: In Pontles-Puits, mudslides dislodge the bones of people interred in a cemetery, including those of an American painter. French authorities have named Lorna as the painter's next of kin and would like for her to pay for his reinterment.

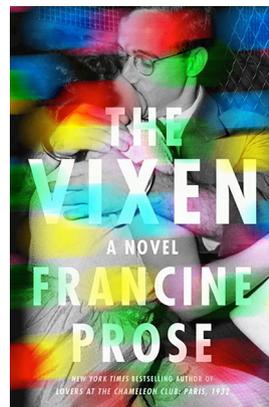
**Lorna Mott Comes Home** takes time to develop its characters, much like the works of Henry James and Edith Wharton, the comedy-of-manners forebears to whom Johnson is often compared. But admirers will savor the ease with which Johnson moves from one storyline to the next.

Early in the novel, Lorna gives a poorly received lecture on medieval tapestries that had "a romantic history of being lost, hidden, forgotten through the centuries." That's the poignant essence of this novel. Like those tapestries, a life is fragile and vulnerable to being forgotten, but that doesn't mean it isn't beautiful.

—Michael Magras

## ★ The Vixen

By Francine Prose



Historical Fiction

In a world where facts are questioned but truth still matters, Francine Prose's latest novel, **The Vixen** (Harper, \$25.99, 9780063012141), raises questions of what we know, how we know it and whose stories get told.

Newly graduated from Harvard, Simon Putnam isn't sure how to make his way in the world. After a harrowing evening with his parents, watching the execution of his mother's childhood friend Ethel Rosenberg and her husband, Julius (American citizens convicted of spying for the Soviet Union), Simon finds himself with a new job at a major New York publishing house. Once there, he is handed a challenge: to prepare for publication a salacious, pulpy, vaguely terrible novel about the Rosenbergs.

As Simon works to uncover the story behind the novel, he discovers more secrets than he could have imagined. While the plot of **The Vixen** is rich and surprising, Simon's narrative voice carries the novel. As he goes along, he tries to make sense of how individual and collective histories interact with stories, and how they complicate and contradict each other. His engaging inquiry asks the reader to invest in this world, one that is both far from and adjacent to our own.

Simon takes us through New York restaurants and lush lunches, from Coney Island amusement rides to his childhood home, from the swanky publishing office to his roach-ridden apartment. In each

moment, Prose evokes a sense of place that feels crucial to Simon's process of discovery. This is, in many ways, a novel of New York in a particular moment.

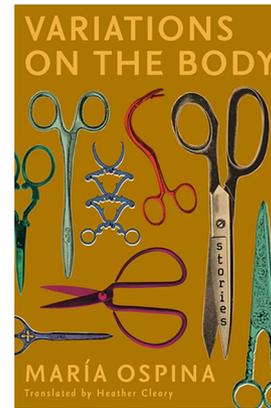
Prose is a master of language, and her captivating words are all the more striking in contrast to the novel's intentional profanity. Good fiction entertains and asks questions, gesturing to truths beyond the novel itself. **The Vixen** does just that, with an extra note of fun.

—Freya Sachs

## ★ Variations on the Body

By María Ospina

Translated by Heather Cleary



Short Stories

Latina identity serves as the foundation for Colombian American author María Ospina's powerful debut collection, and its six stories explore what it means to occupy a body bound by that identity. Each tale tackles a different angle, at turns pondering ownership of the body, how a body is tied to history and why connection between bodies is so important.

Ospina's characters are all Colombian women struggling with their bodies, though not with body image but rather the actual experience of living in human form. For example, the protagonist in "Occasion" is a young pregnant woman who's working as a nanny, and between the needs of the child in her womb and the demands of the child she is paid to care for, the woman barely has any autonomy. Throughout the story, Ospina shifts the narrative's perspective—sometimes the woman speaks, while other times the child she's caring for does—to illustrate the precariousness of ownership.

This polyvocality repeats and is rearranged several times throughout the collection. In the first story, "Policarpa," a former guerrilla fighter is silenced by the editor of her memoir, and in the third story, "Saving Young Ladies," an isolated young woman projects her desire onto those she doesn't know. In every story Ospina outdoes herself, and each time the message is profound and vital.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing awareness of overlapping systems of oppression, **Variations on the Body** (Coffee House, \$16.95, 9781566896108) is undoubtedly timely as a poignant portrait of people on the margins whose bodies are trapped in space and time. While that may sound like science fiction, Ospina shows how real these experiences are, and she challenges everyone to empathize.

—Eric Ponce

—Eric Ponce

## ★ The Man Who Hated Women

By Amy Sohn

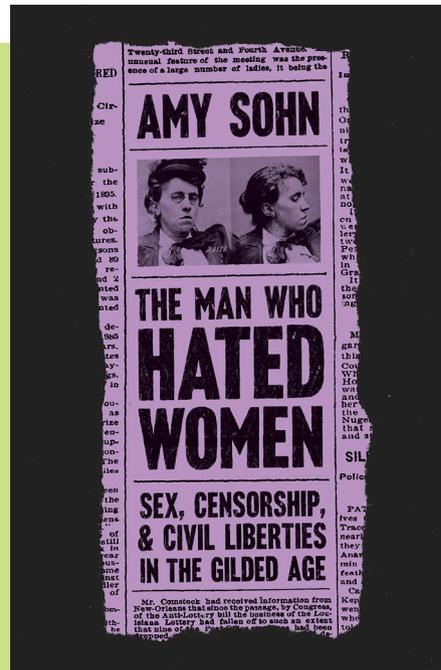
### American History

This engrossing new history of American women's fight to gain autonomy over their sexuality and reproductive choices has a somewhat misleading title: **The Man Who Hated Women: Sex, Censorship, and Civil Liberties in the Gilded Age** (FSG, \$30, 9781250174819). While Anthony Comstock, the "anti-vice" crusader and U.S. postal inspector, was without a doubt a man who hated women, his story is ultimately less significant than those of the brave women who stood up to him at the dawn of the 20th century.

Comstock's drive to root out and destroy materials that he considered pornographic led to the passing of the Comstock Act in 1873, which made it illegal to mail "obscene, lewd, or lascivious" materials through the U.S. Postal Service. In his role as postal inspector, and inspired by a mania for "purity," he

defined pamphlets and books about contraception and family planning as "obscene" and subsequently hounded, prosecuted and even drove to suicide people who disseminated such information.

Bestselling author Amy Sohn vividly brings to life the activists who opposed Comstock's efforts in **The Man Who Hated Women**. Suffragist Victoria C. Woodhull, free love advocate Angela Heywood, spiritualist Ida C. Craddock, abortionist Madame Restell, anarchist Emma Goldman and birth control defender Margaret Sanger are just a few who doggedly fought against the Comstock laws in order to bring information about sex and birth control to American women



at the turn of the century.

Sohn has unearthed a wealth of vivid historic detail about these women's resistance to Comstock's censorship. Dr. Sara Chase, for example, not only sued Comstock for damaging her medical practice but named the vaginal syringe she sold to women for contraceptive douching the "Comstock syringe." Craddock, who believed that sex was a deeply spiritual act, fought for the rights of Egyptian belly dancers to perform the "hoochie-coochie."

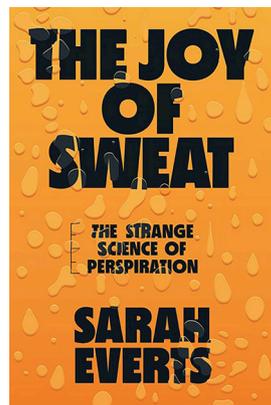
Sohn places these mostly forgotten "sex radicals" at the center of the history of the women's rights movement.

