

The New York Times

# Book Review

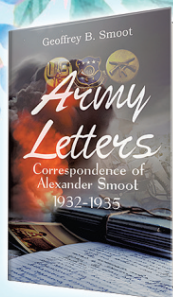
MARCH 10, 2024

IN "SHAKESPEARE'S SISTERS," RAMIE TARGOFF SHOWS THAT SOME OF THE RENAISSANCE'S BEST BARDS WERE WOMEN. BY TINA BROWN





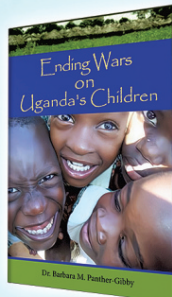
# GRAB THESE PAGETURNER BESTSELLERS!



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Geoffrey B. Smoot

Alexander Smoot's letters narrate a story in the time of war. It reflects a father's legacy and gives readers information about the struggles of the 19th Infantry in Hawaii.

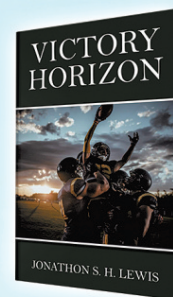
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Through Gibby's *Ending Wars on Uganda's Children*, readers learn about a wonderful people, an entirely different culture, a community in need, and a woman on a mission to help.

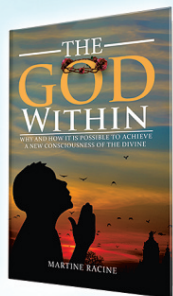
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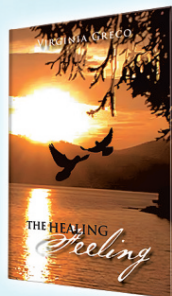
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**The God Within: Why and How It Is Possible to Achieve a New Consciousness of the Divine**  
Martine Racine

This is a collection of quotations and archetypes that revolve around the meaning of Luke 17:21. It is written from the point of view of a Jungian analyst and poet.

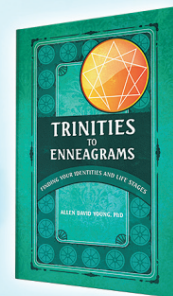
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**The Healing Feeling**  
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This collection of poems has themes of healing and comfort. They are intended to touch readers and soothe their souls so they may move forward in their journey through life.

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**Trinities to Enneagrams: Finding Your Identities and Life Stages**  
Allen David Young, PhD

This book brings new directions and powers into the Enneagram model of types. Astrology sun signs are redefined to create birthday-based Cosmic Enneagram Types, Life Development Type Stages, and a new all-in-one model of types.

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**The Golldooney's Garden**  
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Insects, birds, and fairies are all talking about *The Golldooney's Garden*! They all sing and complement Mr. Golldooney so he may be as delighted to win the best vegetables contest!

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**Silly Billy and the Bees**  
Chris Wright

This book features the adventures of a happy little billy goat who lives with his mother. He explores the world and discovers something that he's never seen before.

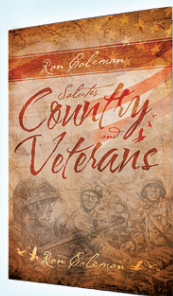
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**Taryn's Tropical Christmas: A Taryn and Kevin Story**  
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This book follows the adventures of Princess Taryn and Prince Kevin of Athanasia. They are attending a wedding with their family and friends when startling news changes their lives forever.

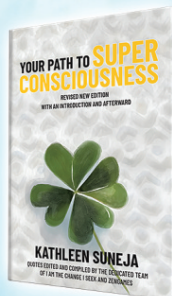
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**Ron Coleman: Salutes Country and Veterans**  
Ron Coleman

Ron Coleman pays homage to American veterans with a collection of poems that reflect his experiences, feelings, and life lessons—all representing his appreciation for American military heroes and veterans.

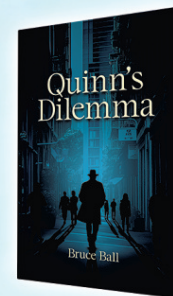
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HB: 979-8-89174-300-7 | \$13.99  
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**Quinn's Dilemma**  
Bruce Ball

Parker Quinn just wanted a fresh start in a stress-free job. Instead, he gets tangled up in a man's thirst for power and revenge. Will he get away unscathed?

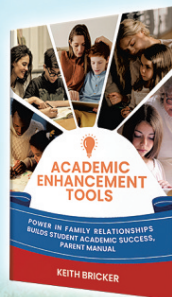
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HB: 979-8-89174-426-4 | \$21.99  
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**Struggle to the Top of the Mountain**  
Ernest D. Simela, M.D.

One young man's struggle to the top is narrated in this inspiring biography. The story highlights themes on ethnic stereotypes, inner strength, and conquering success against all odds.

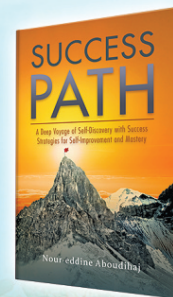
PB: 979-8-89174-135-5 | \$10.99  
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**Academic Enhancement Tools**  
Keith Bricker

This is a comprehensive manual for students and parents which outlines ten activities that assess a student's functional competencies and skills valuable for their future career opportunities and family connections.

PB: 979-8-89174-251-2 | \$6.99  
E-BOOK: 979-8-89174-252-9 | \$2.99



**Success Path**  
Nour-eddine Aboudihaj

A real-life story that describes the main stages of Nour-eddine's transformation journey to date. It is written as a practical guide with calls to action of how we can improve ourselves to achieve our goals and live the dreams we have.

PB: 979-8-89174-222-2 | \$6.99  
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# Book Review

The New York Times  
MARCH 10, 2024



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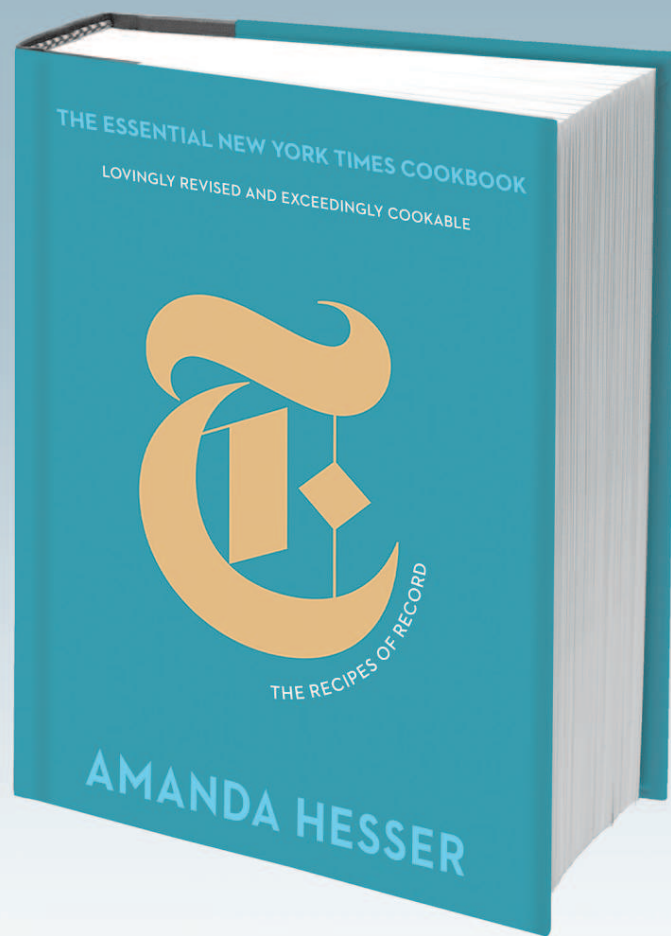
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David Eyre's Pancake  
 Pamela Sherrid's Summer Pasta  
 1940s Caesar Salad  
 —meets—  
 Samin Nosrat's Sabzi Polo  
 Todd Richards's Fried Catfish with Hot Sauce  
 J. Kenji López-Alt's Cheesy Hasselback Potato Gratin



"A gift from heaven."  
 —INA GARTEN

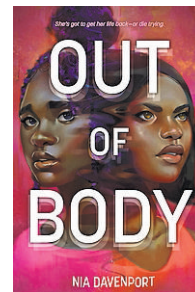
"In a world constantly searching for the trendy,  
 I find comfort in a book celebrating the delicious."  
 —YOTAM OTTOLENGHI

  
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## Newly Published / Y.A.



**WANDER IN THE DARK**, by Jumata Emill. (Delacorte, \$19.99.) To save his name, a Black teenager wrongfully accused of killing a rich, white classmate must find the person who actually murdered her. But instead of straightforward answers, his investigation reveals that the dead girl had been looking into a series of dark secrets herself.



**OUT OF BODY**, by Nia Davenport. (Balzer + Bray, \$19.99.) A teenager who thinks she has made a new friend wakes up after a party only to find her soul swapped into a new body. Now, the only way to get back to her life, and away from terrifying enemies, is to locate her mysterious acquaintance and find out who she really is.

**INFINITY ALCHEMIST**, by Kacen Callender. (Tor Teen, \$19.99.) After he is caught secretly practicing alchemy against the rules, a teenager agrees to help a rival hunt down a mythical text, a quest that is more complicated and dangerous than he realized.

**A TEMPEST OF TEA**, by Hafsa Faizal. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux BYR, \$20.99.) The first in a fantasy duology, Faizal's latest follows an orphan who, to protect herself and her found family, must lead a heist to take down a powerful vampire society.

## ...Also Out Now

**AMERICAN FLANNEL: How a Band of Entrepreneurs Are Bringing the Art and Business of Making Clothes Back Home**, by Steven Kurutz. (Riverhead, \$29.) A Times journalist chronicles the outsourcing of most American clothing manufacturing since the 1980s and profiles the people determined to reverse the trend.



**DEAD WEIGHT: Essays on Hunger and Harm**, by Emmeline Clein. (Knopf, \$30.) "I learned to find something sacred in skeletons and something profane in the way my skin folded," Clein writes in this collection unpacking the cultural, economic and personal histories that have led to a crisis of eating disorders in young women.

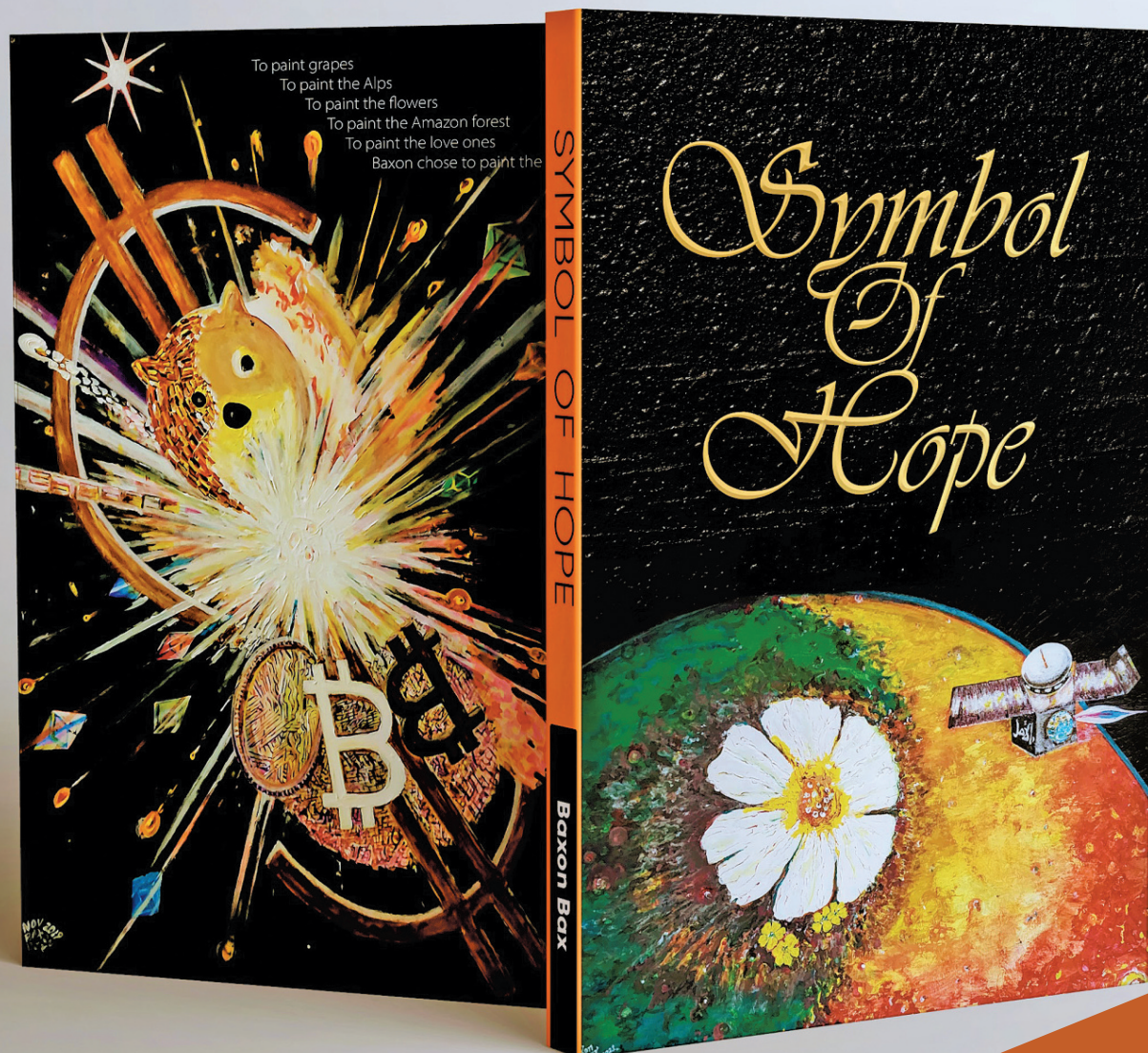
**MY BROTHER, MY LAND: A Story From Palestine**, by Sami Hermez with Sireen Sawalha. (Redwood Press, \$28.) Hermez, an anthropologist, traces a long history of Palestinian dispossession and resistance through the story of Sawalha's family, who lived as farmers in the shadow of mass displacement and war in 1967.

**BABY X**, by Kira Peikoff. (Crooked Lane, \$30.99.) Human DNA doubles as currency for blackmail in this speculative thriller, which tells a propulsive story involving a celebrity singer, his biosecurity guard and a scrappy young journalist.



In *"Symbol of Hope,"* a captivating collection of artistic marvels, the front cover unveils the mesmerizing "GlamourPlumeria Desert Flowers." Enduring the relentless desert sands and scorching heat, the Plumeria stands tall, the king of kings, the flower of flowers. Its symbolic meaning, "Hopeful Symbol," echoes the resilient spirit of a civilization back to a glorious past where brilliance reigned in the 15th century scientific community. The canvas narrates the tale of Al Amal, the historic expedition to Mars; it pays homage to the journey of the spacecraft. The tribulus flowers at the foot of Mt. Mons on Mars symbolize its glory. The book invites you on a journey where art, poetry, and space exploration converge in a celebration of hope and resilience.

Secure your copy today and become part of a cosmic journey that transcends earthly boundaries.



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## Letters



RAPHAËLLE MACARON

### Mariás in Madrid

TO THE EDITOR:

I just read the excellent Madrid reading list by Elena Medel (Feb. 25) and was surprised not to see Javier Mariás's "Thus Bad Begins." His novel is set in Madrid after the death of Francisco Franco in 1975, during the chaotic dawn of Spain's new democracy and amid la Movida Madrileña, a movement of endless love and bottomless drinks.

Maybe a café con leche while reading Mariás's "The Infatuations," narrated by a woman named María, will entice the palate for Kafkaesque intrigue.

