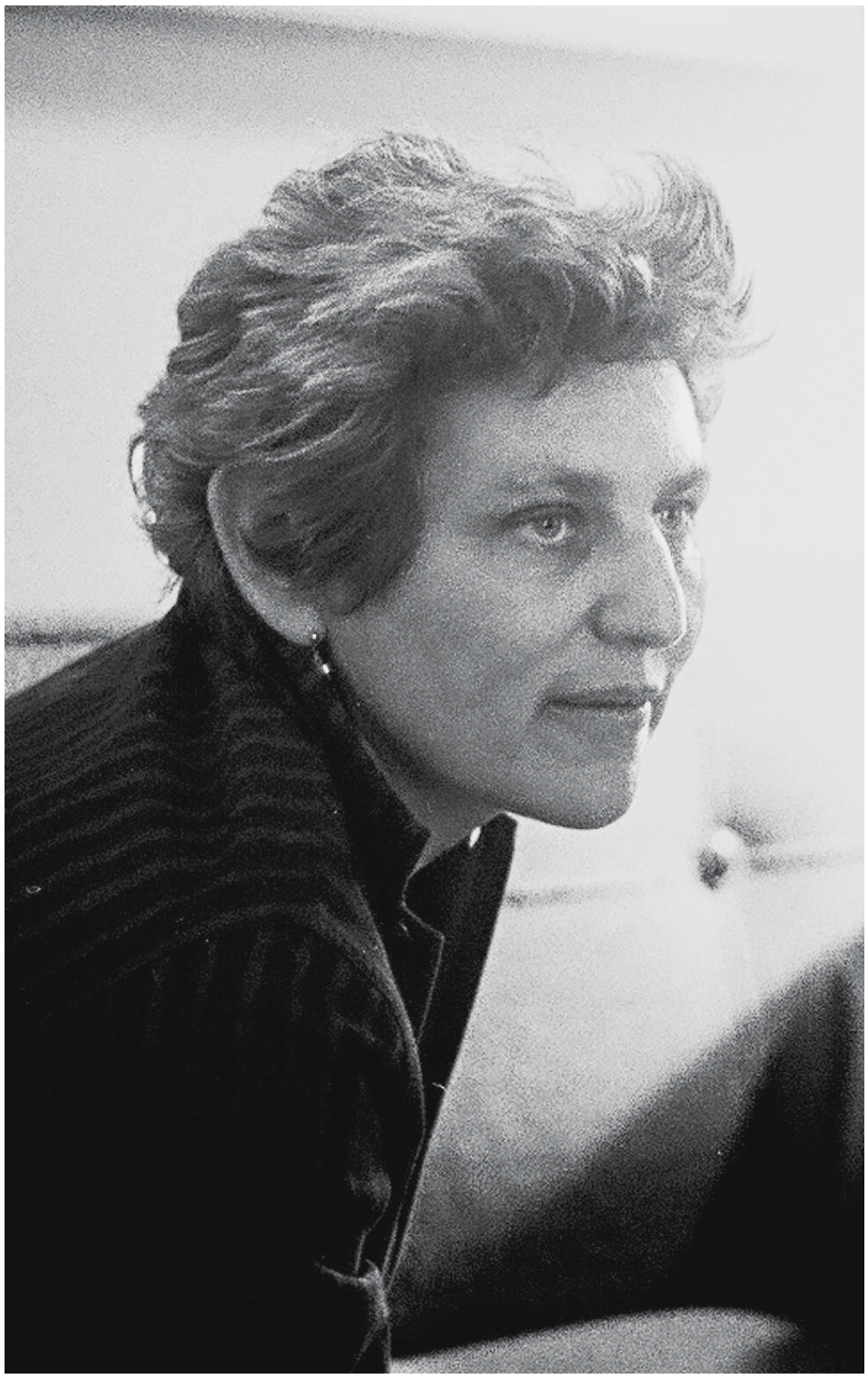
The New York Times
Book Review
MARCH 28, 2021

MODERNIST MAINSTREAM In a single year, four books changed everything

GROUP TEXT Andrea Lee's 'Red Island House' is our next pick

PLUS Stephen King, alien evolution and Tammy Duckworth's bookshelves



OLSEN FAMILY ARCHIVES

THE AMERICANS

WRITERS WHO SHOW US WHO WE ARE

THE FOURTH IN A SERIES

In the United States right now, it can feel as if all our common experience has been cooked down to a sticky residue of partisanship. But American literature tells a different story — or rather, a great many different stories. To read the work of writers from the near and distant past, and some who are still active, is not necessarily to encounter visions of consensus or progress: Culture wars have always been part of the culture. Still, the homegrown literary imagination has shown the ability to flout, to short-circuit and even to transcend the simplified, sloganized language of politics, embracing what Henry James called the "complex fate" of being an American.