That this battle continues in our own time makes **The Man Who Hated Women** all the more important and enlightening.

—Catherine Hollis

## ★ The Joy of Sweat

By Sarah Everts



### Science

Why do some people sweat more than others? Why is some sweat saltier? Is it even good to sweat? We accept as a fact of life that this secretion will come out of our bodies when we need to cool down, but what do we really know about it?

Journalism professor Sarah Everts answers these burning questions and many others in her debut book, **The Joy of Sweat: The Strange Science of Perspiration** (Norton, \$26.95, 9780393635676). Sweat is actually an important bodily function that factors into a number of industries and is closely studied by scientists. Speaking with experts from disciplines such as forensics, chemistry, genetics and even fragrances, Everts takes readers on an entertaining journey into the world of perspiration, including the science behind it and the benefits of a good sweat.

Everts' background in journalism comes in handy as she interviews scientists to find out the role of sweat gland density and the influence of environment on the amount of sweat a person produces. She also investigates sweat in relation to a wide range of occupations and interests, including

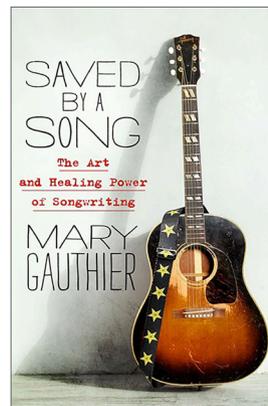
miners who've experienced heatstroke, sensory analysts trained to sniff armpits and poopy diapers, the lucrative sauna and sports drink industries and even sweat dating. (Yes, that's a thing. Find a partner through their sweat scent!)

As she tackles a subject that some people deem taboo or even gross, Everts incorporates interesting historical facts, market research and scientific discoveries, skillfully turning science into poetry. And her examples from real-life situations, including her own personal experiences, make **The Joy of Sweat** even more relatable. As she enthuses, "Let's all just live and let sweat."

—Becky Libourel Diamond

## Saved by a Song

By Mary Gauthier



### Memoir

"When emotional truth is the goal, and courage is part of the equation, the process is deeply therapeutic, but it's not therapy," writes Grammy-nominated folk singer and songwriter Mary Gauthier in her debut book.

**Saved by a Song: The Art and Healing Power of Songwriting** (St. Martin's Essentials, \$27.99, 9781250202116) is memoir, autobiography, creative process guide and journal

of spiritual formation all in one. It's a true expression of the inseparability of songwriting, spiritual practice, recovery and relationship that have been endemic to Gauthier's 25-year career.

**Saved by a Song** is organized topically, with each chapter pairing a song title with an element of craft; for example, "Drag Queens in Limousines: Story/Meaning." Starting with the song's lyrics, Gauthier recounts her personal connection to the song through concrete, accessible personal narrative. By the end of each chapter, readers have gained a behind-the-scenes scoop on the real-life experiences that influenced the song and a wise takeaway for their own lives.

Readers also get a play-by-play of how to put art into practice. One of the biggest questions novice writers have is, "How did the artist get from *this* (their own experience) to *that* (a polished work)?" The elements of craft can seem like puzzle pieces that don't fit together. Gauthier creates an external map of the mysterious internal songwriting process not once but 13 times throughout the book.

Alongside these gems from her lifelong study of creative practice—think Anne Lamott meets Julia Cameron meets Patti Smith—Gauthier also shares all the gory details of her recovery from addiction, plus quotations from the artists and writers who influenced her own development. In Gauthier's words, "I believe songs that heal come from a higher place. They help us with the struggle of being human and by letting us know we are not alone. This is the greatest gift a song can give a songwriter and a songwriter can give the world."

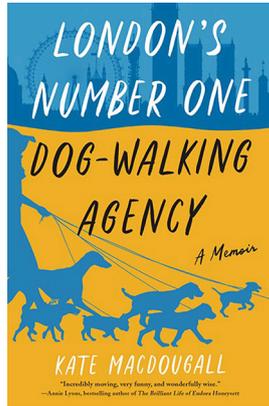
Anyone who can still write from the heart about writing from the heart after being in the music

business as long as Gauthier has is the *real deal*. Her book invites seasoned artists to deeper authenticity, new artists to deeper craft and all readers to deeper self-reflection.

—Sarah Carter

## London's Number One Dog-Walking Agency

By Kate MacDougall



### Memoir

“It was pigeons that started it all, not dogs,” begins Kate MacDougall’s charming coming-of-age memoir, **London’s Number One Dog-Walking Agency** (William Morrow, \$27.99, 9780063059788). After knocking the heads off some ugly

porcelain pigeons at her desk in the antiques department of an auction house, she decided to change careers—and, it must be said, her life. She’d recently had a conversation with a dog walker, so she chose that as her next job. Her mother was blunt: “This is a GHASTLY mistake.”

Still, MacDougall plunged in. Her first client was an impossibly energetic Jack Russell named Frank (a girl) who loved her special ball more than anything. It started fabulously but didn’t end well—a Rottweiler ate Frank’s ball—and with that first mishap, the young entrepreneur began to grasp that while dog walking sounded simple enough, there were challenges galore when it came to getting clients, keeping them happy and making enough money to live on.

As MacDougall figured out her new career, she realized that humans were often harder to handle, especially where their beloved “dog children” were concerned. One owner sent a stern email with the subject line “Mud.” It read, “Winston is NOT allowed in mud—as you know. I presume this was an awful accident?” Needless to say, the blissfully mud-rolling Winston had not been consulted about this rule.

Each chapter of this lively memoir features a dog (or two), some humans, adventures, laughter, tears and a running tally of how many dogs MacDougall has walked (beginning with one in 2006 and ending with 100 in 2014). There were some setbacks, including the 2008 recession. But there was love and growth, too, as she and her boyfriend married and acquired their own dog, Mabel.

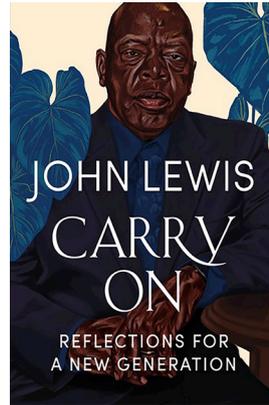
If MacDougall is as skilled with dogs as she is with a pen, it’s no wonder her agency became number one. **London’s Number One Dog-Walking Agency** bounds along with the energy of a rambunctious pup and exudes the wisdom of a beloved canine with an old soul (you know the type). MacDougall’s

writing sparkles with humor, joy and wit. And for dog lovers, of course, the best part is: It’s all about dogs.

—Deborah Hopkinson

## Carry On

By John Lewis



### Essays

When longtime Georgia Congressman John Lewis died from pancreatic cancer in 2020, President Obama said, “He, as much as anyone in our history, brought this country a little bit closer to its highest ideals.” This lovely book offers Lewis’

meditations on everything from love to public service and affirms that he indeed represented the best of our nation.

**Carry On: Reflections for a New Generation** (Grand Central, \$22, 9781538707128) is divided into short sections in which Lewis shares hard-earned wisdom from his years on the front lines of the civil rights battle. The son of a sharecropper, Lewis joined Martin Luther King Jr. and the Freedom Riders as they protested segregation across the South. For someone who faced injustice, police brutality and racism, Lewis remained remarkably optimistic. “Yes, we were jailed, arrested, firebombed, bloodied,” he writes in a chapter on activism. “But we never felt hate, and even though it can be hard to hold back our anger, it is worth the effort because it works in the end. We changed America, and now the time has come for more change.”