RAFAEL C. CASTILLO  
SAN ANTONIO

### Campus Fiction

TO THE EDITOR:

I would add another title to A.O. Scott's compendium of campus novels (Feb. 25): Randall Jarrell's "Pictures From an Institution." Taking place at the fictitious Benton College, it features a protagonist, the novelist Gertrude Johnson, who is reportedly based on Mary McCarthy herself. With sentences like, "Gertrude and the president's Friendship at First Sight had lasted only until they took a second look at each other," there's much in the book to recommend.

SCOTT BANE  
NEW YORK

TO THE EDITOR:

I read A.O. Scott's essay certain I would find mention of John Williams's "Stoner," which The New Yorker called "the greatest American novel you've never heard of." Williams's spare and moving story of

a professor at the University of Missouri is a must-read as an examination of how an ordinary life can have meaning.

JAYNE WATSON  
OTTAWA

### CORRECTION

A review on Feb. 18 about Kristin Hannah's novel "The Women" misstated the timing of Frankie McGrath's enlistment in the Army. Frankie, the book's protagonist, enlists before she learns her brother has been killed in the Vietnam War, not after.

[BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM](mailto:BOOKS@NYTIMES.COM)

### WHAT OUR READERS ARE READING

"While watching 'Monsieur Spade,' I decided to read Dashiell Hammett's **THE MALTESE FALCON**," writes Maggie Qualters. "Any resemblance between Clive Owen's Sam Spade and the original is only in attitude. Enjoyable, still."

"I'm rereading Elspeth Barker's novel, **O CALEDONIA**," writes Nancy Montwieler. "Since her troubled but very likable 16-year-old heroine is murdered on the first page, however, I've chosen an alternative ending. This time she lives and I smile."

Kieran Gabel recently read Peter Bieri's **NIGHT TRAIN TO LISBON**: "It was a tough read but I'm glad I tackled it."

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**10**  
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**2**  
months scrutinizing  
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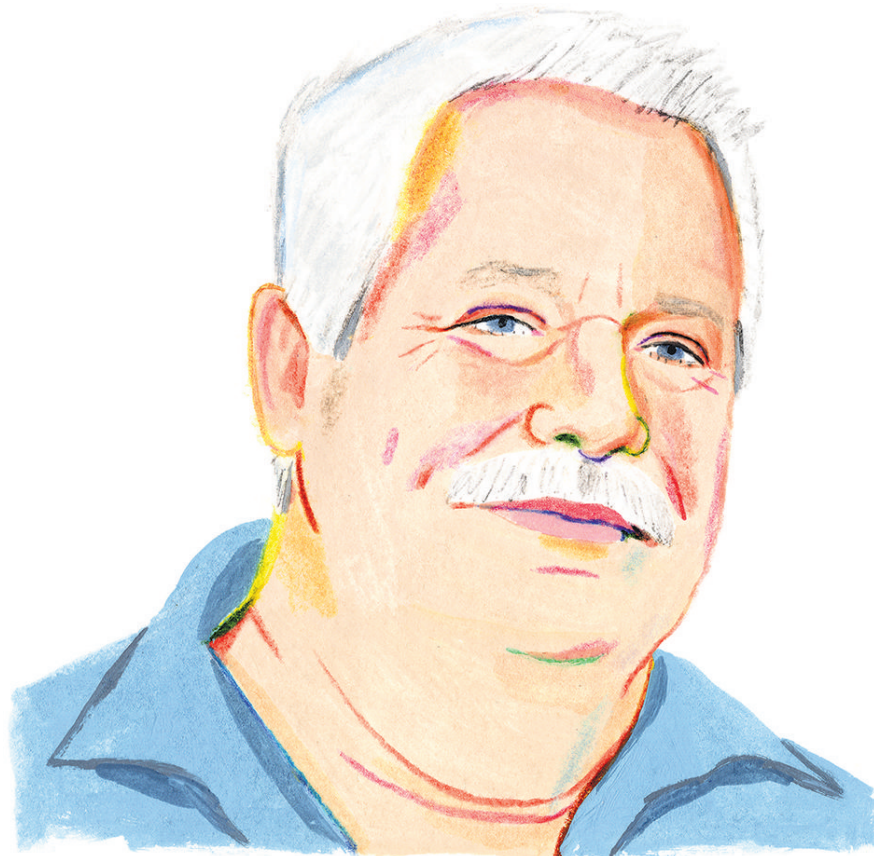


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## Armistead Maupin

‘This is the last in the series,’ the ‘Tales of the City’ writer says about ‘Mona of the Manor,’ which brings Barbary Lane to the English countryside. ‘There are 10 of them, and that has a nice symmetry to me.’

**What book should everybody read before the age of 21?**

Harper Lee’s “To Kill a Mockingbird.” It’s a primer in human decency.

**Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn’t?**

Well, I was warned but I didn’t listen. “Go Set a Watchman,” the so-called “sequel” to “To Kill a Mockingbird,” is a muddied mess, in which Atticus Finch devolves into an old-school racist that my own father would not have found objectionable.

**What’s the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?**

There was a vibrant bohemian culture in San Francisco in the 1860s. Part of it was a response to artists fleeing from the Civil War, which was raging on the East Coast. The community was fascinating, including an actor who some have called a trans man, and other queer figures.

**What kept you from returning to the “Tales of the City” universe?**

Actually I’ve quit several times over the years. The first time was after “Sure of You” (1989) when Michael Tolliver tested positive for H.I.V. In those days that was a certain death sentence, and I was determined not to write a novel in which the gay man dies at the end. When the new drug regimens came along, I wrote “Michael Tolliver Lives” (2007) to celebrate long-term H.I.V. survivors. Three novels followed, and I expected “The Days of Anna Madrigal” in 2014 to be the last. Five years later, my husband, Chris, and I moved to England and Mona was feeling neglected, so I picked up where “Baby-cakes” (1984) left her, living in an English manor house.

**What’s your favorite book set in a manor house (aside from your own)?**

Dodie Smith’s “I Capture the Castle” enchanted me as a teenager and still works its charms when I pick it up. Sweet

eccentrics living penniless in a grand old house. It had a definite influence on “Mona of the Manor.”

**Do you think a reader could jump into “Mona of the Manor” without having read the earlier books? What do they need to know?**

Like all the “Tales,” “Mona” is designed so the reader begins at the beginning. You don’t have to know anything about the other books in order to read this one, although if you’re a fan of Mona from earlier books you’ll probably get more out of it.

**How do you sign books for your own fans?**

Just my name and their name and a personal inscription when I feel inspired. I don’t take dictation.

**Do you think (or write) differently about your characters now that they’ve been brought to the screen by actors?**

Laura Linney’s spot-on portrayal of Mary Ann Singleton was so indelible that she lived in my head when I wrote the later novels. There were plenty of fine actors in the series, but Laura really brought my vision to life.

**Is this the last “Tales” novel, and if so, what are you working on next?**

Yes, this is the last in the series. There are 10 of them, and that has a nice symmetry to me. I am currently working with my husband on a historical fiction novel about a real-life 19th-century gay writer who was born in 1843, and lived in San Francisco. Like me, he wrote pieces for *The Chronicle*. He was influential to some very notable people and lived an amazing life, including traveling to far-flung places and having at least one epic romance on his adventures. I’m enjoying exploring the queer culture that existed during the mid-19th century, before homophobic laws and ideas began to rule the day, like the Labouchere Amendment in Britain, enacted in 1885.

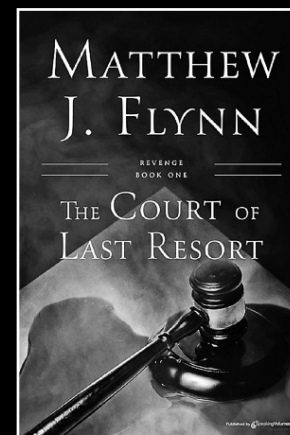
**You’re organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?**

Neil Gaiman, Andrew Sean Greer and Patrick Gale. These are all dear friends whose writing I admire immensely. If there’s going to be a ghost in the room, I would ask for Christopher Isherwood, who I feel sure would enjoy their company.

**What do you plan to read next?**

“The Bee Sting” by Paul Murray. □

*An archive of previous By the Book interviews is available at [nytimes.com/books](http://nytimes.com/books).*



**“Federal Judge Adam Willow, a Marine veteran, demands perfect justice in his Chicago courtroom.**

**Some criminals are acquitted, but none survives.”**

***The Court of Last Resort***

**Revenge Book One**

**By: Matthew J. Flynn**

**Published by Speaking Volumes. Available wherever books are sold**



## My Alien Friend

**EXORDIA** (Tordotcom, 532 pp., \$29.99) is Seth Dickinson's fourth novel and first work of science fiction, following three installments of the excellent Baru Cormorant fantasy series, and it revisits many of those novels' themes and structures: empire, war and sacrifice.

Set in 2013, "Exordia" is a first-contact story: Anna, a Kurdish survivor of genocide who is fostered in the United States, meets a many-headed snake alien named Ssrin in Central Park. Anna and Ssrin become friends and roommates; Ssrin explains that she comes from a galaxy-conquering empire called the Exordia, and needs Anna's help to rebel against it.

Anna, Dickinson writes, "is all in, the way only a woman chased out of her home by sarin gas can be all in. Her adult life began at age 7, with an act of alien intrusion, with the roar of Saddam's helicopters. This is nothing new to her. She's ready to risk it all, because no part of her life since that first alien invasion has felt real."

There is a version of this book that might be more palatable to a broad readership: a version in which a traumatized war orphan's friendship with a warmongering alien heals and redeems them both. This is very decisively not that book. It deliberately withholds what its first three chapters (and dust jacket) seem to promise: a "narratively complete" story centering Anna and Ssrin. Instead, "Exordia" compounds, enlarges and repeats their wounds — the ones inflicted on them, and the ones they inflict on the world and each other — as Dickinson uses a host of other characters to scrutinize ethics, fractal mathematics, theoretical physics and the military-industrial complexes of several nations. The result is agonizing and mesmerizing, a devastating and extraordinary achievement, as well as dizzyingly unsatisfying, given where it ends.

The publisher of "Exordia" claims it is a stand-alone novel.

**AMAL EL-MOHTAR** is a Hugo Award-winning writer and co-author, with Max Gladstone, of "This Is How You Lose the Time War."

This is baffling. If you stop a play after its first act, it does not become a one-act play. "Exordia" is structured and paced like Book 1 of a series; Dickinson has stated in interviews that a sequel is "absolutely" intended. The word "Exordia" itself — the plural of "exordium" — suggests beginnings and introductions, a throat-clearing before the main work, and I sincerely hope Dickinson gets the opportunity to continue it.



JING WEI

**SPEAKING OF SERIES**, Heather Fawcett continues hers to wonderful effect with **EMILY WILDE'S MAP OF THE OTHERLANDS** (Del Rey, 339 pp., \$28). Having gained tenure after publishing her *Encyclopaedia of Faeries*, and enjoying a warm détente with her irritant-turned-fairy-suitor Wendell Bumbleby, Prof. Emily Wilde is hard at work on her next project: finding a "nexus," a fairy door that opens onto multiple locations at once.

To do this she intends to follow in the footsteps of a disgraced scholar named Danielle de Grey, who theorized the existence of a nexus half a century earlier before vanishing somewhere in the Austrian Alps. Meanwhile, Bumbleby is dodging assassination attempts by his royal stepmother, Emily's department chair is breathing down her neck about malpractice, and Emily's niece, Ariadne, is determined to put herself in harm's way.

This second installment in the series is as delightful as the first, if not quite as sharply crafted. One of the many successes of "Emily Wilde's *Encyclopaedia of Faeries*" was how well Fawcett used Emily's journaling as a narrative device to heighten or release tension; here the journal approximates the previous book's narration scheme but mostly reads like a first-person novel. Still, the new characters illuminate different portions of Emily's grumpy and driven interiority, the plot is well paced and tight, and it's a pleasure from beginning to end.

**RAY NAYLER'S THE TUSKS OF EXTINCTION** (Tordotcom, 101 pp., \$26.99) is a compact novella that reads like a superb science fiction inversion of Ernest Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." In the near future, Dr. Damira Khismatullina is an authority on elephants and their behavior, and an important leader in the war against poaching; her expertise makes her an attractive prospect for Russia's "Mind Bank," a digitized repository of the nation's pre-eminent brains.

A year after her consciousness is copied and uploaded, Damira is murdered by poachers; 100 years after that, her consciousness is woken up and offered the opportunity to be embodied as a woolly mammoth, one of dozens that are genetically resurrected in a bid to redevelop a lost ecosystem. In order for the mammoths to survive outside of captivity, they need Damira to teach them how to thrive in the wild — and how to defend against the poachers hunting them for their tusks, and the obscenely wealthy men who hunt them in secret for sport.

While the jacket describes this as a thriller, my sense of it was of a calm, compassionate clarity, smooth and aching, animating its three core points of view. Damira and her memories — and her expanded way of processing memories in her new body — clear a path for the experiences and observations of other characters, working them into their own tragic and tentative ecosystem. □

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# In the Beginning

The novelist Marilynne Robinson delivers a riveting interpretation of the Bible's first book.

By FRANCIS SPUFFORD

MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S "Reading Genesis" is a writer's book, not a scholar's; it has no footnotes. Its power lies in the particular reading it gives us of one of the world's foundational texts, which is also one of the foundations of the Pulitzer Prize-winning author's mind and faith. We want to know what Robinson thinks of Genesis for the same reason we'd want to know what Tolstoy thought of it.

There are the specific judgments she's going to make, but there is also the fascina-

## READING GENESIS

By Marilynne Robinson

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 344 pp. \$29.

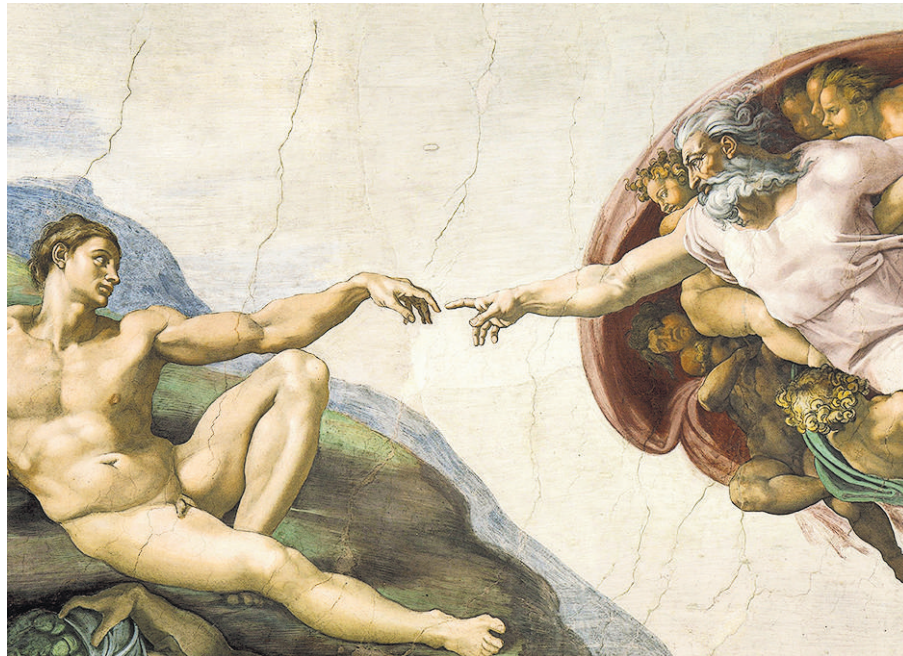
tion of seeing what happens when she applies the sensibility that made the novels "Gilead" and "Housekeeping" directly to the Scripture that, millenniums ago, in a genre of writing very different from realistic fiction, inaugurated the vocabulary of faith that her imagination draws on today.

A woman pins up a bedsheet to dry in the wind in "Housekeeping," and "the throes of the thing were as gleeful and strong as if spirit were dancing in its cerements." The closeness of spirit to wind, the conviction that there is a pulsing life in the world that can make even dead things get up and boogie: All that begins in Genesis, genealogically speaking. The spirit of God moves on the face of the waters, and eventually, far off in Idaho, the novelist's bedsheets stir.