These essays on American authors — some well known, some unjustly forgotten, some perpetually misunderstood — aim to restore a sense of that complexity. The books under discussion don't avoid the perennial hot buttons of race, gender, sex, region and religion, but they offer perspectives on the question of American identity that challenge our pieties as well as our cynicism. Reading them now, again or for the first time, might represent a modest act of patriotism, a pledge of allegiance to the republic of American letters.

Tillie Olsen

BY A. O. SCOTT

TILLIE OLSEN'S REPUTATION rests principally on "Tell Me a Riddle," a collection of three short stories and a novella published in 1961. It was her first book, but Olsen, who was born in 1912, had started writing many years before, and seems to belong, with respect to style and subject matter, as much to the Great Depression as to the Eisenhower Era or the '60s. The four pieces in "Tell Me a Riddle" are lyrical bulletins of working-class family life, charged with emotional detail and delivered with an attention to the rhythms of consciousness more rigorous and powerful than most of what is called realism.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

THE INSTANT *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

"**A knockout of a novel**...which we predict will be viewed as **one of 2021's best.**"
—*O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE*

"This is a **profound and moving** novel." —*PEOPLE*

"A **gifted storyteller** whose writing shines even in the darkest corners." —*THE WASHINGTON POST*

"**A breathtaking story** of the unimaginable prices paid for a better life."—*ESQUIRE*

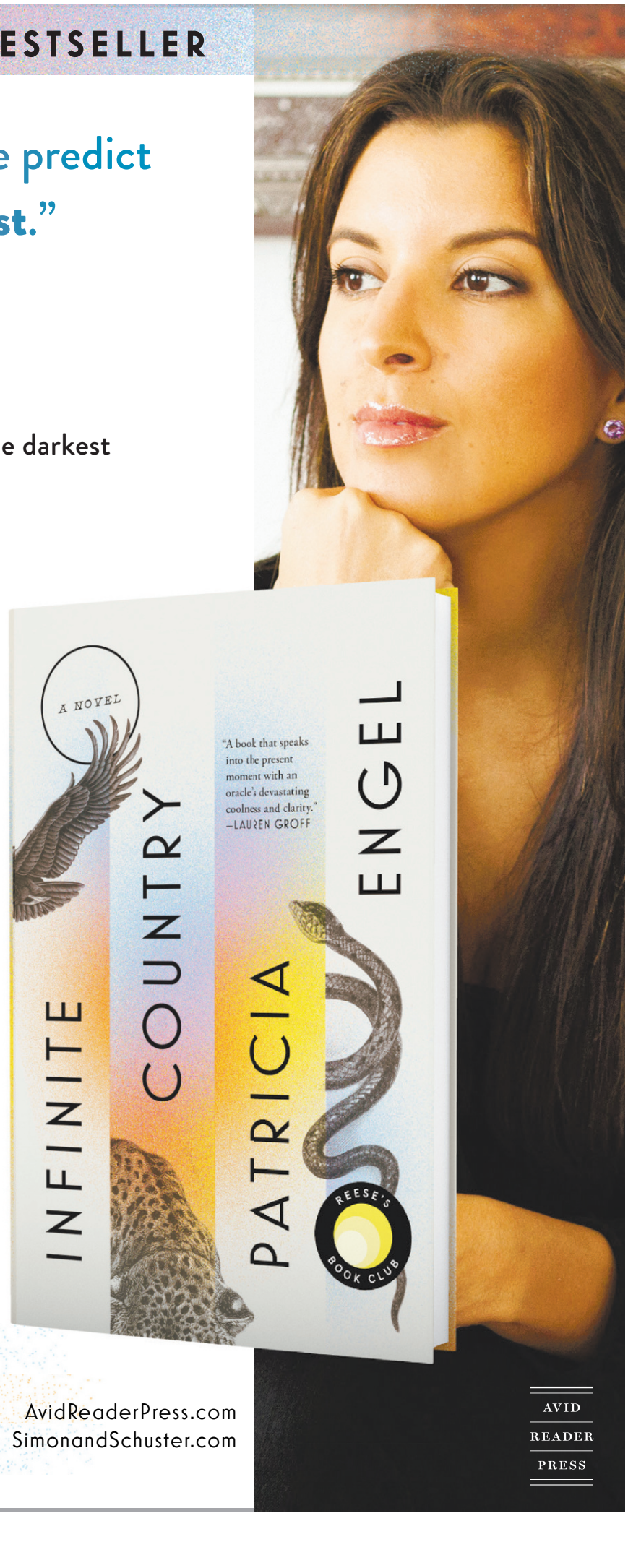
"As moving as it is riveting...poised to be **one of the most stirring page-turners of the year.**" —*THE A.V. CLUB*