Lewis devotes much of the book to the current expression of our nation’s racism. He compares the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and Trayvon Martin to the 1955 lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till and urges his fellow Americans to embrace the Black Lives Matter movement.

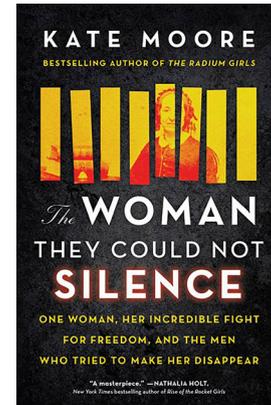
There are lighter chapters, too, in which Lewis writes about art, sports, clothes and books. He loved comic books as a kid, and a favorite hobby as an adult was frequenting flea markets searching for old books. These chapters read like someone shooting the breeze with an old friend. He recalls telling Congressman Elijah Cummings, for whom he was often mistaken, that he was going to get a tattoo on the back of his head so people would stop confusing them.

**Carry On** is a bittersweet book, coming so soon on the heels of Lewis’ death, but a beautiful reminder of finding hope and joy in the simplest things. “Happiness is being at home after a long day, playing with and feeding my cats,” Lewis writes. “I’m a happy person.”

—Amy Scribner

## The Woman They Could Not Silence

By Kate Moore



### Biography

We’re all familiar with the method of discrediting women by making allegations against their mental health whenever they dare to stand up to a man in power. As *Radium Girls* author Kate Moore ably demonstrates in her new book, **The Woman**

**They Could Not Silence: One Woman, Her Incredible Fight for Freedom, and the Men Who Tried to Make Her Disappear** (Sourcebooks, \$27.99, 9781492696728), this particularly pernicious tool of the patriarchy has been in use for a very long time.

Elizabeth Packard was a housewife, mother and champion for the disadvantaged and underserved. In the middle of the 19th century, she was involuntarily committed to an Illinois asylum by her husband, a controlling, Confederate-sympathizing Presbyterian minister with whom she had begun publicly disagreeing. At that time, female madness was defined in part as any unladylike behavior, such as arguing one’s case or expressing unhappiness at one’s situation. Anyone who committed these transgressions could be “sent to the madhouse” on nothing more than her husband’s say-so. Packard discovered two terrible truths from her own experience of this tactic: Married women had no rights or legal recourse, and neither did the inmates of asylums.

Once within the walls of the asylum, women were subject to filthy conditions and horrifying physical abuse and torture. As Packard noted, it was as though these asylums were designed to encourage insanity, not heal it. Faced with this seemingly hopeless situation, Packard set out to prove her own sanity and liberate herself and her fellow sisters in a gripping and improbable battle against rich, powerful men.

Packard’s story is, incredibly, not simply one of a woman who survived three years of imprisonment in an asylum for disagreeing with her husband’s religious views. She didn’t throw her energy into merely freeing herself, clearing her name and being reunited with her beloved children. Instead, the brave, brilliant and unshakable Packard went on to pen multiple books on subjects such as emancipation, women’s rights and the rights of people who are mentally ill; to get bills passed asserting the basic human rights and liberties of married women and mentally ill people; and to gain notoriety for confronting injustice no matter the odds.

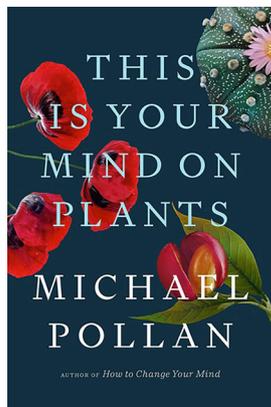
**The Woman They Could Not Silence** is compelling not only because of the way it creates an

alliance between the reader and the courageous Packard, but also because of how it forces the reader to examine once more the language and attitudes around women's mental health. In Packard we see a foremother of the female leaders of today: intelligent, tenacious and impossible to cow.

—Anna Spydell

## ★ This Is Your Mind on Plants

By Michael Pollan



### Science

Acclaimed writer Michael Pollan, author of several notable books including *In Defense of Food*, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and most recently *How to Change Your Mind*, returns with **This Is Your Mind on Plants** (Penguin Press, \$28,

9780593296905), which delves into the deep relationships humans have with three mind-altering plants: opium, coffee and mescaline.

Pollan begins this book with an updated version of his *Harper's* essay from 1997, in which he writes about attempting to grow poppies to make opium tea for his personal enjoyment—and about the intense anxiety over planting the poppies in his own garden. Confused over whether or not it was legal to grow poppies, Pollan conducted research that led him into a morass of penal contradictions, not to mention the philosophical puzzle of why certain drugs and not others are illegal to begin with.

Next Pollan describes his monthlong detox from caffeine, his preferred drug of choice. During this experiment he experiences mental dullness, lethargy and an intense inability to focus—a writer's nightmare. Caffeine is a legal drug, of course, but Pollan can't help but notice how it has a much stronger effect on him than his opium tea did. The relationship between humans and coffee is centuries deep, and Pollan helpfully connects the history of coffee-drinking to our modern-day reliance on caffeine.

The final section is devoted to the study of mescaline: its uses but also who gets to use it. Pollan explores some interesting history involving Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*, and after taking mescaline himself during a Native American peyote ceremony, Pollan makes fair observations about the recent cultural appropriation of mescaline.

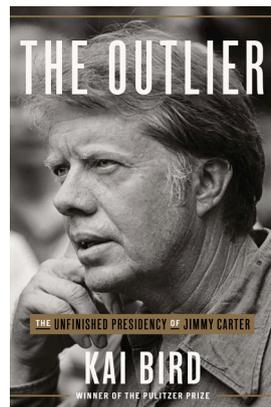
Readers of *How to Change Your Mind* will recognize Pollan's thoughtful and scientific approach to the subject of psychedelic drugs and altered states of consciousness. **This Is Your Mind on Plants** is an entertaining blend of memoir, history and social commentary that illustrates Pollan's ability to be both scientific and personal. By relying on contextual history and focusing on three popular, if

misunderstood, drugs, Pollan challenges common views on what mind-altering drugs are and what they can accomplish.

—Sarojini Seupersad

## ★ The Outlier

By Kai Bird



### Biography

While Jimmy Carter's post-presidential years have been exemplary, filled with significant humanitarian projects, his presidency is often regarded as a failure. Biographer and historian Kai Bird (*American Prometheus*) takes a fresh

look in his balanced, detailed and very readable **The Outlier: The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter** (Crown, \$38, 9780451495235).

Carter's vice president, Walter Mondale, summed up their administration's aims: "We obeyed the law, we told the truth, and we kept the peace." Carter added, "We championed human rights." His radical foreign policy initiatives and stellar domestic legislative record made his term an important one. Bird argues that Carter will come to be regarded as a significant president who was ahead of his time, despite the numerous missteps, misunderstandings and gossip treated as investigative reporting during his administration.

Carter was an outlier, "a person or thing situated away or detached from the main body or system." Deeply religious and fiercely committed to the job, he was not an ideologue but a liberal Southern pragmatist, a fiscally conservative realist. He was perhaps our most enigmatic president, basically a nonpolitician who "refused to make us feel good about the country," Bird writes.

Two of Carter's most successful foreign policy initiatives, securing Senate ratification of the Panama Canal Treaty and personally brokering the Camp David Accords, wouldn't have happened without his persistence. He also normalized relations with China, negotiated an arms control agreement with the USSR and influenced his successors and others around the world with his human rights emphasis.