But the surprising thing about "Reading Genesis," given that it's by a writer who can make even nonbelievers feel the presence of the thing they disbelieve, is that it is hardly interested in the numinous. The sublimity of the Creation story, the strangeness of Jacob wrestling with an angel (or maybe God himself), Abraham's fearful vision of darkness — all of these are here, but briefly, sideshows to her main focus, which is on Genesis as a close-up account of one human clan. This is a chronicle, made extraordinary by the chroniclers' assurance "that out of the inconceivable assertion of power from which everything has emerged and will emerge there came a small family of herdsmen who were of singular interest to the Creator."

The Bible, Robinson says in her very first sentence, is a "theodicy," a justification of the ways of God. And Genesis' part in that, in her view, is a demonstration of how human freedom can coexist with divine foreknowledge, with a covenanted plan. The descendants of Adam and Eve wander, murder, screw up, get drunk immediately after their most impressive actions, cheat one another out of blessings,

FRANCIS SPUFFORD'S most recent novel is "Cahokia Jazz."



The creation of Adam, as depicted by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

**This is a doctrine of Scripture that takes human authorship completely for granted.**

engage in a spot of polyamory and then viciously regret it, do harm on the grand scale while doing good on the local one. (Robinson points out, which most commentators do not, that Joseph, while reconciling with his brothers, also contrives to enslave the entire population of Egypt for the pharaoh.) Yet all the while, the faithfulness of God nudges the actions of these fallible people along the path toward law, justice and mercy.

To Robinson, there is no conflict of scales. "Modest domestic turbulence," details "as quotidian as dust," coexist with a God's-eye view we can't share ourselves but whose consequences we continually witness. To her, Genesis is a narrative exposition of this truth: not an argument, but a psychologically subtle story to the same effect, making wholly deliberate use of repetition, variation, framing and echoing.

She is aided in this claim by a strong conviction that Genesis as we have it is written, through-composed as a document rather than assembled from discrete materials Frankenstein-ed together. "I imagine a circle of the pious learned, rabbis before the word, remembering together what their grandmothers had told them, finding the loveliness of old memory in an odd turn of phrase," she writes, and envisions them able, thanks to the Holy Spirit, to act together as a kind of collective artist, to tell one story, to one end.

She thinks of the whole Bible this way, each new book, onward through the Law and the Prophets and very much including

the New Testament, developing the narrative "with a full awareness of the text as it existed to that point" and able, by grace, to continue in harmony with it. This is a doctrine of Scripture that takes human authorship completely for granted, as a liberal interpreter would, and that reads "ta biblia," "the books," as being truly one book — one gift to humanity with a single redemptive aim — the way a conservative interpreter would. If you mapped Robinson's novelistic reading onto contemporary scholarship of the Bible, you'd find her in several camps at once. Maybe grace is, too.

There are some arguable points. Robinson's depiction of law as a framework of instruction that is up to us to keep or break is extremely modern and individualistic, and doesn't square with the enforced tribal behavior of the Mosaic Code. In the same way, her confidence that "one is, with God, the only possibly competent judge of one's own spiritual state" seems to populate the ancient desert with rather anachronistic Calvinists. And occasionally, she is so determined, in her vindication of God's good intentions, not to let any barbarous or primitive elements into her portrayal of him that you get the whiff of one of those liberal sermons in which the lake of unquenchable fire sweetly transmogrifies over five minutes into a pool of milk and honey.

These are the idiosyncratic incidentals of a genuinely idiosyncratic reading. Against them, there is the tough-minded continual splendor of Robinson's attention to Genesis' figures in the landscape. And there is her affirmation that the foreground, where the sheep baa around the tattered tents and men and women muddle their way onward to the Promised Land, backs onto the immensity that spoke the cosmos into being. □

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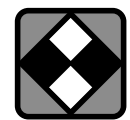
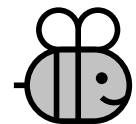
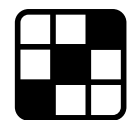
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# Secret Scholars

A Renaissance historian unearths the work of an astounding group of Elizabethan women of letters.

By **TINA BROWN**

JUDITH SHAKESPEARE, Virginia Woolf's imaginary sister of the Bard, was for years the accepted portrait of the nonexistent writer of Renaissance England. In "A Room of One's Own," her seminal feminist essay, Woolf concluded that any glimmer of female creativity in Shakespeare's time would have been expunged by a pinched life as a breeding machine of children who so often died, disallowed opinions of her own. Had any woman survived these conditions, wrote Woolf, "whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issued from a strained and morbid imagination."

Wrong, says the Renaissance scholar Ramie Targoff in "Shakespeare's Sisters," her fascinating excavation of four intellectual powerhouse women of the 16th and early 17th centuries. Woolf had just not dug deep enough to find Mary Sidney's sublime translations, Aemilia Lanyer's groundbreaking poems or Elizabeth Cary's subversive dramas. She dismissed the fourth, the great diarist Anne Clifford, as "trivial," says Targoff — a view not shared by Anne's distant relative Vita Sackville-West when she discovered and lovingly edited the diaries in 1923.

All Targoff's subjects — except for the court musician's daughter, Lanyer — were well-born women. (The female literacy rate in Renaissance England was, by some calculations, below 10 percent outside London — so there is little chance of a hidden masterpiece emerging from the ruins of a pigsty on Pudding Lane.)

But aristocratic life for women with an educated mind offered its own special torture. They had to watch the men of the family leave home for the schooling they were denied and could be married off early to tyrannical dullards — Mary Sidney was only 15 when she was "picked to breed" by a dour 38-year-old widower, the Earl of Pembroke, and to take on the responsibilities as chatelaine of one of England's grandest stately homes.

Elizabeth Cary's husband, Sir Henry (with whom she churned out 11 children), was a dead weight on his wife's soaring talent as a playwright. He forced her to ride, despite her terror of horses. When he left for two years to fight in Protestant wars in the Netherlands, his mother hired someone to write letters to him in Elizabeth's name in case her husband found her obvious intelligence repellent.

The cruel certainties and caprices of primogeniture were an occupational hazard for aristocratic women. Anne Clifford battled for four bitter decades to reverse her exclusion from her father's will: In clear breach of an entail, it left the entirety of his vast northern estates to his brother. Defy-

**TINA BROWN** is the author, most recently, of "The Palace Papers."



Clockwise from top left: the dramatist Elizabeth Cary; a portrait of a woman believed to be the poet Aemilia Lanyer; the diarist Anne Clifford; the translator Mary Sidney.

ing her husband and even the king, she eventually won and took possession of all five of the family's crumbling castles. The exhaustive search through records and legal claims that spurred the rich detail of her autobiographical writing was, in truth, a lifelong effort to validate her right to exist.

If Elizabethan noblewomen had looked for a contemporary role model in Queen Elizabeth I, they would have been disappointed. The queen, in her own speech, played her gender as an anomaly. As Targoff points out, Elizabeth had little in common with most women of the era. The "Virgin Queen," after all, was never forced to submit to a husband who controlled all legal rights over her person and her property, never experienced motherhood or the pain of a child's loss.

It is as an alpha scholar and writer that Elizabeth I earns a chapter in this study, crafting translations into Latin, French and Italian from the age of 12 and leaving

accused wife; the ranting king doesn't even enter until Act IV.

In Mary Sidney's case, her voice emerged under the influence of her gifted and much more famous elder brother, the courtier/soldier/poet Philip, who used her as an editorial sounding board and dedicated to her his celebrated pastoral romance, "Arcadia."

With Mary's help, Philip translated 150 Hebrew psalms before she was inspired to toss off 107 more of her own with 128 different combinations of stanza and meter. "Fear came upon them and sorrow, as upon a woman in travail," from the original Hebrew version of Psalm 48, is, Targoff shows us in Mary's version, rendered in the more empathetic voice of a woman who has given birth herself: "So they fear, and so they fare/As the wife,/whose woeful care/the pangs of childbed finds." The great John Donne was among the psalm's many admirers.

Aemilia Lanyer received no such plaudits for her own remarkable literary efforts. The woman was so erudite, for God's sake, that she dreamed in Latin. The closest she got to high society was as the mistress of the Lord Chamberlain, Baron Hunsdon, son of Anne Boleyn's sister, Mary. (The book is alive with such juicy incidental details. I had never read that Elizabeth I quietly attempted the restoration of her slain mother's reputation by elevating her extended family at court.)

Hunsdon kicked Aemilia to the curb when she fell pregnant, fobbing her off on a musician as lowly as her own father. Her "Salve Deus," an incendiary volume of poetry about Christ's Passion, was dedicated to a long list of society women for whose patronage she angled, unsuccessfully. Its frank feminist cast probably appalled them.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Pontius Pilate's wife is a pass-through one-liner, but in Aemilia's poem she's already a convert to Christ's teaching who explicitly warns Pilate that the man he's about to crucify is the son of God. Aemilia imbues the wife of the Roman governor with powerful agency, arguing not only for Christ's release but for liberation from the yoke of patriarchy. "Your fault being greater," she demands, "why should you disdain/Our being your equals, free from tyranny?" Explosively, she calls the sinning Eve "simply good, and had no power to see." Or as Targoff puts it, Eve was merely "a victim of misinformation." Wow.

After its two printings in 1611, "Salve Deus" fell out of print for the next 360 years, but we hear its passionate, resounding message clearly today. My heart hurts for Aemilia Lanyer. Targoff's intent is to scrape away the layer of literary obscurity from Shakespeare's sisters and present the penitents as transcendent survivors. Their work indeed lives on. And yet, I was left with the crushing sensation of women who tried to flee but were buried alive. □

**SHAKESPEARE'S SISTERS**  
How Women Wrote the Renaissance  
By Ramie Targoff

Knopf, 336 pp. \$33.

us speeches, letters and verse of dazzling rhetorical skill.

Her anguished poem about a suitor's departure is a rare revelation of wounded womanhood behind a queen's frigid mask: "I am and not, I freeze and yet am burned,/ Since from myself another self I turned."

The search for another self dominates the stories of "Shakespeare's Sisters." Often, the women began writing, as the queen did, behind the veil of translating the poems and theological treatises of others. The browbeaten wife, Elizabeth Cary, created her vibrant verse play "The Tragedy of Mariam" from a radical hack of an ancient Jewish history by Josephus. She dramatizes King Herod's obsession with betrayal through the prism of his unjustly



# Food for Thought

This debut novel is a tantalizing layer cake of horror, romance (sort of) and timely questions about the power of appetite.

By JENNIFER WEINER

PITY THE BOOKSELLER who's got to figure out where to shelve Lottie Hazell's debut novel, "Piglet." Its plot — woman learns devastating truth about her fiancé and starts binge-eating as she decides whether to marry him — carries the whiff of a rom-

## PIGLET

By Lottie Hazell

Holt. 320 pp. \$27.99.

com, the faint pink tinge of "women's fiction," the kind of book that gets dismissed as frivolous and small, even though it deals with the topics that loom largest in real life. So is "Piglet" a frothy, fun, forgettable confection, or is it heftier, meatier, the kind of "serious" book that might win prizes, or even male readers?

If I owned a bookstore, I'd hand-sell "Piglet" to everyone. And I'd make a case for shelving it with the horror stories, especially for the scene that unfolds when Piglet's mom, dad, sister and, eventually, her

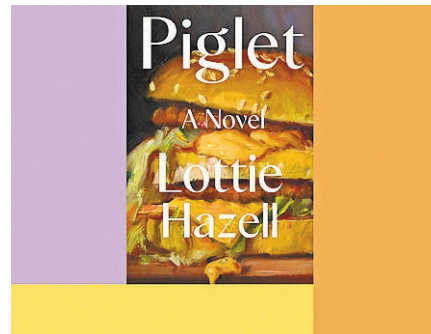
JENNIFER WEINER'S latest novel is "The Breakaway."

sister's boyfriend are enlisted to cram her into her wedding dress, the one wedding expense her working-class father has covered. "What's happened here, Pig?" her father said, lifting his head in the mirror, not meeting her eyes." Hazell goes on:

Piglet felt her father's hand push against her flank, his knuckles hard and swollen with effort.

"You couldn't have waited, could you?" he said, closing his eyes. "You couldn't just control yourself, for once?" He shook his head. "You — this dress — greed," he said, his words failing him in his displeasure. "What is it about you and more, more, more?"

There's a lot Hazell doesn't tell us about Piglet. We don't know her age or her size, her eye color or hair color, or how long she's been a cookbook editor. We don't learn her real name until the book's final pages, and we aren't told the precise nature of her fiancé's betrayal at all, which gives the book the feel of an allegory or a fable: *Once upon a time, there lived an orphan. A princess. A bride.* Or, as Piglet describes herself, "a tall woman with broad shoulders wearing a dress that was designed to make her look smaller than she was."



Hazell's prose is as tart and icy as lemon sorbet; her sentences are whipcord taut, drum tight. The only time she indulges in description is when Piglet's cooking or eating. Then, the writing becomes lush and lavish, with mouthwatering descriptions of "new potatoes, boiled and dotted with a bright salsa verde. Bread and two types of butter: confit garlic and Parmesan and black pepper." There are also "katoris filled with daal, as thick and silky as rice pudding but yellowed with turmeric, finished with cream" and "prawns, pink and black and glistening, scattered with coriander, sitting spikily in their dish."

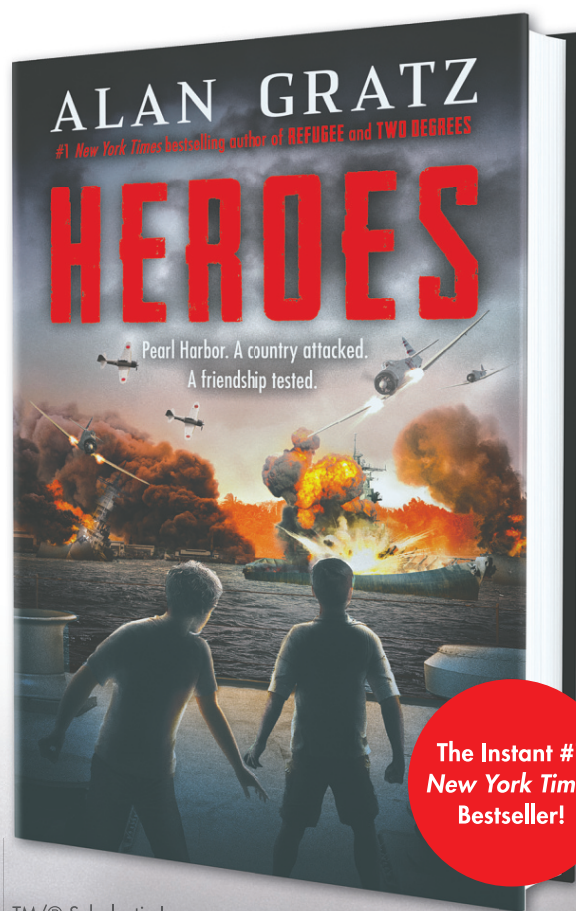
It's impossible to read "Piglet" outside

the current moment, and the new, uber-popular class of weight-loss drugs. Scientists don't know how the drugs work, but do know what they do: Quiet the so-called food noise. Turn down the volume on dieters' appetites. What goes without saying — it seems that it hardly needs to be said — is that hunger is the enemy, and a woman's job is to repel it, control it, fight it off, push it down.

BUT WHAT HAPPENS when women ignore their appetites? What happens when women stop being hungry, when they don't want "more, more, more" — or anything at all?

Ira Levin offered one answer in "The Stepford Wives," and Hazell offers another, in a book where the "will she or won't she" isn't just about the man and the wedding. It's about whether Piglet ends up embracing a big life, full of richness and variety and good things to eat, or if she lets herself be crammed into that too-small dress: constricted, reduced, turned into a pretty morsel, a thing to be consumed. Eat the world, or let it eat you?