"An **exceptionally powerful and illuminating** story about a Colombian family torn apart by war and migration." —REESE WITHERSPOON

"A **gorgeous, moving** novel." —*NEW YORK POST*

"**A sweeping love story and tragic drama**...An authentic vision of what the American Dream looks like in a nationalistic country." —*ELLE*

"This is **a novel our increasingly divided country wants and needs** to read." —R.O. KWON



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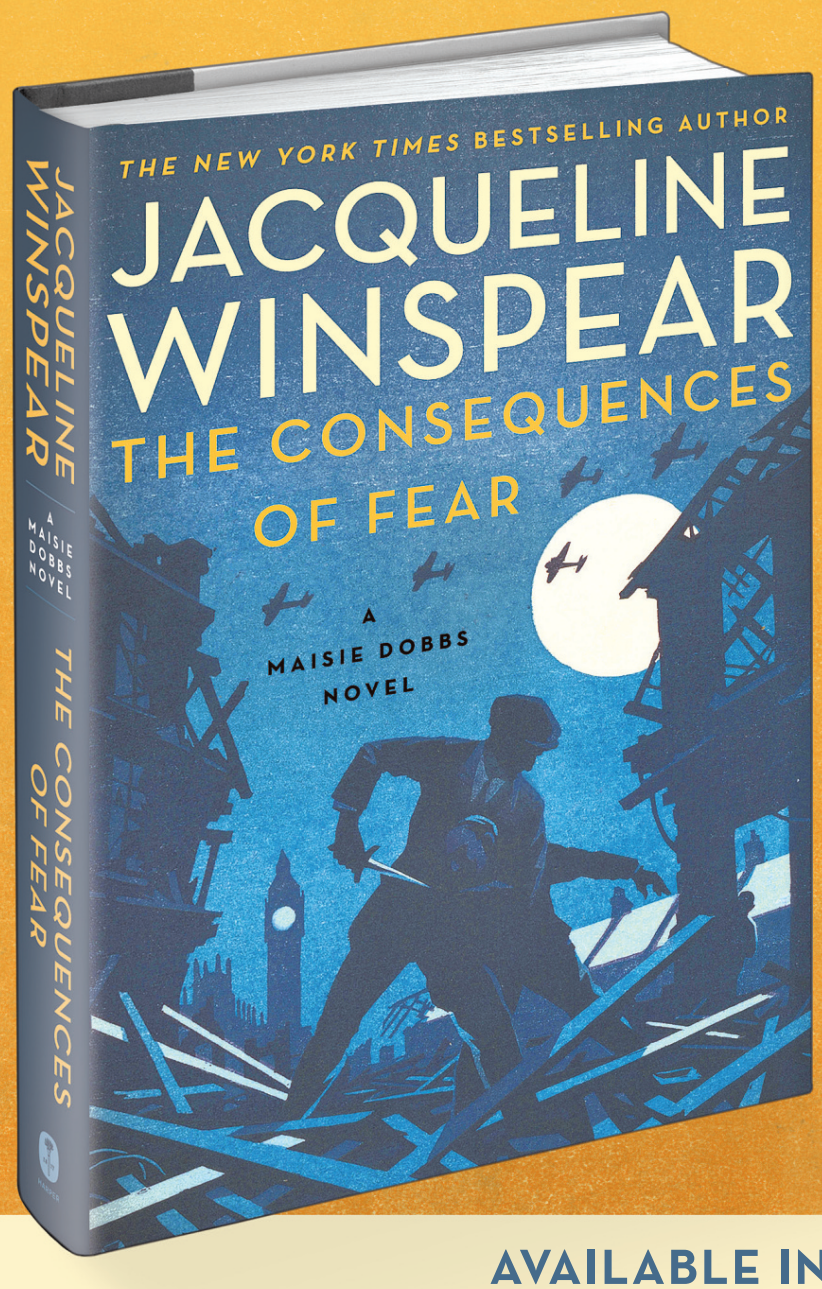
A HEROINE TO CHERISH."