Domestically, Carter's controversial appointment of Paul Volcker to lead the Federal Reserve helped to heal the economy. He also appointed a record number of women and Black Americans to federal jobs, including a substantial number of nominations to the federal bench.

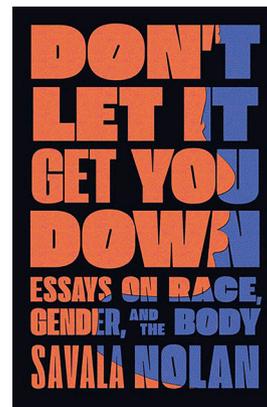
His first major mistake was to appoint Zbigniew Brzezinski as national security adviser. Others in Carter's administration were not Washington insiders, and there was often friction between them and the members of Congress who were lifelong politicians.

This compelling portrait of Carter, a complex personality who was finally undone by the Iran hostage crisis, is an absorbing look at his life and administration that should be appreciated by anyone interested in American history.

—Roger Bishop

## ★ Don't Let It Get You Down

By Savala Nolan



### Essays

Like the 12 essays in **Don't Let It Get You Down: Essays on Race, Gender, and the Body** (Simon & Schuster, \$26, 9781982137267), Savala Nolan is powerful and complex. She is Black, Mexican and white. She yo-yo diets, hates and

loves her body, was raised in poverty but educated among privileged white people. Her mother tried to involve her in local Black communities growing up, but Nolan didn't feel Black enough. "What are you?" was a common question. Her answers are haunting.

Nolan is a lawyer, speaker, writer and the executive director of the Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law. The daughter of an incarcerated Black and Mexican father and a white mother descended from owners of enslaved people, Nolan is also the wife of a white man and mother of their biracial child. She worked her way through school as a nanny for rich people, seething over any connections to the Mammy stereotype. She craves designer clothes, cringes over past experiences using hot irons on her hair, has longed for inclusion among wealthy white people (she calls it "self-erasure") and is dismayed by her own occasionally white-tinted perspective. When mistaken for hired help, she is repelled. When her husband neglected to vote in the 2016 presidential election, she was flummoxed and furious.

In the titular essay, "Don't Let It Get You Down," Nolan's agony spills over as she says their names: Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Jordan Davis and Renisha McBride, challenging her readers to confront the ongoing realities of racial violence. Like Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, written as a letter to his son, Nolan's essays speak to both young and old Americans about our country's pervasive history of racism. Recounting her pregnant great-great-grandmother's murder by white supremacists, Nolan says such stories, "including how we learn them, or why we're sheltered from them . . . [are not] a reason to turn away. It's a reason to go deeper." In **Don't Let It Get You Down**, Nolan brilliantly does so.

—Priscilla Kipp

## ★ Blackout

By Dhonielle Clayton, Tiffany D. Jackson, Nic Stone, Angie Thomas, Ashley Woodfolk and Nicola Yoon

### Romance

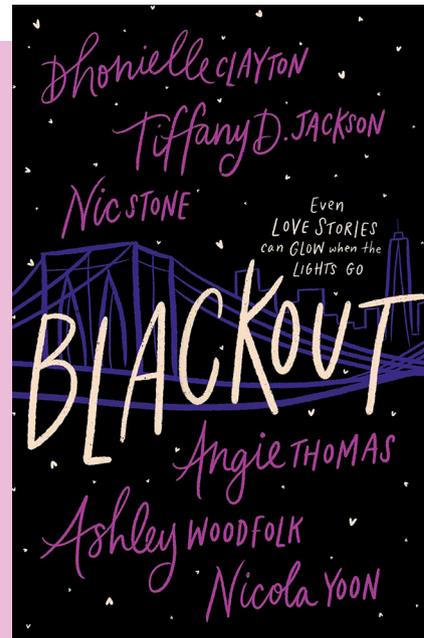
In **Blackout** (Quill Tree, \$19.99, 9780063088092), six of YA's biggest superstars join forces to create a memorable collection of interlinked love stories that all unfold on one unforgettable New York City night.

Talented authors Dhonielle Clayton, Tiffany D. Jackson, Nic Stone, Angie Thomas, Ashley Woodfolk and Nicola Yoon have been crafting memorable novels and gaining deservedly passionate readerships for years. That makes this joint undertaking nothing less than a landmark publishing event for YA literature enthusiasts.

Jackson's story, "The Long Walk," serves as a framing narrative of sorts for the book, as it's split into five "acts" that alternate with the other contributors' stories. It's late afternoon on a sweltering

summer day, and just as Tam realizes that she and her ex-boyfriend Kareem have mistakenly been offered the same internship at the historic Apollo Theater, the city is plunged into a widespread blackout. Tam and Kareem embark on an epic journey on foot from Harlem back home to Brooklyn, where the summer's most happening block party will kick off that evening.

Along the way, Kareem and Tam's story intersects with five other tales of love. In Stone's "Mask Off," two boys stuck on the same subway car feel torn about the last time their paths crossed, when both were in disguise. In Clayton's story, a girl in the iconic New York Public Library struggles to find the perfect book to express her romantic feelings. And in Thomas'



"No Sleep 'til Brooklyn," set on a double-decker tour bus, a girl on a class trip from Mississippi gets valuable advice from a bus driver about charting her own course—which is exactly what he does, too, when he steers the bus to Brooklyn and to that same block party.

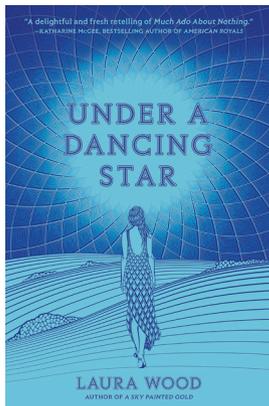
Not all of **Blackout**'s stories are typical happily-ever-afters, but they're more interesting that way. Several leave just enough ambiguity to encourage healthy debate among readers. Spotting various characters' connections to one another will also keep readers engaged and entertained.

YA readers have been calling on traditional publishers to acquire and support more positive representations of Black teens. Readers in search of joyful stories of young Black love will adore **Blackout**.

—Norah Piehl

## Under a Dancing Star

By Laura Wood



### Historical Fiction

In 1930s England, Bea's parents are determined that she should become a proper lady, but she'd rather be studying insects. So when Bea mortifies her parents yet again (in a dinner scene that involves a discussion

of the mating habits of glowworms, the local vicar and the word *fecundity*), they send her to Italy so her strict Uncle Leo can set her straight.

Bea discovers that her uncle's fiancée has turned his villa into an artists' haven. Rather than polishing her manners, Bea will spend her summer studying art with Ben, an obnoxious though decidedly handsome painter. Friends dare Bea and Ben to start up a summer fling, but it soon becomes clear that they're both in for far more than they bargained for.

**Under a Dancing Star** (Random House, \$17.99, 9780593309575) is an effervescent retelling of *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which author Laura Wood transplants Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick to an artists' colony in Tuscany. There, young Bea is encouraged to explore her passions under the watchful but mischief-minded eyes of her new friends.

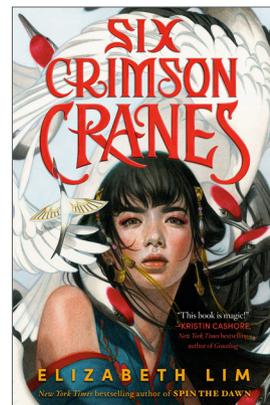
Wood's second YA novel resurrects the dazzle that made her first, 2020's *A Sky Painted Gold*, such a gem. Readers will be immersed in the electric heat of an Italian summer, surrounded by vibrant characters and inspired by their free-flowing conversations and progressive ideals.