No spoilers here. Except I'll tell you that I devoured this book, and finished it hungry. □



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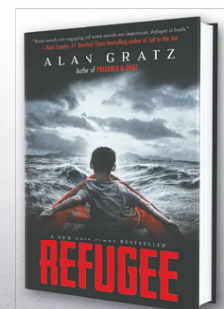
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SCHOLASTIC





# Downtown Discontents

An oral history of America's most important alternative weekly.

By DWIGHT GARNER

TRICIA ROMANO'S ORAL HISTORY of The Village Voice, the most important alternative weekly of the 20th century, is a well-made disco ball of a book — it's big, discursive, ardent, intellectual and flecked with gossip. "The Freaks Came Out to Write" may be the best history of a journalistic enterprise I've ever read, in that its garrulous tone so mirrors the institution's own.

A lot of the people Romano interviewed, former Voice writers, editors, photographers, designers and cartoonists, will

## THE FREAKS CAME OUT TO WRITE The Definitive History of The Village Voice, the Radical Paper That Changed American Culture

By Tricia Romano

PublicAffairs. 571 pp. \$35.

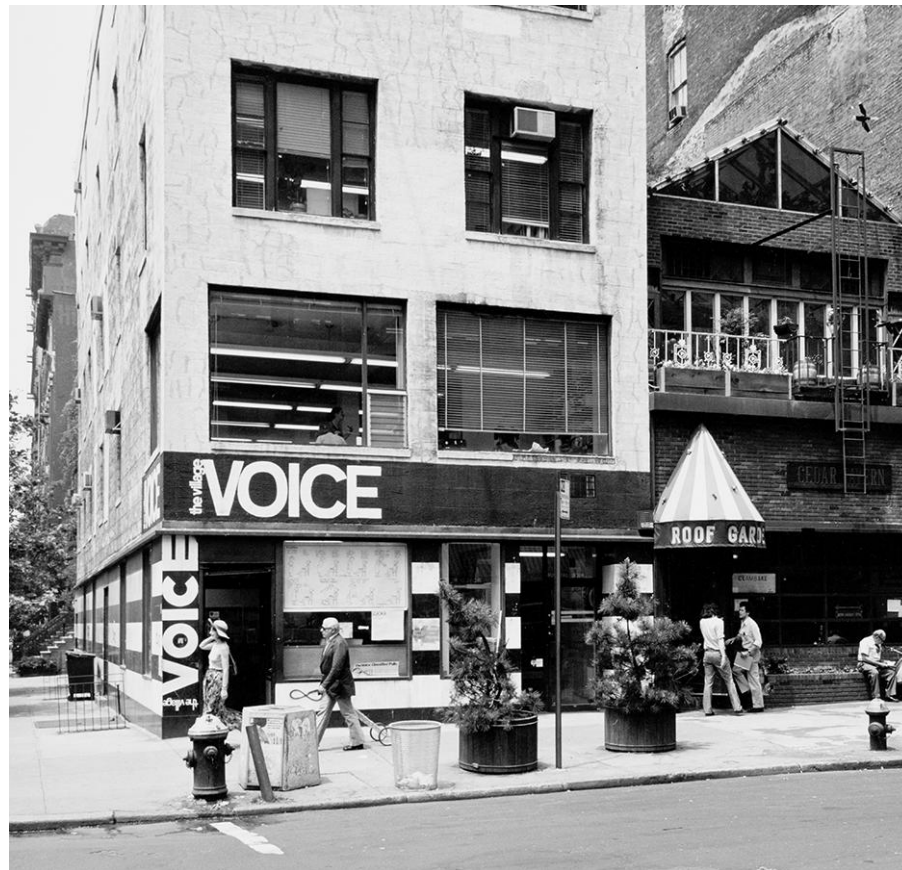
probably wince, at times, at the text. Humiliations are recalled; toes are trod upon; old hostilities have been kept warm, as if on little Sterno cans of pique. Nostalgia remains at arm's length. Yet the tone is familial and warm. Discontent was part of The Voice's DNA. For nearly every staffer, working there was the best thing they ever did.

Founded in 1955 by a group of writers and editors that included Norman Mailer, The Voice was intended to be a newspaper for downtown, defined as below 14th Street in Manhattan. Its influence grew to be national. The Voice's heroic period ran from the late 1960s through the early 1990s, though there were slack stretches in between. The publication still exists in a desiccated and mostly online form, in the same way that Sports Illustrated is existing until someone has the decency to unscrew the final lightbulb.

For many oddballs and lefties and malcontents out in America's hinterlands (I was among them), finding their first copy of The Voice was more than eye-opening. Here was a dispatch from another, better planet. There was nothing else like it. It drove many to go into journalism, or to move to New York, or both. Others fed their heads as long-distance subscribers. You could count on each issue to have been scuffed up by the vicissitudes of the U.S. Postal Service. Some of the scuffing may have been half-intentional. As one art director puts it, the covers tended to look like "The New York Post on acid and run by communists."

Like many publications, The Voice was divided into two halves. The front of the book was for hard news, and in back resided social commentary and criticism. Even further back were The Voice's re-

DWIGHT GARNER has been a book critic for *The Times* since 2008, and before that was an editor at the *Book Review* for a decade.



The Village Voice offices on University Place in Manhattan, circa 1975.

nowned classified ads. For decades people would line up on the night before publication, in the pre-internet days, to get first crack at the apartment listings. People found their whole lives back there. It was a counterculture bulletin board. Blondie got its drummer by advertising there; so did Springsteen. The sex ads were r-a-u-n-c-h-y.

You can approach this book as urban history. Romano has chopped it into brisk set pieces — how The Voice covered Robert Moses' plan to run a speedway through downtown, the Stonewall riots, the early years of Rudy Giuliani and Donald J. Trump, the Central Park Five and so on. The Voice played rough. Annual features included "10 Worst Judges" and "10 Worst Landlords," as reported by the muckraker Jack Newfield. Imagine the impact such lists would have today. Imagine the impact then.

The back of the book slowly swamped the front. The Voice gave America most of the first important rock and then hip-hop criticism. It was the first paper to pay close attention to Off Broadway, and it started the Obie Awards. The literate satire of Jules Feiffer's cartoons defined a generation's sensibility and won a Pulitzer Prize. The Voice covered the nascent downtown art and film scenes in a way no one had.

Its critics were mighty, a killer's row, and they often wrote in the first person, a rare thing at the time. In music, there were, to

name but a few, Robert Christgau, Ellen Willis, Nelson George, Lester Bangs, Stanley Crouch, Greg Tate, Greil Marcus and James Wolcott. In art, Peter Schjeldahl, Roberta Smith and Gary Indiana. In movies, Jonas Mekas and Andrew Sarris. The novelist Colson Whitehead worked for the literary section and wrote television reviews. His editor initially worried he was too straight for The Voice because he wore a tie.

Perhaps more important was the paper's commentary on feminism and gay rights. Vivian Gornick wrote important es-

## The Voice was intended for a certain kind of New Yorker. Its influence grew to be national.

says, as did Susan Brownmiller (one of her earliest was called "On Goosing"). Karen Durbin wrote a piece about the sympathy she felt for the Glenn Close character in "Fatal Attraction." During the AIDS crisis, The Voice printed a condom on its cover. There was a sense of sustained outrage. Nat Hentoff rumbled almost weekly, in his columns, about the First Amendment, before infuriating everyone by coming out against abortion. The Voice's sports section sent Ishmael Reed to report on the 1978 Muhammad Ali versus Leon Spinks fight, and the resulting piece ran on the

cover. Its food writers, including Robert Sitsema, scanned the outer boroughs and were not interested in the top 10 gelato parlors.

The Voice defined itself against the vastly stuffier New York Times. The Times was, Whitehead says, "the Man." To moments of glory in this book, variations of one taunt are consistently appended: "You wouldn't read that in The New York Times." The Voice wobbled consistently on the edges of libel; it welcomed all varieties of life; it got more of what made us human into its pages. Voice writers let their messy lives hang out.

Owners and top editors came and went. The former included Rupert Murdoch, who called the paper "the bane of my existence." So did writers. Christgau — his potent editing skills are analyzed and praised — liked to say that 50 percent of the paper was good and 50 percent awful, though no one could agree on which 50 percent.

Romano, who worked at The Voice for eight years in its later stages, clearly asked good questions, and she has a snappy sense of conversational rhythm. Like a capable film director, she knows how to enter a scene late and leave it early. You always want a bit more of whatever topic she is allowing people to explore.

Out of context and unattributed, here are a few lines from this gaggle of talking heads: "Meeting deadlines, you know, interfered with taking drugs"; "I'm sure that every major person at The Voice had an F.B.I. file"; "We had at least three writers who wouldn't use punctuation"; "Is Jack dead? Good"; "Lou Reed knocked up a friend of mine, and we had to help her get rid of the fetus"; "He hit Ron Plotkin, too"; "What do you think we are? A warehouse on a field trip?" A lot of the punches came from Crouch, who believed that the pen was mightier than the sword but did not always have a pen at hand.

One contributor comments that while in certain newspapers the second mention of Derek Jeter would be "Mr. Jeter," in The Voice the second mention would be the word "that" followed by cheerful expletives and sexual envy, unprintable here.

The internet in general and Craigslist in particular tanked The Voice. So did the gentrification of downtown. The paper was the victim of its own success. The things it cared about were embraced by the mainstream. It is hard to imagine it existing in the new journalistic world of team-building exercises and social media guidelines.

The tone of "The Freaks Came Out to Write" is a symphonic kind of anarchy. I kept imagining these interviews poured by a director into a word-drunk "Chorus Line"-like musical, without the dancers but with a plank-walking line of disrupters with cigarettes and S.T.D.s and inky fingers and authority issues. You wanted to hang the sign on The Village Voice that Ken Kesey put on the back of his magic bus: "Caution: Weird Load." □



# Fanfare for the Common Man

The historian Patrick Joyce presents a stunning eulogy for a dying way of life.

By FINTAN O'TOOLE

IN 1970, when John Lennon wanted to denounce the bourgeoisie in his angry song “Working Class Hero,” he delivered the ultimate insult: “You’re still [expletive] peasants as far as I can see.”

In French (*paysan, paysanne*), the word simply means “a country person.” Yet almost all its synonyms are contemptuous: boor, bumpkin, churl, clodhopper, hillbilly, hayseed, hick, oaf, rube, yokel.

Most of the people who have lived on this planet since the invention of agriculture have been peasants. The word “human” is related to the Latin “humus,” meaning earth or soil. And yet the full humanity of those who survive by working the land has been routinely denied.

## REMEMBERING PEASANTS

### A Personal History of a Vanished World

By Patrick Joyce

Scribner. 400 pp. \$30.

The cultivators, it is often assumed, are dreadfully uncultivated. And this alleged lack of sophistication has made them fair game for every kind of depredation. The food they produce has been expropriated by their overlords, by marauding armies and by totalitarian states. They have been conscripted as cannon fodder; entangled in debt and dependency as sharecroppers and serfs; starved, sometimes deliberately, in famines and prisons; forcibly converted to their masters’ religions; herded onto collective farms and slaughtered mercilessly when they revolt.

In “Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World” his moving and sensitive rumination on the historic fate of these earthbound people, Patrick Joyce quotes Ignazio Silone’s summation, in his novel “Fontamara,” of the hierarchy of existence as seen by the peasants of his native village in rural Italy. “At the head of everything is God.” Then came the landowner, Prince Torlonia, followed by the prince’s guards and then by his dogs. Below the dogs was “nothing at all.” And under nothing at all were the *cafoni*, the poor peasants.

If peasants have been at the end of the line for power and respect, for thousands of years, they are now part of a great ending. Joyce’s study is an elegy for a way of life, and a way of understanding the world, that is “part of a past we have now lost, lost in less than a single lifetime, lost with barely a sign of its loss in a present that is obsessed with itself.”

He writes of Europe, but the same processes are at work everywhere. Around the world, a great driver of migration

FINTAN O'TOOLE is the author of “We Don’t Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland.”



“The Gleaners,” an 1857 painting by Jean-François Millet.

within and between countries is the desire to escape the peasant life.

Joyce, as he acknowledges frequently, is far from the first to note the epoch-making nature of this recent shift. In “The Age of Extremes,” published in 1994, the great social historian Eric Hobsbawm wrote that “the most dramatic and far-reaching social change” of the second half of the 20th century, “and the one which cuts us off forever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry.”

Joyce is himself a distinguished academic historian and emeritus professor of history at the University of Manchester. But what gives “Remembering Peasants” its distinctiveness and its depth is the import of that word “personal” in his subtitle. Its poignancy is intimate.

“As the London-born child of Irish rural immigrant parents, now a man of 78 years of age,” Joyce writes, “I am a sort of relict of what we have lost. A relict that will in turn pretty soon be gone.”

He examined the world of his father, who was born a poor peasant in County Mayo, in his wonderfully evocative memoir-history “Going to My Father’s House,” published in 2021, which captures in close-up the mental landscape that “Remembering Peasants” frames as a wide shot. In that earlier book, he described his task as “pleading on behalf of the dead and their unheard stories.” “On behalf of” because

## Most of the people who have lived on this planet since the invention of agriculture have been peasants.

very few of the countless millions who have eked a living from the land left enduring accounts of their own lives.

“This,” Joyce wrote, “is a world of a very ancient form of silence, peasant silence, something enmeshed in cultures that are largely oral in nature.” In this sense, Joyce is as much a necromancer, summoning the dead and bidding them speak, as he is a conventional historian.

He is also a kind of pilgrim. In “Remembering Peasants,” as in his memoir, he embraces the idea of homage, a word that, as he put it in “Going to My Father’s House,” “involves the show of public respect.”

Respect is not romanticization — Joyce is all too aware that the idealization of the peasantry from the 19th century onward as the embodiment of the nation’s “blood and soil” is just another form of expropriation. What he seeks to explore is, rather, the cultural richness that these generations harvested, always against the odds, from the barren soil of oppression and contempt.

Drawing on the historical and anthropological records of the rural Ireland of his

parents but also those of Poland and Italy, Joyce lures us into the collective mentalities of the European peasantry. He conjures their sense of time as cyclical and reversible. He reveals their very different understanding of nature. “The wild as our sublime,” he writes, “makes no sense to the peasant.” (Joyce cites a Polish peasant interviewed in the 1960s who said, “I like it where the plain is; when I was in America I saw a mountain, and this was an awful view.”)

Much of Joyce’s method is to meditate on old photographs to draw out the importance of bodies, physical objects, interior spaces, religion and ritual. He cites Susan Sontag: “Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art.” “Remembering Peasants” is itself imbued with the diffuse and melancholy glow of a sinking sun.

Joyce shows how the supreme value of the peasant is generational survival: The great task is to hand on to the child the land the peasant has inherited, making one’s own existence a kind of interlude between past and future. His beautifully written book is equally in-between, haunted by the ghosts of the dead but also full of the warmth of human sympathy. Returning to the little farm where his father was born, he thinks of “the throng of the invisible departed that once populated the hillside.” His achievement is to leave them a little more visible, a little less silent. □



# Mother, Daughter and Holy Ghost

A search for a missing parent sets off this road-trip thriller.

By DWYER MURPHY

THE TWINS Jane and Lila Pool are the “hard girls” at the center of J. Robert Lennon’s new thriller. They’ve earned the title. When we meet Jane, it’s “19 years after she ran away from home, 13 years after she married a stonemason, 12 years after

## HARD GIRLS

By J. Robert Lennon

Mulholland. 307 pp. \$27.99.

her daughter was born and 11 years after she got out of prison and pretended to put the past behind her.” Now, she’s working at a university in upstate New York, where her father, Harry, is a professor.