—New York Times Book Review



"Winspear is writing at the top of her game."

—Publishers Weekly, starred review

"Fast-paced."

—Booklist, starred review

October, 1941.
As Europe buckles under Nazi occupation, **MAISIE DOBBS** investigates a possible murder that threatens devastating repercussions for Britain's war efforts.

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OUR FIRST-EVER COVER PHOTO

"OUR PORTRAIT OF Edith Wharton, whose serial novel in Scribner's, 'The House of Mirth,' is so eagerly discussed this summer . . . is the first portrait printed in The New York Times Book Review in eight years or more," the editors wrote in the Aug. 12, 1905 issue. It was also the first time an author photo appeared like this on the cover: "The departure from custom is surely justified by the widespread interest in the subject." The photograph — as exquisitely composed as a scene in "The House of Mirth" — features Wharton in a lace tea dress at her desk.

When this issue appeared, "The House of Mirth" was captivating — and dividing — New York with its less-than-flattering depiction of high society. This was at a time when many novels were first published in serial form. Initially, the Book Review wasn't a fan, writing in April 1905 that "it develops in a rather grim fashion," but allowing that "we must be grateful for these glimpses of the inner social circle, given by one who has the magic password." By June 1905, the Book Review was raving about the novel, and by August, literary New York could talk of little else. "The recently printed assertion that 'The House of Mirth,' like most 'society' novels, promised to reach no logical or dramatic conclusion, seems to be sufficiently disproven in the latest installment," the Book Review editors noted. "Indeed the novel has a well-wrought plot which cannot fail to develop a striking denouement." □

The New York Times.
SATURDAY REVIEW OF BOOKS--PART II.
NEW YORK, SATURDAY, AUGUST 12, 1905. 12 PAGES.
THE THUNDERER'S WHIM
SWINBURNE'S LYRICS.
A Consideration of Their Quality Based on a New Selection of Its Poems, Arranged and Commented Upon by William Morton Payne.
A RECENT PORTRAIT OF EDITH WHARTON.

TINA JORDAN *is the deputy editor of the Book Review and co-author of "The New York Times Book Review: 125 Years of Literary History," which will be published in the fall.*

This is a sample. The number of pages displayed is limited. Send us a request today to receive a copy of this issue.

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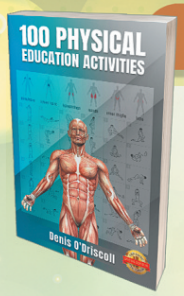

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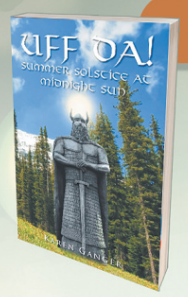

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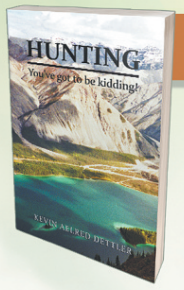

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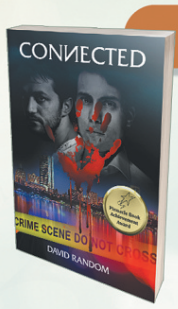

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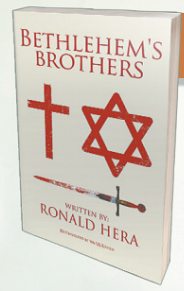

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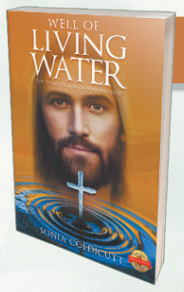

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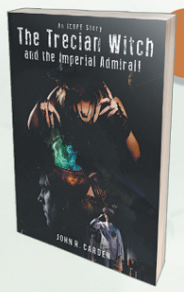

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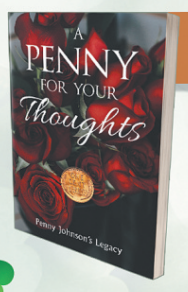

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