

The New York Times

# Book Review

MARCH 21, 2021

**LIKE LIFE** Jessica Winter explores the craze for autofiction

**HUMANITY 2.0** Brain transplants, genetic editing and toxic chemicals

**PLUS** Errol Morris, Fareed Zakaria and what Don Lemon is reading



ILLUSTRATION BY MATT DORFMAN. PHOTOS FROM LEFT: TERRY DISNEY/EVENING STANDARD HULTON ARCHIVE, VIA GETTY IMAGES; SANTI VISALLI, VIA GETTY IMAGES; ANDREW BURTON, VIA GETTY IMAGES

## Gotham Revival

By Kevin Baker

YOU WILL HAVE a hard time getting through Thomas Dyja's "New York, New York, New York," mostly because there is an idea on every page, if not in every paragraph — and usually attached to a perfect line from the host of sources he has collected for this history of New York City over its last four rollicking decades.

Here is the journalist Michael Tomasky fret-

ting that "there's only so much wholesomeness New York can take," the graphic designer Tibor Kalman advising us that Times Square "should be a zoo, like the rest of New York, but a well-maintained zoo instead of a depressed, unemployed and crack-smoking kind of zoo," and the philanthropist Andrew Heiskell promising a crime-free Bryant Park: "All the hiding places have been eliminated." Here is *Spy* magazine headlining Rudy Giuliani as "The Toughest Weenie in America," Jules Feiffer calling

**NEW YORK, NEW YORK, NEW YORK**  
**Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation**  
By Thomas Dyja

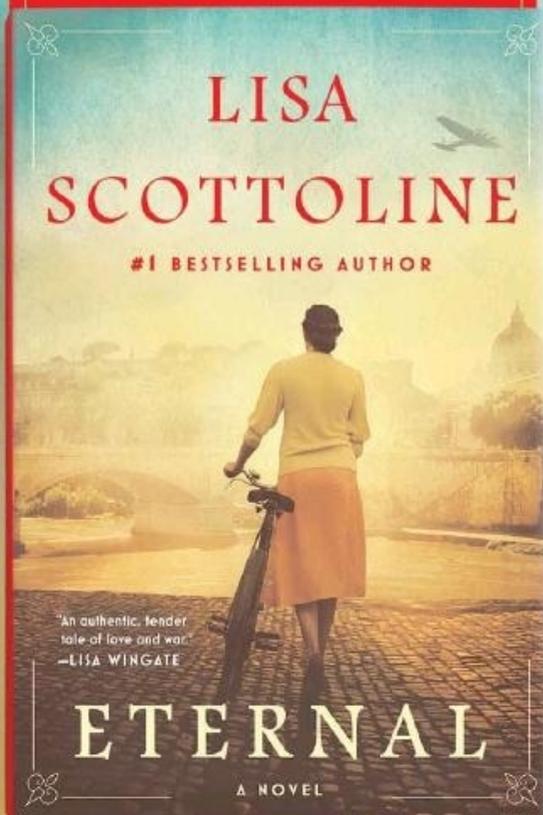
Illustrated. 544 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$30.

Elaine's "a men's club for the literary lonely," the writer Lewis Lapham diagnosing money as "the sickness of the town" and the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable calling Harry Helmsley's Palace Hotel tower "a curtain wall of unforgivable, consummate mediocrity."

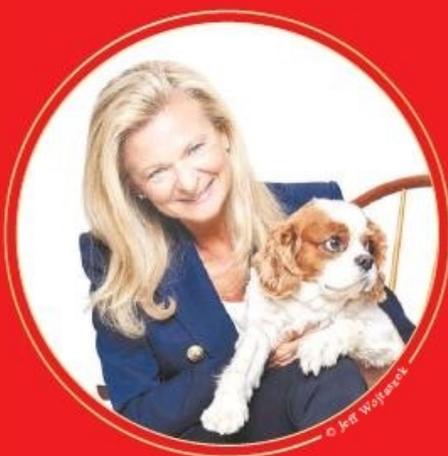
And from Dyja himself: "In the Meatpacking District, both sides of beef and gay men hung from hooks"; hedge funds "meant leaving the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

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—SANDRA BROWN

*“What Elena Ferrante did with her Neapolitan Quartet, Scottoline does for wartime Rome. *Eternal* is a must-read.”*

—LORENZO CARCATERRA



## Fiction

- 10 MONA**  
By Pola Oloixarac  
Reviewed by Sadie Stein
- 13 Crime**  
Reviewed by Sarah Weinman
- 19 FOREGONE**  
By Russell Banks  
Reviewed by Adam Haslett
- 19 ALL GIRLS**  
By Emily Layden  
Reviewed by Kate Elizabeth Russell

## Nonfiction

- 1 NEW YORK, NEW YORK, NEW YORK**  
**Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation**  
By Thomas Dyja  
Reviewed by Kevin Baker
- 11 MR. HUMBLE AND DR. BUTCHER**  
**A Monkey's Head, the Pope's Neuroscientist, and the Quest to Transplant the Soul**  
By Brandy Shillace  
Reviewed by Sam Kean
- 12 THE CODE BREAKER**  
**Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race**  
By Walter Isaacson  
Reviewed by Dava Sobel
- 14 THE SHADOWS OF EMPIRE**  
**How Imperial History Shapes Our World**  
By Samir Puri  
Reviewed by Fareed Zakaria
- 16 FLOATING IN A MOST PECULIAR WAY**  
By Louis Chude-Sokei  
Reviewed by Ijeoma Oluo
- 16 LAST CALL**  
**A True Story of Love, Lust, and Murder in Queer New York**  
By Elon Green  
Reviewed by Christopher Bollen
- 17 AMORALMAN**  
**A True Story and Other Lies**  
By Derek DelGaudio  
Reviewed by Errol Morris