When an encrypted email arrives in Jane’s inbox, it throws her carefully balanced life off kilter. That’s because it comes from her sister, Lila. The twins haven’t seen each other in over a decade. They haven’t seen their mother, Anabel, for even

DWYER MURPHY’S latest novel is “*The Stolen Coast*.”

longer, and Lila, it turns out, has a lead on Anabel’s whereabouts.

Lila’s proposition — the novel’s organizing conceit — is that the two sisters, long ago forged in the same crucible, by the same terrible circumstances, should put their lives on hold, drop off the grid, meet in Missouri and go on a cross-country road trip in search of their mother. It’s an enticing proposition, one that Jane, whatever her misgivings, can’t quite resist.

Their mother’s identity is the novel’s big mystery, and Lennon pads it appropriately. Jane and Lila were, in their youth, avid readers of adventure literature, stories like “The Railway Children” and “Harriet the Spy.” The habit evolved into something like a language between them, while also fueling a belief that their mother, who was “often away and never truly present,” was in fact leading a life as a spy or a serial adulterer, or perhaps adopting one of those lives in service of the other.

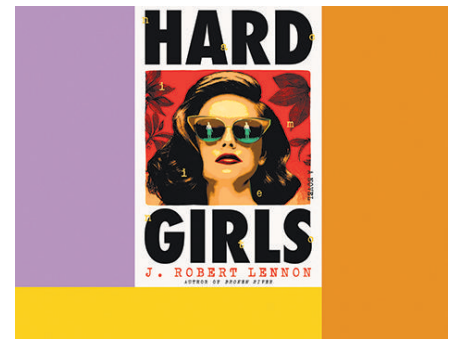
Their suspicions were well founded, if not exactly accurate. The tip Lila has received suggests a connection between their mother and a master criminal nicknamed the Holy Ghost, who has a web of interna-

tional connections à la Carmen Sandiego and a home base in Panama’s mountainous region. If it all sounds slightly fanciful, that may well be the idea: Lennon seems to be enjoying himself, particularly as Jane and Lila hit the road, moving from one indiscreet fount of information to another.

The best of those sources is a man named Gramps, an auto parts restorer and dealer who has a hand in several criminal pies and supplies the Pool sisters with details on their (possible) mother’s (possible) whereabouts. It all comes pouring out in a lengthy exchange connecting U.F.O. watchers to the C.I.A.

For all its movement between locations and time periods, “Hard Girls” never quite gains momentum. Lennon’s understated prose sometimes reads like the absence of style, suppressing the high notes the story would seem to promise: the thrill of a good con, the freedom of the highway and anonymous stop-offs, the tingle of recognition as a conspiracy’s shape is discerned.

Lennon is at his best exploring the nuances of family lives built on deception and abandonment. In the midst of pursuing the Holy Ghost, Jane begins to question her



own marriage, which is coming apart, and her ability to connect with her daughter, Chloe, who can’t understand Jane’s past or her drive to confront it alongside her sister.

These dilemmas are gripping and subtly rendered, but we’re never allowed much time to spend with them, since we need to get to the next point in the journey, where a new source will be waiting with another piece of the puzzle. The build toward the climax is twisty, but in the end, we’re left more with an appreciation for the story’s construction than with a feeling we’ve traveled anywhere worth going. □

# Even Stranger Things

The wife of a paranormal researcher explores why girls have gone missing from a remote island.

By ELIZABETH HAND

KIRSTEN BAKIS HAS TAKEN her time — 27 years — to produce a follow-up to her acclaimed 1997 debut, “Lives of the Monster Dogs.” Now a classic of weird fiction, the novel depicted a bioengineered canine society struggling to hold its own in modern-day New York City.

Bakis’s new book, “King Nyx,” again focuses on oddball or marginalized figures. Its narrator, Annie, is the fictionalized wife

## KING NYX

By Kirsten Bakis

Liveright. 306 pp. \$28.99.

of Charles Fort, the early-20th-century crypto-scientist whose obsessive attempts to catalog and explain anomalous events — rains of frogs, “the fall of a thousand tons of butter . . . hailstones flavored like oranges” — gave us the adjective “Fortean” to describe paranormal phenomena. Fort’s close friend Theodore Dreiser strong-armed his own publisher to take on Fort’s first work of nonfiction, “The Book of the Damned,” in 1919.

ELIZABETH HAND’S most recent novel is “*A Haunting on the Hill*.”



Ever since, Fort and his speculations have cast a long shadow over popular and conspiracy culture: films like Peter Weir’s “The Last Wave” and Paul Thomas Anderson’s “Magnolia”; television’s “The X-Files” and “Stranger Things”; Bigfoot and Mothman and Area 51.

Yet of Fort’s real wife, Anna, we know virtually nothing. As a young girl, she went to work as a maid in the household of the wealthy Fort family in Albany. She married the middle son, Charles, and the couple moved to the Bronx, where Charles scraped by, writing for newspapers, until the success of “The Book of the Damned.”

Bakis’s Annie recounts an anomalous adventure of her own, “the strangest week of my life.” In November 1918, her husband

receives a mysterious invitation from the reclusive tycoon Claude Arkel, to spend the winter at his remote mansion in the Thousand Islands of upstate New York. Charles can finish “The Book of the Damned” while Annie keeps him company.

Waiting on the dock to catch their boat, the couple learn that, months ago, three girls went missing from the island’s Arkel School for Domestic Service, founded by the tycoon’s late wife. Arkel and the local police have made no efforts to find them.

Charles shrugs off this information, but Annie is disturbed. In the novel’s most affecting chapters, she recalls her years in service to Charles’s violent and abusive father, where her only friend was another housemaid, Mary, “a lost girl” who ran away after several months. Annie remains haunted by thoughts of Mary, who reinvokes childhood daydreams of King Nyx, a “benevolent spirit” conflated with Annie’s favorite toy, a tin windup bird that, like Mary, disappeared long ago from the Forts’ house.

On the island, Annie and Charles are met by a factotum wearing a gas mask. Their germophobe host insists they quarantine in a cabin for two weeks. And they’re not Arkel’s only guests: The neighboring cabin houses another couple. Stella

Bixby greets Annie by announcing, “Welcome to hell, by the way.”

Stella’s psychologist husband is also here to finish a book, a monograph on recurring nightmares. He’s invented an apparatus that delivers electrical shocks to cure people of bad dreams, and has been treating Arkel, whose wife died in a hunting accident. Soon, Annie glimpses famished-looking girls in the woods, one nursing a baby, and enlists Stella to help her save them.

Mysterious island, missing girls, magnate in absentia with a wife killed under suspicious circumstances — Bakis has all the elements for a compelling gothic noir. But “King Nyx” feels at once over-egged and undercooked.

Bakis piles on a possible ghost, automatons in a secret underground chamber, unsettling glimpses of the Bixbys’ private life, hypnosis, Annie’s nightmarish memories of a rain of blood, a dead private detective and the disappearance of Arkel’s second wife.

The intriguing setup is buried under this avalanche of unfortunate events. Bakis summons her gift for atmospheric prose in a few memorable scenes, but otherwise “King Nyx” feels flat. Even Charles Fort might be challenged to rationalize its climax. □



# Capital Grill

The Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Carlos Lozada mines a genre known for sanitized prose to revealing effect.

By JANET HOOK

THE NATION'S CAPITAL is home to a dreary literary genre, the Washington book: political memoirs, campaign biographies, policy treatises and other works by politicians, government officials and D.C. hangers-on. They're often self-aggrandizing, poorly written or crushingly boring. Many people buy and talk about these books, but fewer really read them (except to scan the index for their names).

That charade was spotlighted in 1985 when Michael Kinsley, then editor of *The New Republic*, stuck a note deep inside copies of high-profile political books in a Washington-area bookstore, offering a \$5 reward to anyone who found it. No one called to claim the reward.

Carlos Lozada, a *New York Times* columnist and former *Washington Post* book critic and editor, thinks Washington books have gotten a bad rap. He makes the case that, given the right kind of sharp-eyed scrutiny, they can deliver unexpected insights into American politics and the people who get drawn into the fray.

He's made a specialty of not just finishing such books, but ferreting out telling details, rhetorical tics, things politicians might not want noticed — and things they

## THE WASHINGTON BOOK

### How to Read Politics and Politicians

By Carlos Lozada

Simon & Schuster. 390 pp. \$28.99.

don't even notice about themselves. In his new collection, "The Washington Book: How to Read Politics and Politicians," Lozada gathers essays he wrote between 2013 and 2023, some of which helped him win the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

He has a distinctive vantage on the decade: an insider's feel for political dynamics and the detachment of a literary critic. His signature observations, about subjects ranging from George H.W. Bush to Vladimir Putin and Ron DeSantis, are a kind of high-level, intellectual "gotcha."

"No matter how carefully these politicians sanitize their experiences and positions and records, no matter how diligently they present themselves in the best and safest and most electable or confirmable light — they almost always end up revealing themselves," he writes. "Whether they mean to or not, in their books, they tell us who they really are."

Take Donald Trump's explanation, in a 2004 book, for why his hair was always so neat. Because he spent his days traveling between his home — which was also his office — and a stretch limo, private club, jet

**JANET HOOK** has covered Washington and national politics for more than 40 years, most recently for *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.



Above, former Vice President Mike Pence signs a copy of his book "So Help Me God" in 2023. At left, Senator Kamala Harris on tour in 2019 with her memoir, "The Truths We Hold."



and helicopter, Trump brags, he hardly ever went outside. Lozada spots the subtext: Trump lived in a self-made bubble long before he moved into the White House. "In a soliloquy about his hair, Trump reveals his complete and deliberately constructed isolation — the kind of isolation that lets you spin whatever story you've created for yourself," writes Lozada, whose 2020 book, "What Were We Thinking: A Brief Intellectual History of the Trump Era," was a close reading of dozens of books by or about Trump.

In Mike Pence's memoir "So Help Me God" (2022) the tell is in what's unsaid. Pence uses a truncated quote from Trump's Jan. 6 comments to airbrush his sympathy for Capitol insurrectionists. Pence wants credit for refusing Trump's command to overturn the election but offers scant evidence of standing up to Trump in four years as vice president. Lozada nails him: "You shouldn't get the glory for pulling democracy back from the brink if you helped carry it there in the first place."

In a rarity among book reviewers, Lozada sometimes returns to older books that suddenly acquire new relevance. Reading Kamala Harris's 2019 campaign autobiography well after she quit running for president, he spots a reason for her failure in two words: her repeated denunciation of "false choices" in policy and politics. Lozada sees the phrase as camouflage for her reluctance to choose sides on tough issues. That didn't keep Biden from picking her as his running mate but may help explain her struggles finding a niche as vice president.

Summing up his approach, Lozada writes, "If the art of politics can be to subtract meaning from language, to produce more and more words that say less and less, then it is my purpose to try to find that meaning and put it back."

Lozada serves readers well when he tackles a pile of books on a single topic to provide broader context. It's especially

welcome when he considers government reports that are rarely read cover to cover, such as his comparison of the three investigative reports about Trump: the Mueller report on Russian interference in the 2016 election; the 2019 House Intelligence Committee report on his pressuring Ukraine to investigate Hunter Biden; and the 2022 House Select Committee report on his role in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

The joint reading is a rich chronicle of a president who, over time, became increasingly skillful and deliberate at using the mechanisms of government for political gain. Trump's scandals are seen as overlapping tales: The 2019 Ukraine scandal, with the goal of discrediting Joe Biden through his son, was an effort to manipulate the 2020 election as surely as the Jan. 6 insurrection.

"The Washington Book" runs the risk of all collections of previously published articles. Some seem a little dated or less compelling than when they first appeared. Does anyone still care about "Anonymous," the author of a breakthrough anti-Trump opinion piece in 2018? Do we really need to revisit the spate of vitriolic books attacking Hillary Clinton in 2016?

"The Washington Book" didn't persuade me to read more Washington books. But it did encourage me to read more Carlos Lozada and be grateful that, as people often tell him, "You read those books so we don't have to!" □



# Paths of Glory

A new biography tackles the remarkable career of Stanley Kubrick.

By LISA SCHWARZBAUM

THE PASSIONS, OBSESSIONS, habits, talents and fears that shaped the extraordinary movies of Stanley Kubrick were well chewed over in his lifetime. Some of the reporting came from those who knew him; other impressions came from journalists who didn't know him, but enjoyed the digging. It was easy quarrying, because there was so much rich topsoil. A son of the Bronx who became the self-styled squire of Childwickbury Manor in Hertfordshire, England, Kubrick was a visionary film-

## KUBRICK

*An Odyssey*

By Robert P. Kolker and Nathan Abrams

Pegasus. 649 pp. \$35.

maker whose greatest works — including “Paths of Glory” and “Dr. Strangelove,” “Lolita” and “2001: A Space Odyssey,” “The Shining” and “A Clockwork Orange” — are as vital and prescient about culture and society today as they were when they blazed through the second half of the 20th century.

But for Kubrick to be Kubrick took so much fussing on his part, and scurrying on the part of others! He had his routines, his rituals, his ways of working. He immersed himself in slow-simmering, yearslong research to decide on whatever his next project was going to be; he insisted on many many many many takes for each camera shot, with a commitment to “perfection” — the usual term used — that regularly drained those around him, including actors and crew, family and friends, artistic collaborators and insurance claims adjusters. (He filed work-related insurance claims as regularly as other people floss. Surprisingly, there is no record of how diligently Kubrick flossed.)

A short list of the man's insatiable interests included sex, the Holocaust, chess, Freud, Napoleon, the treacheries of marriage and the works of the Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler. Schnitzler's 1926 novella “Traumnovelle” — “Dream Story” — simmered within Kubrick for decades until it became “Eyes Wide Shut,” his last film. The simmering shows, in a movie as impermeable and deracinated as it is weirdly mesmerizing, not least because the galactic movie star Tom Cruise and his then-wife, Nicole Kidman, went all in for Kubrick's fevered ride.

With a slender 13 features in his filmography, Kubrick operated at a painstaking crawl. After an absence of a dozen years, he was completing “Eyes Wide Shut” when he died of a heart attack in 1999, at the age of 70. (The son of a doctor, he distrusted doctors.) And then the real chew-

LISA SCHWARZBAUM is a former film critic for *Entertainment Weekly*.



Kubrick on the set of the 1975 film “Barry Lyndon,” his adaptation of a Thackeray novel.

ing over of Stanley Kubrick's work and life began.

Frederic Raphael, who collaborated with Kubrick on the screenplay for “Eyes Wide Shut,” jumped in quickly with a memoir. Michael Herr, who worked with Kubrick on the screenplay for “Full Metal Jacket,” wrote a memoir. Kubrick's personal driver wrote a memoir. “The Stanley Kubrick Archives,” published in 2008, dazzled with its handsome presentation of so much of the man's project-related *stuff*. The film scholar Robert P. Kolker analyzed the work of Kubrick in an expanded edition of “A Cinema of Loneliness” in 2011. Nathan Abrams, a professor of film studies with a special interest in the intersection of Jewishness and cinema, published “Stanley Kubrick: New York Jewish Intellectual” in 2018. Kolker and Abrams together produced “Eyes Wide Shut: Stanley Kubrick and the Making of His Final Film” in 2019.

Kolker and Abrams are not done. In the manner of the master himself, peering at a subject with an absorption that confounds less pointed minds, the two now mark the 25th anniversary of the filmmaker's death with “Kubrick: An Odyssey.” The book is billed as “definitive,” and sure, let's say it is. It is also touted for the addition of new interviews with family members, and that

part is evident. In her extended commentary, Kubrick's widow, Christiane Kubrick, wants readers to know that her husband was not the tyrannical, cold, reclusive, obsessive, secretive, difficult genius others have said he was, but a wonderful, warm, easygoing guy. The authors, meanwhile, would like to remind everyone at regular intervals that Kubrick was Jewish, even when he ignored it.

Noted. And agreed, too, that those who are devoted to the study of Kubrick's life as a key to the Scriptures of his movies form a self-selecting book club for whom every detail of the creator's existence is worth savoring. (This one is: The Scottish actor Alan Cumming, who played a hotel clerk in one scene of “Eyes Wide Shut,” described the director as “a Hobbit version of Salman Rushdie.”)