Although Wood treats the political tensions in Italy seriously, the novel's primary focus is Bea's personal journey. In the beginning, she's a witty and intelligent girl who's unhappy with the status quo but uncertain how to define her ambitions. It's heartening to see Bea's evolution into a self-assured young woman who is determined to chart her own course. And if readers fall just a little bit in love with Ben in the meantime, well, who could blame them?

—Sarah Welch

## Six Crimson Cranes

By Elizabeth Lim



### Fantasy

Magic is forbidden in Kiata, so Princess Shiori keeps her abilities hidden. But when she slips up, Shiori's stepmother, Raikama, notices. The two watch one another warily until Shiori discovers that Raikama is also hiding a secret.

After Shiori reveals the secret to her six older

brothers, Raikama curses them, transforming the princes into cranes, then lays an even more cruel curse on Shiori: A magical bowl on her head obscures her face, so that she is unrecognizable as the kingdom's princess, and any time she speaks a single word aloud, one of her brothers will die.

Shiori must rely on help from Kiki, a mischievous paper bird brought to life by Shiori's magic; an infuriating dragon prince; and a nobleman's son who continually defies her expectations. It will take all of Shiori's wit and determination to reunite her family and break Raikama's curses.

In **Six Crimson Cranes** (Knopf, \$18.99, 9780593300916), Elizabeth Lim delivers a mix of fairy tale and legend that feels both classical and fresh. Lim draws on and blends European, Chinese and Japanese sources, which gives the novel an entertaining unpredictability, as the reader never knows which source's elements will take precedence in the next step of the story.

Shiori is no magical savant; she's an endearing heroine who uses her natural strengths to fight her way back home. The book's romantic subplot is satisfyingly swoony but also functions as an indicator of Shiori's transformation from a kind and curious yet sheltered and judgmental princess into an open-minded young woman.

Intriguing departures from the beats of a typical fantasy-quest plot, well-laid red herrings and excellently sown seeds of future complications set **Six Crimson Cranes** apart. It radiates with Lim's love for fairy tales and legends from around the world and takes readers on a well-paced adventure with a magic all its own.

—Annie Metcalf

# A JOYOUS HYMN TO THE SONIC CATHEDRAL

Leah Johnson's second novel is an ode to summer, friendship, love and Black girls everywhere.

Leah Johnson burst onto the YA scene in the summer of 2020 with her acclaimed debut, *You Should See Me in a Crown*, which received a Stonewall Honor. She returns with *Rise to the Sun* (Scholastic, \$17.99, 9781338662238), the story of Olivia and Toni, who meet on the first day of the Farmland Music and Arts Festival. Together, they race to solve scavenger hunt clues, nail onstage performances and learn to trust each other with their hopes and fears.

**Let's start from the outside and work our way in. What did you think the first time you saw the book's cover art?** I full-on got teary-eyed. It's beautiful art—bright and hopeful—reflecting Black queer girls in love, and I couldn't have asked for anything more.

**Can you introduce us to Toni and Olivia? Where are they in their lives when readers first meet them?**

Toni is grieving the loss of her father, who passed away eight months before the book begins. She's hoping that returning to the music festival they both loved will bring her closer to him and give her some insight into what she should be doing with her life after high school.

Olivia has just been the victim of a pretty nasty breakup that's left her an outcast at school and at home, and she's hoping that one epic weekend with her best friend, Imani, will help her forget what her senior year has in store.

They're both precious little unsure babies trying to convince the world that they have it all together. (Reader, they do not.)

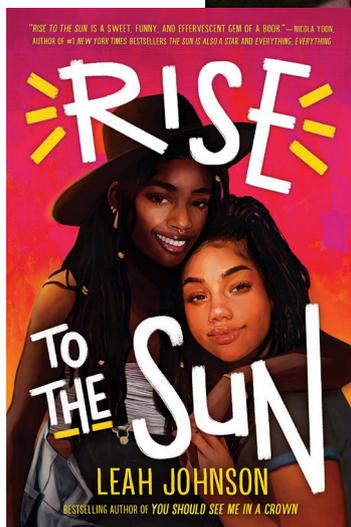
**Your first book was told from a single character's point of view, but *Rise to the Sun* alternates between two perspectives. What motivated that decision? Was that always the plan?**

From the start, I knew that I wanted the book to be told from two points of view and also take place over a pretty tight span of time, which is an homage to some of my favorite books (Rachel Cohn and David Levithan's *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* being at the top of that particular list) but also an effort to more intimately explore two sides of the same fear.

Both Toni and Olivia are terrified of being seen for who they really are. Digging into that more—the ways they arrived at that fear, what it takes to push past it, allowing themselves to be loved through it—felt like not only an interesting craft challenge but also a real opportunity to explore the ways all of us at our cores are both remarkably similar and wildly different.

**The book's dual perspectives enable us to see that when Olivia views one of her personality traits as a flaw, Toni actually considers it to be one of Olivia's strengths, and vice versa. It's a really effective way to capture how girls, especially young queer Black girls, internalize negative perceptions of themselves. Was this always something you wanted to explore in this book?**

Thanks so much for saying that. I hoped it would illustrate the ways that so many of us are unable to see the best parts of ourselves because the voices that want us to be ashamed or embarrassed or small are often the loudest in our heads. But when you're able to divorce yourself from those voices and unlearn that shame, you become your fullest self. Sometimes it takes someone else who sees that grandness in you, and is so unabashed about it that there's



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

no room in your head for anything else, in order for you to begin to see it yourself.

I've been really lucky that I'm surrounded by people who love and support me, but that love is under constant threat of buckling under the weight of a world that doesn't want me to love myself. Black women—Black girls in particular—are expected to be palatable, to shrink themselves into something small and “respectable.” I wanted to buck against that in this book. Black girls should have room to be selfish, to

be careless, to make mistakes and still be redeemable. Still be worthy of and capable of boundless love.

**You really captured the power of live music as a communal experience. What do the connections between artist, audience/listener and music mean to you? Do you make music yourself?**

I play the ukulele pretty poorly, but I've always had a heart for live music. I can't count the number of times I've lost myself in a crowd at a show, become family with sweaty strangers standing next to me at a concert, felt something too big to name under the stars at a music festival as I shouted lyrics at the sky. Live music has given me shelter when I needed it and shined a light on the things I wanted most to hide when I needed that, too. Not to wax too poetic about it, but I love it a great deal.

Dave Grohl wrote about this in *The Atlantic* last summer: “Without that audience—that screaming, sweating audience—my songs would only be sound. But together, we are instruments in a sonic cathedral, one that we build together night after night.” And I think that's the whole thing. I believe in the power of the sonic cathedral. In building something together under those lights that I could never build on my own. And that belief has changed my life.