What is there, then, in one more biography of Kubrick for the rest of us? The rest of us who, while loving the streaks of wholly original brilliance in his work, are less impressed with the number of takes required to meet the director's satisfaction and more impatient with the patience with which so many put up with so much for so long in the name of one man's art? “What we learn from the myriad stories about Kubrick,” the biographers write, with the bland wording of a state-controlled news

service, “is that he was uncompromising and so singularly focused on the task at hand that he could well be oblivious to others' feelings and needs. He needed to get what he wanted. Or, if he didn't exactly know what he wanted, he would push everyone to help him find it.”

Maybe it's the current rancid air quality, maybe it's the dawning of the age of #MeToo, maybe it's reading too many think pieces about “art monsters,” but my tolerance for the behavior of geniuses oblivious to the feelings and needs of others is at an all-time low. I don't expect the authors of a family-friendly biography to go rogue and declare their dismay at the human toll paid by so many in Kubrick's orbit. (The authors counter the much-reported abusive behavior directed toward Shelley Duvall during the making of “The Shining” with “the cold fact that Kubrick elicited from her a performance of anxious, hysterical strength.”) But that doesn't mean I need to spend any more time with the late Stanley Kubrick than I — a person who loves much of his work, and has no plans to lose his number or cancel him from my consciousness of great filmmakers of the 20th century — already have. If I never read another sentence about the man behind the movies, that works for me. □



# Where I Come From

In this Icelandic novel, an amnesiac pieces together a life, and a cultural history, from the tales of strangers.

By DANIEL MASON

JON KALMAN STEFANSSON'S 2007 novel "Heaven and Hell," the first of an extraordinary trilogy, begins with a sea voyage worthy of Melville. A crew of cod fishermen is caught in a storm off a remote coast of Iceland. The land vanishes, snow swirls over the water. As the waves bear down on the soaked rowers, they must stop continually to punch off the ice that forms on their clothes. It's a fitting image of both the sea's terrifying indifference and a desperate, seemingly futile violence from within.

## YOUR ABSENCE IS DARKNESS

By Jon Kalman Stefansson

Translated by Philip Roughton

Biblioasis. 430 pp. Paperback, \$26.95.

Elemental nature and human tragedy are equally present in Stefansson's latest book to be translated into English, "Your Absence Is Darkness." Set across farms and villages on the wind- and sea-swept Snaefellsnes peninsula in western Iceland, the novel presents communities similarly shaped by their harsh and beautiful landscape, and by the rich history of their forebears.

The novel begins, however, with a blank canvas. The narrator awakes with amnesia inside a church, knowing neither his name nor how he arrived. He is not alone; there is a stranger in a back pew who makes him uneasy, and he flees outside, where he meets a woman amid the gravestones of the churchyard.

The woman clearly knows him; she is delighted by his presence and offers to take him to her sister, with whom, she implies, the narrator once was close. First, though, she brings him to the grave of her mother, where she tells a story of her parents' love. It is but a premonition of the storytelling to come. When at last they reach the woman's sister, the narrator experiences the first of many convulsive recollections that he sets down on any scrap of paper he can find.

Most of "Your Absence Is Darkness" consists of these writings, which come to the narrator in fugues, "as if I'd received a powerful electric shock that unleashed a flurry of vague thoughts and unfathomable feelings within me." Some are prompted by the mysterious stranger from the church, a shape-shifter who reappears as a coach driver, switches clothing faster than a quick-change artist and, among other quirks, offers guidance while preparing crepes.

The characters and stories are as varied as they are vivid. There is Gudridur, a modest peasant's wife who pens a philosophical article on the earthworm; Petur, a

DANIEL MASON is the author, most recently, of the novel "North Woods."



ANNA PARINI

lovelorn priest who writes letters to the dead poet Friedrich Hölderlin; Jon, tormented by alcoholism and yet bewitched by the stars in the sky; and in the most contemporary story, the musician Eirikur, who was abandoned as a boy by his mother, and is adrift in Europe until a love affair and family obligations prompt him to return home.

EACH STORY COULD stand on its own; one of the pleasures of the novel is the slow revelation of their connections. This is a story of heritage, a topic hardly unique to Iceland, and yet it was impossible not to feel that it shares many of the same preoccupations — genealogical and topographical — with classic 13th- and 14th-century Icelandic family sagas. Indeed, I often found myself thinking of the family trees and coastal maps in my copy of "The Sagas of Icelanders," just as I often thought of the epic, compassionate and humorous lens that Halldor Laxness, Iceland's only Nobel laureate in literature, turned upon the struggles of humble farmers in "Independent People," a lodestone for any writer of rural life.

Yet such comparisons do not do justice to the complexity of Stefansson's book, nor the uniqueness of his prose, rendered here

in a tumblingly beautiful translation by Philip Roughton.

The structure of "Your Absence Is Darkness" is best described as a series of recursions: The stories build and break apart, yield to other stories, emerge again later, sometimes at length, sometimes in fragments, flashbacks, single words. The effect is kaleidoscopic; as the narrative turns,

## Author and reader are common travelers into the unknown.

pieces shift, stories merge, themes dilate and contract. I fantasized about an edition printed in color, each narrative strand a hue of its own, the shuffling, shuffling syntax fractal in its effect.

Or perhaps the better comparison would be musical: a round, voices entering at different intervals, bringing elements of both melody and harmony. The text quotes itself constantly, tying "centuries and generations together into one unbroken whole," in a way that feels fruitless to quote. A late paragraph of exquisite beauty made almost no sense when I tried to include it here because it builds on over 400 pages that must be read first.

Music also appears in more direct ways in the novel. Regular mention is made to specific songs and artists — from Icelandic classics and Édith Piaf to Bob Dylan and Amy Winehouse — all compiled in a "Death's Playlist" at the back of the book, and, I've since learned, in a Spotify playlist. I don't know what kind of effect listening to it would have had while reading, but my suspicion is that Stefansson's unique voice, his stunning imagery and his expansive, sympathetic score of human experience are all music enough.

Many artists have made use of amnesia for narrative purposes, whether it's biographical rediscovery in Christopher Nolan's film "Memento" or the more philosophical exploration of self in Tom McCarthy's novel "Remainder." From early on, however, Stefansson makes it clear that he is after something different. In linking remembering to re-creation, he uses amnesia to bring author and reader together as common travelers into the unknown. For what are we upon opening a new book if not amnesiac? We must have our new lives created for us. Either it must be explicitly explained, or we must piece together clues, must eavesdrop. We too appear in the churchyard without memory, and meet the world anew. □



# Girls Who Code-Break

The young women who worked at Britain's Bletchley Park were normal teenagers — playing pranks, attending dances.

By SARAH LYALL

AS WAR RAGED in Europe in 1941, Sarah Norton, the 18-year-old daughter of an English lord, received a letter in a plain brown envelope with no return address. "You are to report to Station X at Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire in four days' time," said the letter, signed by a mysterious "Commander Travis." "That is all you need to know."

Little did Sarah realize she was being recruited for Britain's top-secret wartime code-breaking operation. Arriving at Bletchley Park with a suitcase full of "what she considered the bare essentials — five daytime outfits, an evening gown with matching shoes, lipstick and, most impor-

## THE ENIGMA GIRLS

**How Ten Teenagers Broke Ciphers, Kept Secrets and Helped Win World War II**

By Candace Fleming

Scholastic Focus. 384 pp. \$19.99.

(Ages 8 to 12)

tantly, her teddy bear" — she would work alongside hundreds of similar recruits to help intercept and decipher the Nazis' secret communications.

"This is the story of a handful of young women — teenagers really — who left their childhoods behind and walked into the unknown," Candace Fleming writes in "The Enigma Girls," her beguiling new account of their contributions. "For most of their lives, they never breathed a word about their war experiences."

We learn about 10 of these real-life conscripts. In addition to Sarah, there was Mavis Lever, also 18, who was assigned to work with Dilly Knox, a Greek scholar who had "spent years successfully deciphering ancient papyri fragments at the British Museum." There was Patricia Owtram, another 18-year-old, whose job was to monitor radio frequencies for enemy communications while simultaneously converting the Morse code messages into plain text. And there was Diana Payne, just 17, who helped operate the massive "Bombe" machines, which sped up the process of breaking the enemy's ever-shifting codes.

Events are brought to dramatic life through a treasure trove of photographs — which show the goings-on at Bletchley and the sobering progress of the war — and through the author's meticulous research. In a thrilling section, Fleming explains the differences between a code and a cipher,

**SARAH LYALL**, the *Book Review's* thrillers columnist, was a correspondent in *The Times's* London bureau for 18 years before returning to New York as a staff writer at large.



Civilian and service personnel work together at code-breaking in a hut at Bletchley Park during World War II.

walks us through the basics of code-breaking and demonstrates not only how sophisticated the Nazi codes were and how daunting it was to break them, but also that failure to do so could cost lives.

The annals of Bletchley Park have mostly focused on famous code-breakers like Alan Turing, but the young women's work was, in its own way, just as essential. Interception was only part of it. Some recruits translated decrypted messages. Others scoured messages for clues to enemy plans. Still others, like Diana Payne, performed the complicated, physically difficult task of operating the code-breaking machines.

YET THE GIRLS were still normal teenagers — playing pranks, suffering from homesickness, attending dances. Jane Hughes, 18, sang with a choral group directed by Herbert Murrell, who before the war was the head of music at the British Broadcasting Corporation. She never knew what his job at Bletchley was.

Required to sign Britain's harsh Official Secrets Act, they were forbidden to discuss their work with anyone, even one other,

**Sarah Norton arrived at 'Station X' with clothes, lipstick and, 'most importantly, her teddy bear.'**

and had limited knowledge of how it all fit together. "The work here is so secret that you will be told only what is necessary for you to know," one of them was informed, "and you will never, never seek to find out more."

Code-breaking was integral to the war effort, particularly in the lead-up to D-Day. The Allies had planted false intelligence in an attempt to trick the Nazis into thinking the landing would take place at Pas-de-Calais to the north, rather than Normandy, but they didn't know until the last minute that the ruse had succeeded.

On June 5, 1944, the day before D-Day, Sarah Norton traveled to London on a 48-hour leave. Huddling under an umbrella in the rain late at night with her dinner date, she heard a roaring noise and looked up "as more than a thousand R.A.F. planes flew over London toward the shores of Normandy." When her date asked if she

knew what was going on, she replied (inaccurately), "I haven't the faintest."

As the Allied troops liberated Europe from the Nazis, Fleming writes, they weren't alone. "Every one of their maneuvers was matched — by Patricia's keen ears and Jane's clicking Teletype keys; by Mavis's cipher-breaking and Gwen's word games; by Sarah's translation skills and Ann's complex menus; by Joanna's devotion to Colossus [a giant code-breaking computer] and Diana's cantankerous Bombes as they clacked their way to vital 'stops.'"

For years, the women stayed true to their promise of secrecy. But in 1977, the British government released 70,000 documents related to the work at Bletchley. Luckily for readers of "The Enigma Girls," that opened the door to an outpouring of first-person accounts in articles and books, some of them written by the very women featured here.

"Working at Bletchley Park was the most important thing any of us have ever done in our lives," one of the women said later. "We just didn't realize it at the time." □



# Best Sellers

The New York Times

For the complete best-seller lists, visit [nytimes.com/books/best-sellers](https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers)

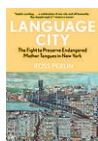
## COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 18-24

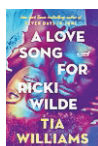
THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	<b>THE WOMEN</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's) In 1965, a nursing student follows her brother to serve during the Vietnam War and returns to a divided America.	3	1	1	<b>KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON</b> , by David Grann. (Doubleday) The story of a murder spree in 1920s Oklahoma that targeted Osage Indians, whose lands contained oil. The fledgling F.B.I. intervened, ineffectively.	117
2	2	<b>FOURTH WING</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) Violet Sorrengail is urged by the commanding general, who also is her mother, to become a candidate for the elite dragon riders.	43	2	2	<b>THE WAGER</b> , by David Grann. (Doubleday) The survivors of a shipwrecked British vessel on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain have different accounts of events.	44
3	4	<b>IRON FLAME</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) The second book in the Empyrean series. Violet Sorrengail's next round of training might require her to betray the man she loves.	16	3	3	<b>THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE</b> , by Bessel van der Kolk. (Penguin) How trauma affects the body and mind, and innovative treatments for recovery.	182
4	7	<b>THE TEACHER</b> , by Freida McFadden. (Poisoned Pen) A math teacher at Caseham High suspects there is more going on behind a scandal involving a teacher and a student.	3	4	5	<b>OUTLIVE</b> , by Peter Attia with Bill Gifford. (Harmony) A look at recent scientific research on aging and longevity.	48
5		<b>THE CHAOS AGENT</b> , by Mark Greaney. (Berkley) The 13th book in the Gray Man series. Assassins disrupt the Gray Man and his lover's new quiet life.	1	5	4	<b>THE BOYS IN THE BOAT</b> , by Daniel James Brown. (Penguin) The story of the American rowers who pursued gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games; the basis of the film.	133
6	5	<b>HOUSE OF FLAME AND SHADOW</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The third book in the Crescent City series. Bryce wants to return home while Hunt is trapped in Asteri's dungeons.	4	6	6	<b>CAPOTE'S WOMEN</b> , by Laurence Leamer. (Putnam) Truman Capote's attempt to portray the lives of high society women led to his banishment from their circles; the basis of the TV series "Feud: Capote vs. the Swans."	4
7	3	<b>BRIDE</b> , by Ali Hazelwood. (Berkley) Issues of trust arise when an alliance is made between a Vampyre named Misery Lark and a Were named Lowe Moreland.	3	7	10	<b>EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT LOVE</b> , by Dolly Alderton. (Harper Perennial) The British journalist shares stories and observations; the basis of the TV series.	14
8	8	<b>THE HEAVEN &amp; EARTH GROCERY STORE</b> , by James McBride. (Riverhead) Secrets held by the residents of a dilapidated neighborhood come to life when a skeleton is found at the bottom of a well.	17	8	8	<b>OATH AND HONOR</b> , by Liz Cheney. (Little, Brown) The former congresswoman from Wyoming recounts how she helped lead the Select Committee to Investigate the Jan. 6. Attack on the United States Capitol.	12
9	11	<b>ICEBREAKER</b> , by Hannah Grace. (Atria) Anastasia might need the help of the captain of a college hockey team to get on the Olympic figure skating team.	36	9		<b>WHY WE REMEMBER</b> , by Charan Ranganath. (Doubleday) A neuroscientist elucidates the role memory plays in our lives.	1
10	10	<b>A COURT OF SILVER FLAMES</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The fifth book in the Court of Thorns and Roses series. Nesta Archeron is forced into close quarters with a warrior named Cassian.	13	10	11	<b>MASTERS OF THE AIR</b> , by Donald L. Miller. (Simon & Schuster) An account of the American Eighth Air Force in World War II; the basis of the TV series.	4

The New York Times best sellers are compiled and archived by the best-sellers-lists desk of the New York Times news department, and are separate from the editorial, culture, advertising and business sides of The New York Times Company. Rankings reflect unit sales reported on a confidential basis by vendors offering a wide range of general interest titles published in the United States. **ONLINE:** For complete lists and a full explanation of our methodology, visit [www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers](https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers).

## Editors' Choice / Staff Picks From the Book Review



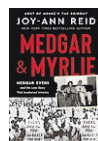
**LANGUAGE CITY: The Fight to Preserve Endangered Mother Tongues in New York**, by Ross Perlin. (Atlantic Monthly Press, \$28.) In this history of New York, Perlin, a linguist, focuses on four residents fighting to preserve their spoken heritages. The result is sweeping and intimate, simultaneously a call to arms and a tribute to a place that contains almost as many tongues as speakers.