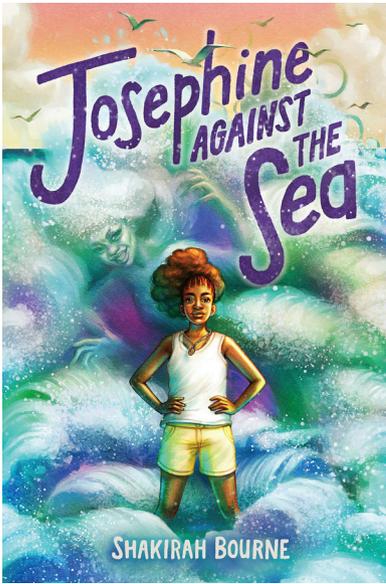
**I loved the book's dedication: “To the Black girls who have been told they're too much and to the ones who don't believe they're enough: You are the world's most beautiful song.” Who do you hope will read this book, and what do you hope they'll take away from it?**

All of my work is for Black girls who deserve to see themselves reflected in the pages of the stories they read, but this particular book is for the Black girls who have internalized shame about who they are. There's nothing wrong with being someone who feels “too much” or loves “too hard.” It's OK to be afraid of the future and unsure about what you want. Be loud, be foolish, be a little reckless. Be quiet, be brooding, be contemplative. You deserve to take up space, to be whoever and whatever you are, and be loved not in spite of those things but *because* of those things.

—K.J. Witherow

# Of magic and mayhem

Middle grade readers hungry for great fantasy reads should look no further.



In two middle grade fantasy novels, each set against a mythology-inspired backdrop, girls battle monsters that are bent on destroying everything they love. These books are perfect for readers who dream of worlds far beyond what we can see with our own eyes.

In **Josephine Against the Sea** (Scholastic, \$17.99, 9781338642087, ages 8 to 12), Barbadian author Shakirah Bourne introduces 10-year-old Josephine Cadogan. Josephine lives in the small town of Fairy Vale with her father, Vincent, who works as a fisherman. Still reeling from the loss of her mother five years ago, Josephine spends her time playing with her best friend, Ahkai, who has autism, dreaming of glory on the cricket pitch and running off any of her father's potential new "friends." She's successful, too, until her father meets Mariss.

Mariss is beautiful, elegant and charming, and everyone instantly loves her—even Ahkai, who is normally pretty shy. Josephine doesn't initially suspect anything unusual about Mariss, despite how many unexplainable events seem to surround her. A deep cut on Mariss' hand vanishes without even the trace of a scar. One night, Josephine is mysteriously unable to wake Vincent until Mariss does it with a single word. And Ahkai's cuddly cat, who is only ever aggressive toward a tuna can, tries to attack Mariss every time he sees her. But when a cricket ball headed straight for Josephine's bat



stops in midair and changes direction during a match Mariss is watching, Josephine can't ignore the signs. She and Ahkai must unravel the truth about who Mariss really is and what she wants with Vincent and Fairy Vale before it's too late.

Josephine is a grounded and realistic heroine. She's still grieving her mother's death and is blindingly possessive of her father's love. She's also incredibly stubborn and willing to go to extreme lengths to have her way. In a hilarious scene, Josephine uses a well-aimed cricket ball and a bucket of fish entrails to let Vincent's latest "friend" know exactly what he smells like when he comes home from a long day of fishing. But her loyalty to her father, her friends and her town is touching and the driving force behind this emotional story. Debut author Bourne skillfully draws on Barbadian folklore to create a suspenseful adventure that will keep readers guessing until the very end.

Josephine's story is firmly planted on Earth, but Kiki Kallira's is out of this world. The 11-year-old heroine of British author Sangu Mandanna's first middle grade novel **Kiki Kallira Breaks a Kingdom** (Viking, \$17.99, 9780593206973,

ages 8 to 12) crashes into a world of her own creation, where she discovers that her actions could either save or destroy everyone in it.

Kiki's anxiety is getting worse, and her fixation on worst-case scenarios is becoming overwhelming. Sketching is the only thing that helps her clear her mind. She's deep into a series of drawings based on the defeat of Mahishasura, a demon from a book of Indian folklore her mom gave her. In the story, Mahishasura becomes so powerful that no man or god can kill him. He conquers the beautiful kingdom of Mysore but then is defeated and banished by a goddess.

As Kiki keeps drawing, strange things begin happening in her London home, and one night, she awakens to her desk on fire and a demon standing in her room. When she chases after it, Kiki meets Ashwini, the heroine of her drawings, who tells her that her art has created a world that allowed Mahishasura to escape. Ashwini pushes Kiki through her sketchbook and into the kingdom of Mysore, where only Kiki has the power to stop Mahishasura. Kiki must fight against forces inside her mind as well as in Mysore to rescue the kingdom and return home.

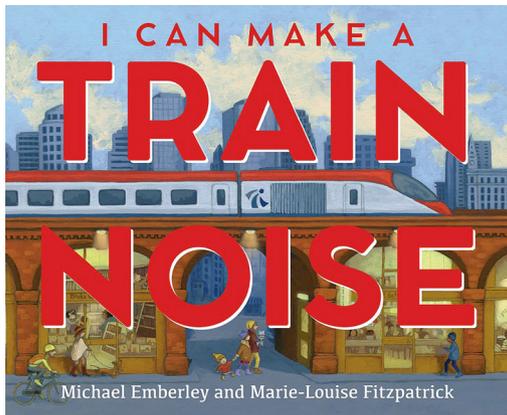
Kiki, like Josephine, struggles with the relatable disconnect between who she truly believes herself to be and who she thinks she needs to be in order to win her battles. Mandanna, who has written several science fiction novels for teens, excels at depicting how Kiki navigates feelings of fear, anxiety, mistrust and, eventually, self-awareness. **Kiki Kallira Breaks a Kingdom** is a breathtaking rush through Kiki's growing understanding of herself and the worlds, both real and fantastical, around her. Any kingdom that springs from the mind of an 11-year-old is sure to contain twists and surprises, and Kiki's does not disappoint.

—Kevin Delecki



# THINGS THAT GO

All aboard! Anchors aweigh! These picture books are your tickets for two fantastic voyages.



Two inventive tales capture the fun of transforming your world using nothing but your imagination.

A girl escapes onto a make-believe train in **I Can Make a Train Noise** (Neal Porter, \$18.99, 9780823444960, ages 4 to 6), which creatively sweeps readers right alongside her on an adventure that's bursting with rhythm and energy.

As she enters a city coffee shop with her family, the girl spots a commuter train rushing by on an elevated track. Intrigued, she quietly says, "I can make a train noise." Once inside, she repeats her statement a bit louder. No one notices, so she stands up on her chair and adds an emphatic "NOW!" In the next spread she leaps off her chair and plunges into her own imagination.

Illustrator Marie-Louise Fitzpatrick uses a swoosh of brown and white paint to signify that the girl is transforming the coffee shop into a traveling train, with herself as its engineer and her family and other customers as its passengers. Tabletop condiments and salt and pepper shakers become skyscrapers that the train speeds past before heading into the countryside. The red train and blue sky provide splashes of color amid muted sepia spreads, emphasizing the shifting landscape and giving readers a sense of change and motion.

Through Michael Emberley's exquisitely minimal text and repeated titular refrain, readers feel the clackety clacks of the train's acceleration, as variations in lettering size and layout highlight changes in momentum and direction.

"TRAIN-NOISE-TRAIN-NOISE-TRAIN-NOISE..." appears in a small, straight line across a spread that shows the train chugging through a grassy prairie. And "Now!" becomes the train's whistle, at one point appearing in huge letters on a curved baseline—"NOOOOW!!"—as the train whooshes through a tunnel.

The result is a fully choreographed, immersive journey. Readers will see and hear the train rumble along the tracks, then feel it

stop abruptly with a jumble of passengers when it pulls into the station. The book ends with an enticing invitation that breaks the fourth wall in irresistible fashion. Deceptively simple, **I Can Make a Train Noise** is a perfect choice for reading aloud. Young readers will eagerly hop aboard again and again.