**A LOVE SONG FOR RICKI WILDE**, by Tia Williams. (Grand Central, \$29.) Sparks fly when Ricki, who has opened a flower shop in Harlem in 2024, meets Ezra, who made a name for himself as a musician during the Harlem Renaissance a century earlier. The novel's brutal calculus of love and loss grounds the dazzling prose and light magic.



**THE AMERICAN DAUGHTERS**, by Maurice Carlos Ruffin. (One World, \$27.) Ruffin's stirring new novel brings a little-known aspect of the Civil War to vivid life: enslaved women who worked as resistance fighters against the Confederacy. His courageous protagonist reminds us that we still have a lot of work to do when it comes to reckoning with our past.



**MEDGAR AND MYRLIE: Medgar Evers and the Love Story That Awakened America**, by Joy-Ann Reid. (Mariner, \$30.) The MSNBC journalist offers an intimate account of the civil rights activists Myrlie Evers-Williams and her husband Medgar Evers, an N.A.A.C.P. field secretary killed by the Klan in 1963. Their story casts light on the tolls of the fight against white supremacy.



**STRONG PASSIONS: A Scandalous Divorce in Old New York**, by Barbara Weisberg. (Norton, \$28.99.) In 1864, the nation was riveted by a society divorce trial that had everything: cheating, wealth, feuding brothers and lurid details. Weisberg's sensitive examination reconstructs the trial while giving dimension to the real-life people involved.



**SPLINTERS: Another Kind of Love Story**, by Leslie Jamison. (Little, Brown, \$29.) Jamison, who has previously written stylishly about her experiences with addiction, abortion and more, here delivers a searing account of divorce and the bewildering joys of new motherhood, cementing her status as one of America's most talented self-chroniclers.



**ORDINARY HUMAN FAILINGS**, by Megan Nolan. (Little, Brown, \$27.) An ambitious London tabloid reporter, a murdered child and a family mired in unspoken tragedy are the main ingredients of Nolan's deftly turned if surpassingly bleak page turner.



**EVERYONE WHO IS GONE IS HERE: The United States, Central America, and the Making of a Crisis**, by Jonathan Blitzer. (Penguin Press, \$32.) This urgent and propulsive account of Latin American politics and immigration makes a persuasive case for a direct line from U.S. foreign policy in Central America to the current migrant crisis.



**SWAMP MONSTERS: Trump vs. DeSantis — The Greatest Show on Earth (or at Least in Florida)**, by Matt Dixon. (Little, Brown, \$30.) Last year, as Ron DeSantis briefly surged in polls against his former ally Donald Trump, the Republican presidential primary seemed headed for an epic face-off. Dixon's book is an enjoyable, if horrifying, soap opera.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are online: [nytimes.com/books](https://www.nytimes.com/books)



## Inside the List

ELISABETH EGAN

Billy Dee Williams might be best known for his roles in “Star Wars,” “Brian’s Song” and “Mahogany,” but his best-selling memoir proves that he has bookish chops as well. In “What Have We Here?,” the 86-year-old actor, who



**‘His intellect was like a giant roller coaster.’**

landed his first Broadway role at 7, looks back on a lifetime of art, music, barrier breaking and hobnobbing, occasionally with iconic authors. Williams unfurls some entertaining yarns about his share of thespians, too, but, for the purposes of this column, Maya Angelou trumps Harrison Ford. (Angelou threatened to have Williams fired after he poured a bag of sugar over a co-star’s head during a production of Jean Genet’s play “The Blacks.”)

Of all the stories attached to the household names in Williams’s 15-page index, the ones about James Baldwin are the most poignant. “He saw me in a musical called ‘Hallelujah, Baby!’ with Leslie Uggams, and he came backstage to meet me,” Williams said in a phone interview. Baldwin was adapting “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” for Columbia Pictures: “He wanted me to play Malcolm.”

The studio had other ideas, Williams writes, going so far as to propose Marlon Brando for the role, but, in the meantime, Williams and Baldwin became close friends. Williams describes their escapades: ordering custom-made suits, dining with Gore Vidal (whom Williams liked more than Norman Mailer) and traveling for four months, from Paris to New York to Los Angeles.

In the spring of 1968, the men were lounging by a pool in Palm Springs when they learned that Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot. “We were shocked, obviously,” Williams said. “It was a very, very moving situation.”

Baldwin later described the day in an essay for Esquire — their jubilation in the moments before the phone rang, the way the music seemed to stop: “Yet, though I know — or I think — the record was still playing, silence fell.” He continued, “I remember weeping, briefly, more in helpless rage than in sorrow, and Billy comforting me.”

In his memoir, Williams writes of Baldwin, “His intellect was like a giant roller coaster. It drew you in, and then you just held on for a thrilling ride.”

Wary as he might be from another thrilling ride — his book tour — Williams sounded eager to get cracking on another project. “It’s a coffee-table book,” he said. “It talks about my life through my paintings. Now that I’m having all of this wonderful response to ‘What Have We Here?’ I think I’d like to go ahead and do that.” □

## PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 18-24

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1	1	<b>THE WOMEN</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin’s) In 1965, a nursing student follows her brother to serve during the Vietnam War and returns to a divided America.	3	1	1	<b>THE WAGER</b> , by David Grann. (Doubleday) The survivors of a shipwrecked British vessel on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain have different accounts of events.	44
2	2	<b>FOURTH WING</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) Violet Sorrengail is urged by the commanding general, who also is her mother, to become a candidate for the elite dragon riders.	42	2	2	<b>OUTLIVE</b> , by Peter Attia with Bill Gifford. (Harmony) A look at recent scientific research on aging and longevity.	48
3	3	<b>IRON FLAME</b> , by Rebecca Yarros. (Red Tower) The second book in the Empyrean series. Violet Sorrengail’s next round of training might require her to betray the man she loves.	16	3	4	<b>OATH AND HONOR</b> , by Liz Cheney. (Little, Brown) The former congresswoman from Wyoming recounts how she helped lead the Select Committee to Investigate the Jan. 6. Attack on the United States Capitol.	12
4	4	<b>HOUSE OF FLAME AND SHADOW</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The third book in the Crescent City series. Bryce wants to return home while Hunt is trapped in Asteri’s dungeons.	4	4	3	<b>MEDGAR &amp; MYRLIE</b> , by Joy-Ann Reid. (Mariner) The MSNBC host details how the wife of the civil rights leader Medgar Evers carried forward their legacy after his assassination in 1963.	3
5	5	<b>THE HEAVEN &amp; EARTH GROCERY STORE</b> , by James McBride. (Riverhead) Secrets held by the residents of a dilapidated neighborhood come to life when a skeleton is found at the bottom of a well.	27	5		<b>WHY WE REMEMBER</b> , by Charan Ranganath. (Doubleday) A neuroscientist elucidates the role memory plays in our lives.	1
6	6	<b>FIRST LIE WINS</b> , by Ashley Elston. (Pamela Dorman) A woman who works for a mysterious boss takes on a new identity to dig up information on someone.	8	6	7	<b>FRIENDS, LOVERS, AND THE BIG TERRIBLE THING</b> , by Matthew Perry. (Flatiron) The late actor, known for playing Chandler Bing on “Friends,” shares stories from his childhood and his struggles with sobriety.	33
7	9	<b>GOTHIKANA</b> , by RuNyx. (Bramble) A century-old mystery brings Corvina Clemm and Vad Deverell together at a university based in a castle at the top of a mountain with a dark history.	5	7		<b>SPLINTERS</b> , by Leslie Jamison. (Little, Brown) After her marriage ends, Jamison examines the relationship she has with her daughter and with her parents.	1
8	8	<b>LESSONS IN CHEMISTRY</b> , by Bonnie Garmus. (Doubleday) A scientist and single mother living in California in the 1960s becomes a star on a TV cooking show.	94	8	10	<b>ELON MUSK</b> , by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster) The author of “The Code Breaker” traces Musk’s life and summarizes his work on electric vehicles, private space exploration and artificial intelligence.	24
9	7	<b>CROSSHAIRS</b> , by James Patterson and James O. Born. (Little, Brown) The 16th book in the Michael Bennett series.	2	9		<b>THIS AMERICAN EX-WIFE</b> , by Lyz Lenz. (Crown) A look at marriage today and an argument for how divorce can be empowering for women.	1
10		<b>THE CHAOS AGENT</b> , by Mark Greaney. (Berkley) The 13th book in the Gray Man series. Assassins disrupt the Gray Man and his lover’s new quiet life.	1	10	8	<b>I’M GLAD MY MOM DIED</b> , by Jennette McCurdy. (Simon & Schuster) The actress and filmmaker describes her eating disorders and difficult relationship with her mother.	72

An asterisk (\*) indicates that a book’s sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders.

## Paperback Row / BY SHREYA CHATTOPADHYAY



**AMERICAN INHERITANCE: Liberty and Slavery in the Birth of a Nation, 1765-1795**, by Edward J. Larson. (Norton, 384 pp., \$17.99.) This Editors’ Choice pick evaluates the relationship between the American Revolution’s call for “liberty” and the institution of slavery, showing that slavery and racism were “economic, political and cultural constructs that served the purposes of the powerful,” our reviewer wrote. “And because of this, they stood for centuries.”



**PINEAPPLE STREET**, by Jenny Jackson. (Penguin, 320 pp., \$18.) This novel, which our reviewer called “an unabashedly old-fashioned story involving wills, trust funds, prenups and property,” centers three women — the eldest daughter, the family baby and the middle-class sister-in-law — as they navigate the shifting dynamics of a wealthy Brooklyn Heights family.



**THE WORLD AND ALL THAT IT HOLDS**, by Aleksandar Hemon. (Picador, 352 pp., \$19.) “Maybe all this insanity will produce a better world, where everyone could love whoever they want,” a doctor tells two men, one Sephardi and one Bosnian, World War I soldiers and lovers desperate to stay alive together in Hemon’s novel of passion and care amid violence and displacement. “Stranger things have happened.”



**THIRD GIRL FROM THE LEFT: A Memoir**, by Christine Barker. (Delphinium, 352 pp., \$18.) Before Christine Barker was a successful dancer on Broadway, she was a little sister. Her poignant memoir depicts the vibrant New York life she shared with her older brother Laughlin and his partner, the designer Perry Ellis, as well as its collapse during the devastation and secrecy of the AIDS epidemic.



**THE SOULMATE**, by Sally Hepworth. (St. Martin’s Griffin, 352 pp., \$18.) Until their cliff became a suicide spot, Pippa and Gabe’s coastal cottage life was idyllic. Now, Gabe talks people down from an approved distance. But not this time: Pippa watches as Gabe reaches out to a woman on the edge. She watches the woman fall. And she begins to question her marriage and world when she learns that the two were far from strangers.



**DINNERS WITH RUTH: A Memoir on the Power of Friendships**, by Nina Totenberg. (Simon & Schuster, 320 pp., \$18.99.) In 1971, a call between a reporter and a law professor turned into a friendship that would last five decades. Totenberg, who later broke the news of Anita Hill’s allegations, recounts a life of mutual support with Ruth Bader Ginsburg, through the highs and lows of their trailblazing careers and lives.