All it takes is a sturdy wooden crate for a determined red-haired girl to turn an uneventful afternoon into a grand adventure in **I Want a Boat!** (Neal Porter, \$18.99, 9780823447152, ages 3 to 6). Through a series of spare declarative statement pairings, the girl dreams up an exciting sea voyage and sets sail right from her bedroom.

"I have a box. / I want a boat," the girl announces on the first page as she stands before an empty wooden box, hands on her hips. On the next page, she declares, "I have a boat. / I want a rudder," while seated inside the box, smiling. The action continues to build in this fashion as she uses ordinary objects to fulfill her seafaring needs. Stuffed animals become her crew, and a toy whale swims beside her in the imaginary ocean. The girl also yearns for and creates excitement, including the danger of a raging storm, the peril of stuffed-animal sailors gone overboard and the thrill of a safe return—happy, tired and ready for dinner.

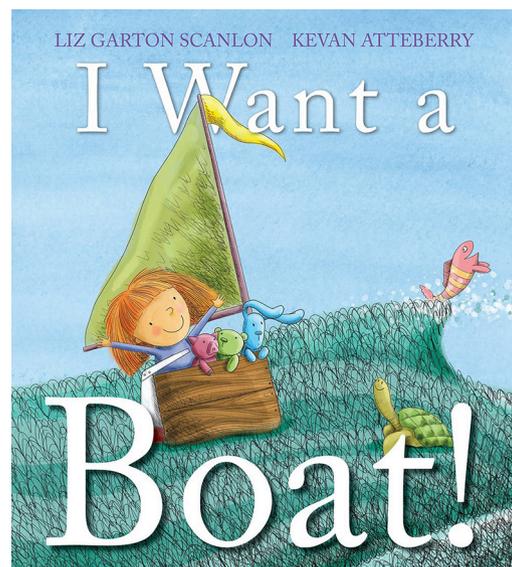
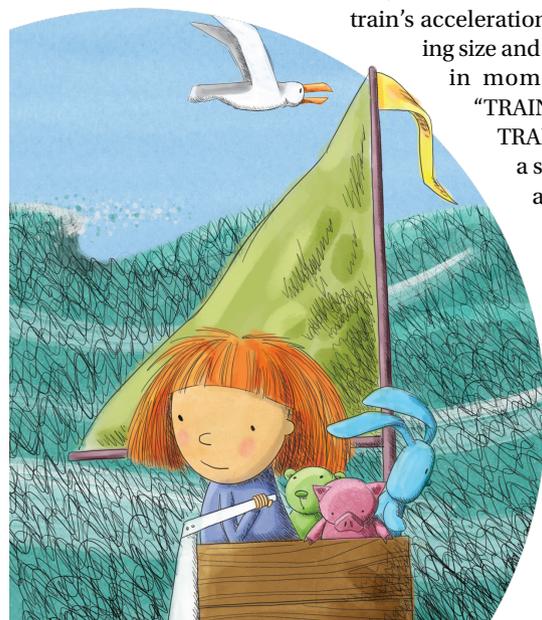
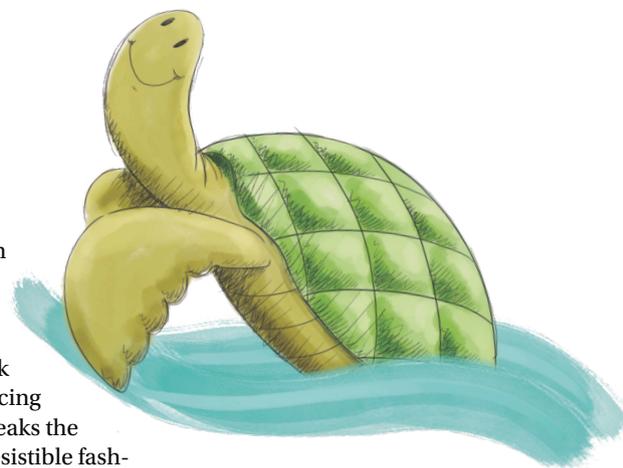
Author Liz Garton Scanlon's step-by-step approach to the story doesn't just create an effective narrative arc that's perfect for preschoolers. It also provides a road map for young readers inclined to envision their own imaginative expeditions.

Kevan Atteberry's cheery and animated illustrations practically leap off the pages. He's a master of using simple strokes to convey great emotion, whether it's the girl's exuberance as she sails the high seas or her stuffed animals' astonished expressions as she sets off.

In tandem with the story's exciting ebbs and flows, white margins frame each page, becoming slimmer as the girl grows more engrossed in her voyage. When the girl declares, "I have the wind. / I want the world," the margins give way to full-bleed spreads, only to reemerge as she returns home. It's a wonderful homage to a similar technique employed by Caldecott Medalist Maurice Sendak in his ultimate imaginative adventure story, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

In **I Want a Boat!** dynamic illustrations and tightly focused prose combine for a boatload of high-seas fun.

—Alice Cary



Illustrations from **I Want a Boat!** © 2021 by Kevan Atteberry. Reproduced by permission of Holiday House Publishing, Inc.

# ★ Ahmed Aziz's Epic Year

By Nina Hamza

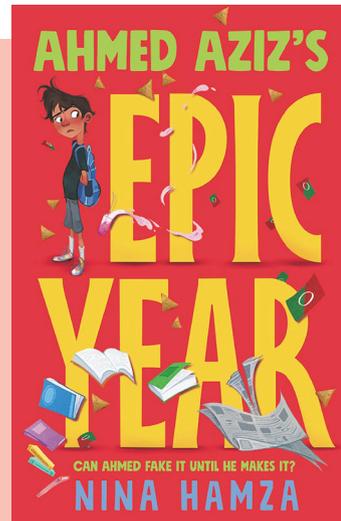
Middle Grade

Nina Hamza sets an incredibly high bar by placing three classics of children's literature at the heart of her debut middle grade novel, **Ahmed Aziz's Epic Year** (Quill Tree, \$16.99, 9780063024892, ages 8 to 12). Fortunately for readers, she more than delivers, soaring over the bar with ease.

Twelve-year-old Ahmed must move with his family to his father's Minnesota hometown so that his father can receive experimental treatment for a rare genetic liver condition. Ahmed feels displaced and lost, and his Muslim faith and brown skin don't ease the transition. In Minnesota, he says, "I hated having to explain myself with an adjective. I didn't feel like an Indian American, and it didn't matter that I had never been to India, because the color of my skin meant I needed to explain."

Ahmed's new English teacher, Mrs. Gaarder, was the best friend of Ahmed's uncle, who died at age 12 of the same liver condition that now threatens Ahmed's father's life. Her class provides the book's narrative focus: a yearlong group competition in which students will study Louis Sachar's *Holes*, Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* and E.L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. At the end of the year, students will challenge her in "Are You Smarter Than Mrs. Gaarder?"—a competition no student has ever won. Ahmed, who's never enjoyed school and doesn't like to read, is less than enthused.

**Ahmed Aziz's Epic Year** features not just a riveting and complex plot but also a large cast of fully realized characters anchored by the likable Ahmed, who has a fresh, funny and authentic tween voice. Hamza delves deeply into Ahmed's fears of loss



and grief as he learns more about his uncle, and she portrays a prolonged and dire medical crisis with notable sensitivity.

The author's depiction of realistic school scenes, friendships and rivalries is also excellent. Ahmed gets to know a broad group of students, notably a bully named Jack, who unfortunately lives next door. Their superbly developed relationship provides opportunities for Ahmed to compare his own experiences to those in the books he is studying.