## CHILDREN'S BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 18-24

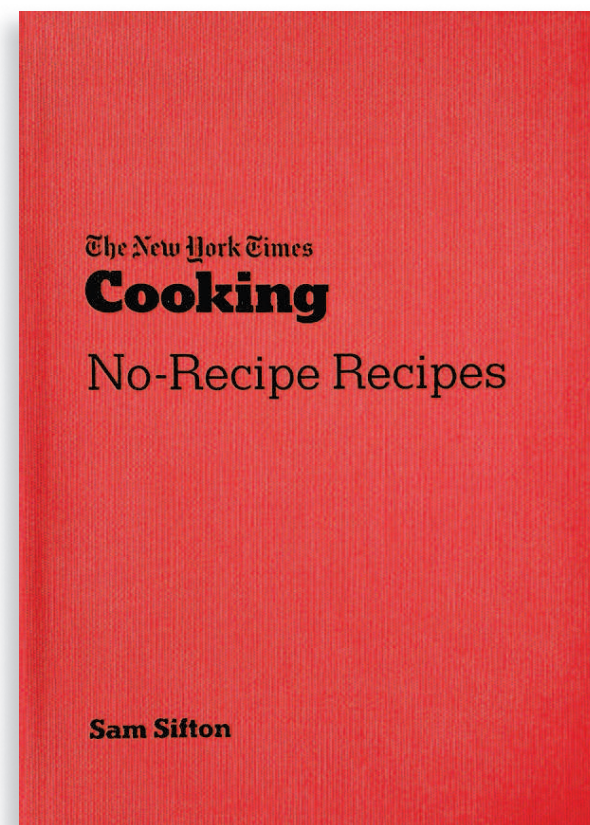
THIS WEEK	Middle Grade Hardcover	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	Young Adult Hardcover	WEEKS ON LIST
1	<b>HEROES</b> , by Alan Gratz. (Scholastic) A vivid account of the Pearl Harbor attack. (Ages 8 to 12)	3	1	<b>A TEMPEST OF TEA</b> , by Hafsa Faizal. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) Arthie Casimir runs a tearoom by day and an illegal bloodhouse that caters to vampires at night. (Ages 14 to 18)	1
2	<b>REFUGEE</b> , by Alan Gratz. (Scholastic) Three children in three different conflicts look for safe haven. (Ages 9 to 12)	251	2	<b>POWERLESS</b> , by Lauren Roberts. (Simon & Schuster) Forbidden love is in the air when Paedyn, an Ordinary, and Kai, an Elite, become romantically involved. (Ages 14 and up)	16
3	<b>WONKA</b> , by Sibéal Ponder. (Viking) The movie novelization and prequel to "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." (Ages 8 to 12)	10	3	<b>DIVINE RIVALS</b> , by Rebecca Ross. (Wednesday) Two young rival journalists find love through a magical connection. (Ages 13 to 18)	36
4	<b>WONDER</b> , by R. J. Palacio. (Knopf) A boy with a facial deformity starts school. (Ages 8 to 12)	432	4	<b>RUTHLESS VOWS</b> , by Rebecca Ross. (Wednesday) Roman and Iris will risk their hearts and futures to change the tides of the war. (Ages 13 to 18)	9
5	<b>THE SUN AND THE STAR</b> , by Rick Riordan and Mark Oshiro. (Disney Hyperion) The demigods embark on a dangerous journey. (Ages 10 to 14)	43	5	<b>HEARTLESS HUNTER</b> , by Kristen Ciccarelli. (Wednesday) Rune, a witch, and Gideon, a witch-hunter, fall in love. (Ages 13 to 18)	1
6	<b>WINGS OF FIRE: A GUIDE TO THE DRAGON WORLD</b> , by Tui T. Sutherland. Illustrated by Joy Ang. (Scholastic) A deeper dive into the legends of the 10 dragon tribes. (Ages 8 to 12)	21	6	<b>MURTAGH</b> , by Christopher Paolini. (Knopf) Murtagh and his dragon, Thorn, must find and outwit a mysterious witch. (Ages 12 to 15)	16
7	<b>THE EYES AND THE IMPOSSIBLE</b> , by Dave Eggers. Illustrations by Shawn Harris. (Knopf, McSweeney's) A dog who serves as the eyes for three bison in a park enclosure devises a plan to free them. (Ages 8 to 12)	8	7	<b>NIGHTBANE</b> , by Alex Aster. (Amulet) Isla must choose between her two lovers. (Ages 13 and up)	16
8	<b>LITTLE LEADERS</b> , by Vashti Harrison. (Little, Brown) The biographies of 40 African-American women who made a difference. (Ages 8 to 12)	82	8	<b>THE BAD ONES</b> , by Melissa Albert. (Flatiron) Nora follows enigmatic clues left by her best friend, Becca, who has disappeared. (Ages 14 to 18)	1
9	<b>THE COMPLETE COOKBOOK FOR YOUNG CHEFS</b> , by America's Test Kitchen Kids. (Sourcebooks Jabberwocky) Kid-tested recipes. (Ages 8 and up)	188	9	<b>BETTING ON YOU</b> , by Lynn Painter. (Simon & Schuster) Charlie and Bailey place bets on the love lives of others. (Ages 14 and up)	13
10	<b>THE COMPLETE BAKING BOOK FOR YOUNG CHEFS</b> , by America's Test Kitchen Kids. (Sourcebooks Explore) Kid-tested baking recipes. (Ages 8 to 12)	64	10	<b>I HOPE THIS DOESN'T FIND YOU</b> , by Ann Liang. (Scholastic) Sadie Wen vents her frustrations with people in email drafts that she never intends to send out. (Ages 12 and up)	3
THIS WEEK	Picture Books	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	Series	WEEKS ON LIST
1	<b>HOW TO CATCH A LEPRECHAUN</b> , by Adam Wallace. Illustrated by Andy Elkerton. (Sourcebooks Jabberwocky) Catching an imp. (Ages 4 to 10)	33	1	<b>DIARY OF A WIMPY KID</b> , written and illustrated by Jeff Kinney. (Amulet) The travails and challenges of adolescence. (Ages 9 to 12)	780
2	<b>GRUMPY MONKEY SPRING FEVER</b> , by Suzanne Lang. Illustrated by Max Lang. (Random House Studio) Jim catches spring fever. (Ages 4 to 8)	1	2	<b>PERCY JACKSON &amp; THE OLYMPIANS</b> , by Rick Riordan. (Disney-Hyperion) A boy battles mythological monsters. (Ages 9 to 12)	713
3	<b>DRAGONS LOVE TACOS</b> , by Adam Rubin. Illustrated by Daniel Salmieri. (Dial) What to serve your dragon-guests. (Ages 3 to 5)	432	3	<b>A GOOD GIRL'S GUIDE TO MURDER</b> , by Holly Jackson. (Delacorte) Pippa Fitz-Amobi solves murderous crimes. (Ages 14 and up)	126
4	<b>BLUEY: SLEEPYTIME</b> , by Joe Brumm. (Penguin) Bingo wants to do a big girl sleep and wake up in her own bed. (Ages 4 to 8)	8	4	<b>HARRY POTTER</b> , by J. K. Rowling. (Scholastic) A wizard hones his conjuring skills in the service of fighting evil. (Ages 10 and up)	779
5	<b>HAPPY ST. PATRICK'S DAY FROM THE CRAYONS</b> , by Drew Daywalt. Illustrated by Oliver Jeffers. (Philomel) When Green crayon goes on vacation, how can the crayons pull off St. Patrick's Day? (Ages 4 to 8)	1	5	<b>THE HUNGER GAMES</b> , by Suzanne Collins. (Scholastic) In a dystopia, a girl fights for survival on live TV. (Ages 12 and up)	316
6	<b>THE DAY THE CRAYONS QUIT</b> , by Drew Daywalt. Illustrated by Oliver Jeffers. (Philomel) Problems arise when Duncan's crayons revolt. (Ages 3 to 7)	379	6	<b>BOYS OF TOMMEN</b> , by Chloe Walsh. (Bloom) In Ireland, friends at the private school Tommen College prepare for adulthood. (Ages 16 to 18)	1
7	<b>HOW TO CATCH THE EASTER BUNNY</b> , by Adam Wallace and Andy Elkerton. (Sourcebooks Jabberwocky) The Easter Bunny avoids traps in order to deliver eggs and candy. (Ages 4 to 8)	25	7	<b>THE SUMMER I TURNED PRETTY TRILOGY</b> , by Jenny Han. (Simon & Schuster) A beach house, summer love and enduring friendships. (Ages 12 and up)	97
8	<b>THE WONDERFUL THINGS YOU WILL BE</b> , by Emily Winfield Martin. (Random House) A celebration of future possibilities. (Ages 3 to 7)	382	8	<b>THE INHERITANCE GAMES</b> , by Jennifer Lynn Barnes. (Little, Brown) Avery Grambs tries to figure out why an inheritance from a stranger was bestowed upon her. (Ages 12 to 18)	77
9	<b>THE BIG CHEESE</b> , by Jory John. Illustrated by Pete Oswald. (HarperCollins) The Big Cheese learns a lesson in humility. (Ages 4 to 8)	10	9	<b>THE WILD ROBOT</b> , by Peter Brown. (Little, Brown) Roz the robot adapts to her surroundings on a remote, wild island. (Ages 7 to 12)	10
10	<b>BIG</b> , by Vashti Harrison. (Little, Brown) A young girl's journey to self-acceptance. (Ages 4 to 8)	3	10	<b>WHO WAS/IS . . . ?</b> , by Jim Gagliotti and others; various illustrators. (Penguin Workshop) Biographies unlock legendary lives. (Ages 8 to 11)	148

Picture book rankings include hardcover sales only. Series rankings include all print and e-book sales.

# The first cookbook from New York Times Cooking

**No recipes. You don't need them.**

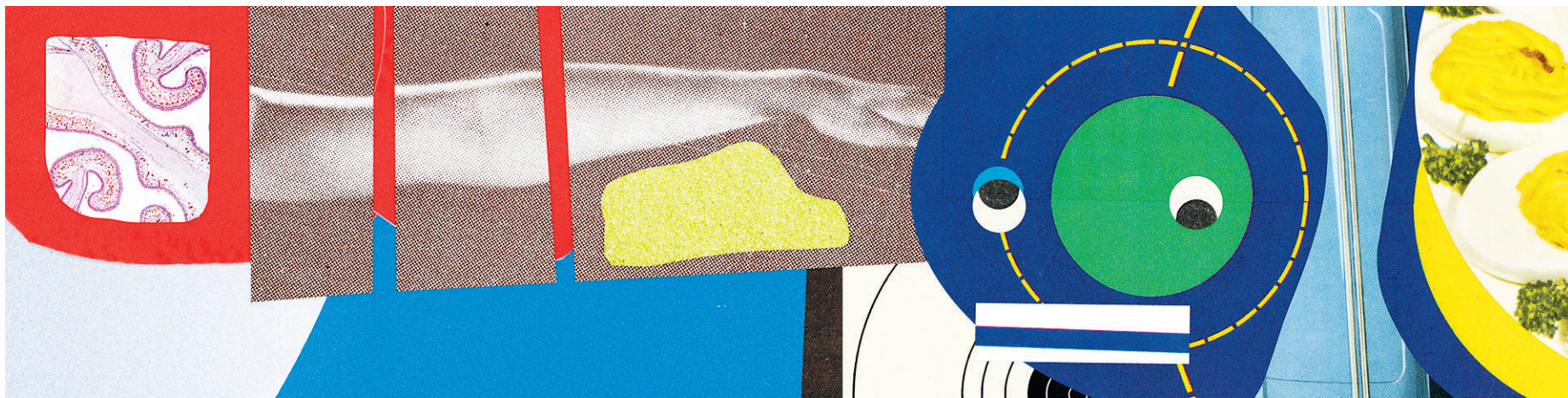
"Join me in cooking this new, improvisational way, without recipes." —Sam Sifton



The New York Times  
**Cooking**

TEN SPEED PRESS





**YOUR UTOPIA**  
**Stories**

By Bora Chung

Algonquin Books. 241 pp. \$18.99.



We were promised a future full of innovation, a tomorrow filled with sleek technologies that would whisk us far away from the most mundane aspects of our humanity. Technology has indeed gotten sleeker — so why do we seem so stubbornly the same?

The wistful, emotionally unmoored protagonists of the Korean writer Bora Chung's second story collection, "Your Utopia," translated by Anton Hur, do their best to navigate this quandary.

In one story, a low-level employee at the Center for Immortality Research organizes an anniversary party at the institution even as the question of her own immortality hovers in the background. In another, a highly contagious disease that causes cannibalism sweeps the planet, eventually reaching a spaceship where the government is working desperately to develop a cure. The epidemic is horrifying, but that doesn't prevent Chung from finding humor in it. "Aside from the afflicted's tendency to regard other people as food, they were completely normal," she writes. "It was only when cannibalism was mentioned in conversation that they responded abnormally, most notably their uniform insistence that eating people did not kill the eaten."

Chung builds out her stories with imagination, absurdity and a dry sense of humor, all applied with X-Acto knife precision, but what stands out about her fantastical tales is not how different they are from one another so much as how much remains the same. No matter the premise behind a story, jobs still suck, suffering is still the natural product of living under society's thumb and not even looming threats, like the danger of being eaten, can keep people from adhering to familiar structures of authority.

All of this might sound grim, but Chung's deft handling makes these fraught obediences and tender concerns feel powerfully human. In the title story, for instance, a sentient self-driving vehicle left on Earth after humans have fled the planet finds meaning in ferrying around a damaged robot. Though the vehicle is only a smart object, its experience is richly emotive and tinged by the paradoxical affects that circulate at the end of the world. "If I want to conserve energy during the sunless nights, I need to think less. But here I am in the dark, having thoughts about having fewer thoughts." Same, bestie.

**BUGSY AND OTHER STORIES**

By Rafael Frumkin

Simon & Schuster. 206 pp. Paperback, \$16.99.



In his gutsy collection, "Bugsy and Other Stories," Rafael Frumkin presents characters in untraditional situations who are threatened by internal and external forces as they strive to stake out a joyful place in the world.

In the title story, Bugsy, a college student struggling with repressed queer desire and debilitating depression, finds a sense of belonging by moving into a commune-like house of women who make sadomasochistic queer porn. There, one of the women, Stella, a versatile performer and committed polyamorist, unlocks Bugsy's capacity for sexual exploration, but when Stella decides that she no longer wants to be polyamorous and wants to be in a monogamous relationship with a guy named Cody instead, it sends Bugsy into a spiral of paranoid ideation.

Mental illness resurfaces in a story about a therapist experiencing a break of his own. He blacks out, slices up his arm and hallucinates that an aggressive Alex Trebek verbally abuses him. Meanwhile, he stubbornly continues to treat his patients, eventually showing up at one's home to deliver an urgent, incomprehensible message that his empathetic patient interprets as a cry for help. In an affecting scene, she comforts him with lessons she has learned while in his care.

Frumkin renders focal points like crisis and desire with compelling fluidity: His characters navigate the complexities of self-discovery against the constantly shifting background of psychological slippage and the pressures of making a life worth living. For instance, a story about the celebrity e-girl Dina Valentine, who is in love with her best friend and roommate, Aubrey, keeps the reader on a knife's edge about whether Dina's attempts to prevent Aubrey from seeing her boyfriend will be successful, with the nature of Aubrey's own desire a powerful opacity until the story's end.

But the collection's greatest strength is its way of unpacking its characters' stuck moments and impasses through vivid gasps of insight, moments when we come into contact with the abundance of their inner life. For each of them, the obscure whole of their identity is beyond easy summarization — but as they grope their way through crises both existential and mundane, every moment feels bracingly true.

**FLOAT UP, SING DOWN**

**Stories**

By Laird Hunt

Bloomsbury. 207 pp. \$26.99.



A small town in Indiana is the central protagonist of the lyrical, reflective stories in "Float Up, Sing Down." The collection — written by Laird Hunt, whose novel "Zorrie" was a finalist for the National Book Award for fiction in 2021 — is composed of 14 linked tales, each set in the same town (which is

also the same town in "Zorrie") and each delving deep into the interiority of a single character as events large and small percolate through the community.

On the surface, the stories are preoccupied with the quotidian events of daily life. Candy Wilson is making deviled eggs, but forgot to buy paprika. The teenagers Della Dorner and Sugar Henry practice kissing, and reward each other for their pleasures with slices of Kraft American cheese. Neighborhood boys shoot starlings out of a tree with BBs; Della's grandfather Hank Dunn takes Sugar for a drive. But beneath these seemingly everyday actions pulse vivid minds that gnaw on old regrets, muse on unknown futures and travel the length of personal and communal history. Their days seem ordinary but they are dense with the matter of living.

If the constant fullness of these internal monologues can sometimes feel slightly monotonous, it doesn't detract from the gratification of reading. The book unfolds similarly to a neighborhood cookout — you brush up against one charming moment, one charming character, and then move on to the next. In this way, Hunt's characters reveal beguiling secrets and contradictions. In one story, a slacker schemer named Champ turns out to have had a promising aptitude for ballroom dancing when he was working as a janitor: "He took to it when the school emptied out. In his heavy work boots, in the half dark with the waltz records playing. . . . He added flourishes of his own. He liked the way his arm felt when it went rising up and up through the air. He liked it better than anything."

In the process of learning what makes each character tick, what feels at first like a loosely linked collection grows revelatory, unearthing an ecology of elusive connection and meaning.



**Up Close** / 'What the Bees See,' by Craig P. Burrows / By William Atkins

Using clever camera methods, a buzzy new photo book illuminates a bee's-eye view of the world.



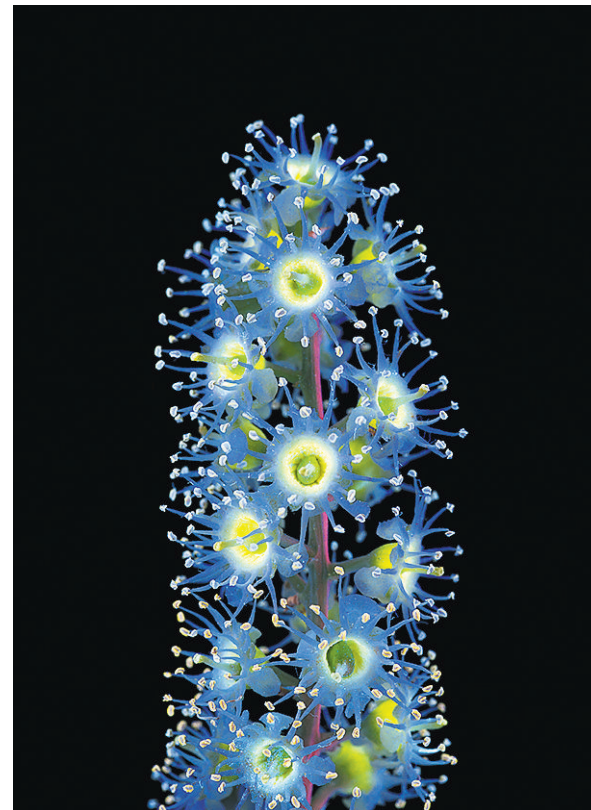
In **WHAT THE BEES SEE: The Honeybee and Its Importance to You and Me** (Chronicle, \$40), Craig P. Burrows's ultraviolet-lit photographs mimic the fluorescence his botanical subjects emit when exposed to sunlight, revealing colors and textures usually obscured by the dazzle of visible light. Because bees see in the ultraviolet spectrum, Burrows's method can afford us a glimpse of the world as they perceive it: His portraits of plants are, in part, prompts for interspecies empathy at a time when bees are under attack on multiple fronts, from air pollution to pesticides.

In these exquisitely intimate close-ups — of French lavender, creeping fuchsia, cucumber flower and more — each specimen glimmers and throbs with otherworldly light against a backdrop as black as jeweler's velvet.

Accompanying texts describe the bee and its pivotal place in global ecosystems (some 35 percent of food crops rely on insect pollinators), but the photographs themselves are, above all, a study of the plants on which bees feed.

Under Burrows's ultraviolet lamps, pistil and stamen, stigma and anther glow with the colors of a distant planet or some bioluminescent creature of the deep seas, at once alien and familiar. These hallucinatory images don't merely simulate a bee's perspective, then, so much as help us to imagine an alternative reality: that of a creature whose fate is indivisibly bound up with our own. □

*By shining ultraviolet lamps on plants, Craig P. Burrows is able to create botanical portraits that show what the objects look like to bees — who see things on the ultraviolet spectrum.*





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