**Ahmed Aziz's Epic Year** marks Hamza as a writer to watch and provides engaging opportunities for readers to discover common ground with Ahmed and with the characters he meets during his epic year. Hamza hints at a sequel when Mrs. Gaarder reveals that she'll lead a similar exercise in her class next year with a study of three of Shakespeare's plays. We can only hope this is the case.

—Alice Cary

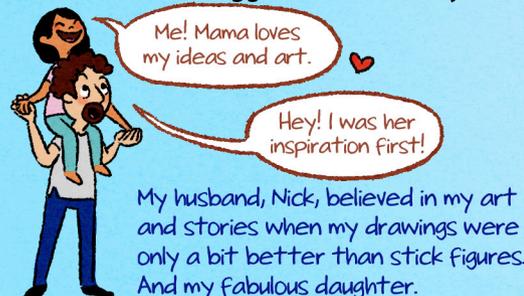
## meet NIDHI CHANANI

**How would you describe your book?**

A time traveling adventure! Two brown girls find a jukebox that transports them through eras of American history and music.

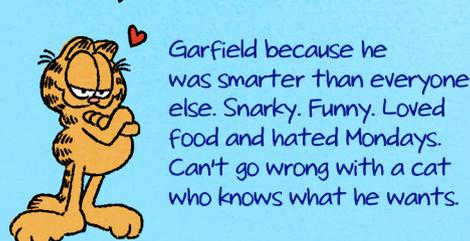


**Who has been the biggest influence on your work?**



My husband, Nick, believed in my art and stories when my drawings were only a bit better than stick figures. And my fabulous daughter.

**Who was your childhood hero?**



Garfield because he was smarter than everyone else. Snarky. Funny. Loved food and hated Mondays. Can't go wrong with a cat who knows what he wants.

**What books did you enjoy as a child?**

I read EVERYTHING! Books saved my life as a kid (now, too, but differently). I loved picture books, chapter books, my mom's grown up mysteries, comics and especially loved books with a touch of magic.



**What one thing would you like to learn to do?**

Play piano and sing. I'm not good at either.



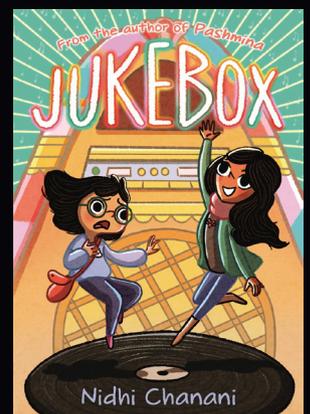
**What message would you like to send to young readers?**

Books were my best friends growing up. They don't judge, are always by my side and can take me to beautiful worlds.

Keep reading and find your own book best friends!



Nidhi Chanani's **Jukebox** (First Second, \$14.99, 9781250156372, ages 10 to 14) is an epic journey through music history. Chanani is the author-illustrator of the graphic novel *Pashmina*. She has also illustrated picture books written by Bea Birdsong, Thrity Umrigar and Kiki Thorpe.





# Your Next Great Read

## JULY 2021

#1 PICK



### Falling: A Novel

By T. J. Newman

(Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, 9781982177881, \$28, July 6, 2021, Fiction/Thriller)

"Falling is an absolute masterclass in unique suspense fiction. From the first few lines, I could tell this was going to be a stunner, and boy, was I right. I'll be anxiously waiting until Newman releases her next novel!"

—Shelby Roth, Naughty Dog Books, Nashville, IN



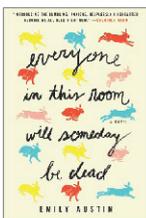
### A Psalm for the Wild-Built

By Becky Chambers

(Tordotcom, 9781250236210, \$20.99, July 13, 2021, Science Fiction)

"What do you do when you have everything you could ever need or want, but still aren't satisfied with what your life is? *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* is a short and sweet odd-couple road trip set in a beautiful world that could be our world—if we wanted it to be."

—Joey Puente, DIESEL, A Bookstore, Santa Monica, CA



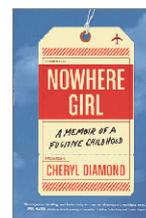
### Everyone in This Room Will Someday Be Dead: A Novel

By Emily Austin

(Atria Books, 9781982167356, \$26, July 6, 2021, Fiction)

"Gilda never wants to disappoint anyone, which is exactly how she ends up with a job as a secretary at a Catholic church. As a gay atheist, it's problematic. Alternatively hilarious and tragic, Gilda's story is one that stays with you."

—Laura Cummings, White Birch Books, North Conway, NH



### Nowhere Girl: A Memoir of a Fugitive Childhood

By Cheryl Diamond

(Algonquin Books, 9781616208202, \$27.95, June 15, 2021, Memoir)

"This was such a deftly paced story; often incredibly touching and funny, yet heavily laced with intrigue and terror. No memoir has gripped me more since Kiese Laymon's *Heavy*."

—Rob Fuller, Seminary Co-Op Bookstore, Chicago, IL



### Fox and I: An Uncommon Friendship

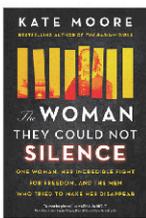
By Catherine Raven

(Spiegel & Grau, 9781954118003, \$28, July 6, 2021, Memoir)



"On the surface, this is a story about a woman befriending a fox, which is in and of itself remarkable enough, but it is also a powerful meditation on nature, living in the world with and without people, as well as the power of literature."

—Cody Morrison, Square Books, Oxford, MS



### The Woman They Could Not Silence: One Woman, Her Incredible Fight for Freedom, and the Men Who Tried to Make Her Disappear

By Kate Moore

(Sourcebooks, 9781492696728, \$27.99, June 22, 2021, Biography)

"As this country waged war against slavery, a quiet heroine fought for the rights of women. A must read for all!"

—Fran Ziegler, Titcomb's Bookshop, East Sandwich, MA



### The Final Girl Support Group: A Novel

By Grady Hendrix

(Berkley, 9780593201237, \$26, July 13, 2021, Fiction/Horror)

"Lynette has been going to the same support group for years—only this isn't a normal support group. It's a secret group for final girls. This is a fast-paced and shocking thriller that I couldn't put down!"

—Katie Cerqua, Gramercy Books, Bexley, OH



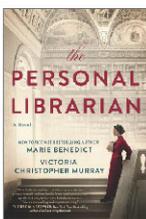
### Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness

By Kristen Radtke

(Pantheon Books, 9781524748067, \$30, July 13, 2021, Graphic Nonfiction)

"In *Seek You*, Kristen Radtke approaches the epidemic of American loneliness from a variety of angles. A thoughtful exploration of a complex problem that offers understanding, not easy answers."

—Keith Mosman, Powell's Books, Portland, OR



### The Personal Librarian: A Novel

By Marie Benedict, Victoria Christopher Murray

(Berkley, 9780593101537, \$27, June 29, 2021, Historical Fiction)

"I dearly loved this historical fiction based on the life of J.P. Morgan's personal librarian. My favorite combination of entertaining and educational!"

—Elizabeth Barnhill, Fabled Bookshop & Café, Waco, TX



### Such a Quiet Place: A Novel

By Megan Miranda

(Simon & Schuster, 9781982147280, \$26.99, July 13, 2021, Fiction/Thriller)

"A once tranquil suburb is shocked by two horrible deaths. As the accused killer returns to live in the community, its residents are increasingly uneasy. Pick this book up and you won't want to put it down!"

—Jane Stiles, Wellesley Books, Wellesley, MA



To purchase and find more recommendations visit your local independent bookstores or [IndieBound.org](http://IndieBound.org).

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