- 18 FLIGHT OF THE DIAMOND SMUGGLERS**  
**A Tale of Pigeons, Obsession, and Greed Along Coastal South Africa**  
By Matthew Gavin Frank  
Reviewed by Nate Blakeslee
- 21 COUNT DOWN**  
**How Our Modern World Is Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, Threatening Sperm Counts, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race**  
By Shanna H. Swan with Stacey Colino  
Reviewed by Bijal P. Trivedi
- 26 The Shortlist**  
Memoirs  
Reviewed by CJ Hauser

## Children's Books

- 22 A SHOT IN THE ARM!**  
By Don Brown  
Reviewed by Lydia Kang
- 22 THE LEAK**  
By Kate Reed Petty  
Illustrated by Andrea Bell  
Reviewed by Julie Bosman

## Features

- 8 By the Book**  
Don Lemon
- 15 Essay**  
Our Autofiction Fixation  
By Jessica Winter
- 27 Sketchbook**  
By Grant Snider

## Etc.

- 4** New & Noteworthy
- 6** Letters
- 23** Best-Seller Lists
- 23** Editors' Choice
- 24** Inside the List
- 24** Paperback Row

"Confirms Herron's stature as the  
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—NPR, FRESH AIR

"This is a darker, scarier Herron. The gags are still there but the satire's more biting. The privatization of a secret service op and the manipulation of news is relevant and horribly credible."—Ann Cleeves, author of the Vera Stanhope series

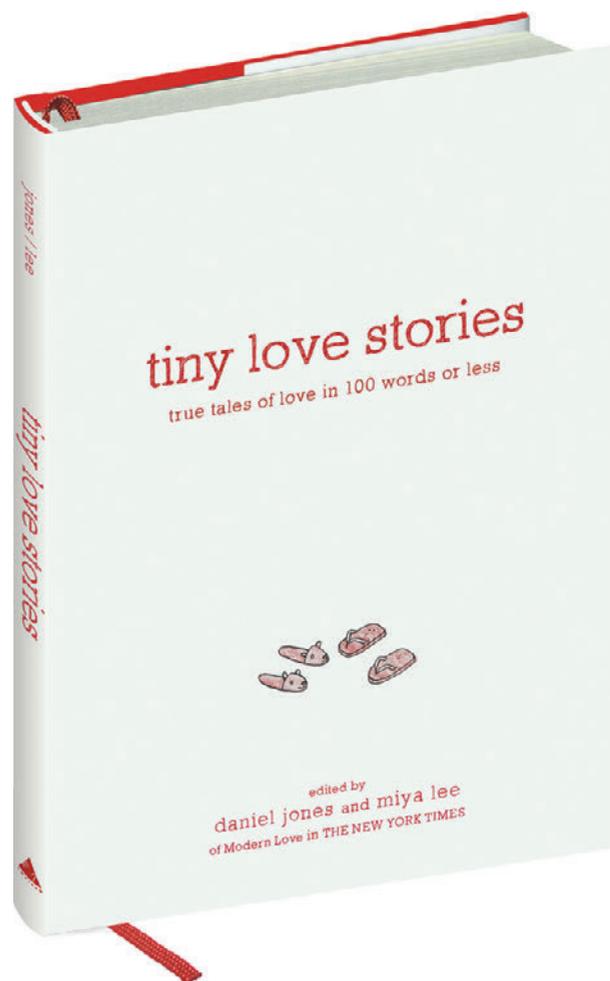
**MICK HERRON**  
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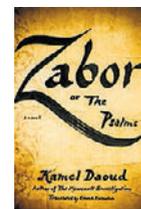
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From the editors of the Modern Love column in The New York Times.

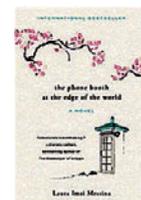


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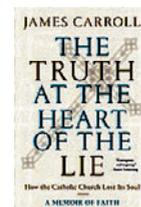
## New & Noteworthy



**ZABOR, OR THE PALMS**, by Kamel Daoud. (Other Press, paper, \$17.99.) An ode to storytelling with shades of Scheherazade, this novel by the author of “The Meursault Investigation” features a hero convinced that his journal writing keeps those he loves alive.



**THE PHONE BOOTH AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD**, by Laura Imai Messina. Translated by Lucy Rand. (Overlook, \$25.) Set in the aftermath of the 2011 Japanese tsunami, this novel about grief and resilience was inspired by a real phone booth where survivors imagined connecting with those they had lost.



**THE TRUTH AT THE HEART OF THE LIE: HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH LOST ITS SOUL**, by James Carroll. (Random House, \$28.99.) A former priest and a longtime liberal critic of the church, Carroll here turns to memoir to explain his gradual disenchantment with Catholicism’s dominant male hierarchy.

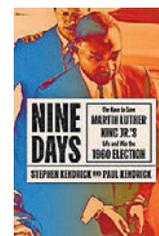


**THE CHEERFUL SCAPEGOAT: FABLES**, by Wayne Koestenbaum. (Semiotext(e), paper, \$16.95.) These charmingly insouciant short stories by the noted critic, poet and essayist exhibit the same surreal whimsy that distinguishes his work in other formats.



**MIDNIGHT IN CAIRO: THE DIVAS OF EGYPT'S ROARING '20S**, by Raphael Cormack. (Norton, \$28.95.) A century ago, ambitious women shaped Cairo’s thriving entertainment scene as performers and entrepreneurs. Cormack’s fascinating history profiles seven of them.

## WHAT WE'RE READING



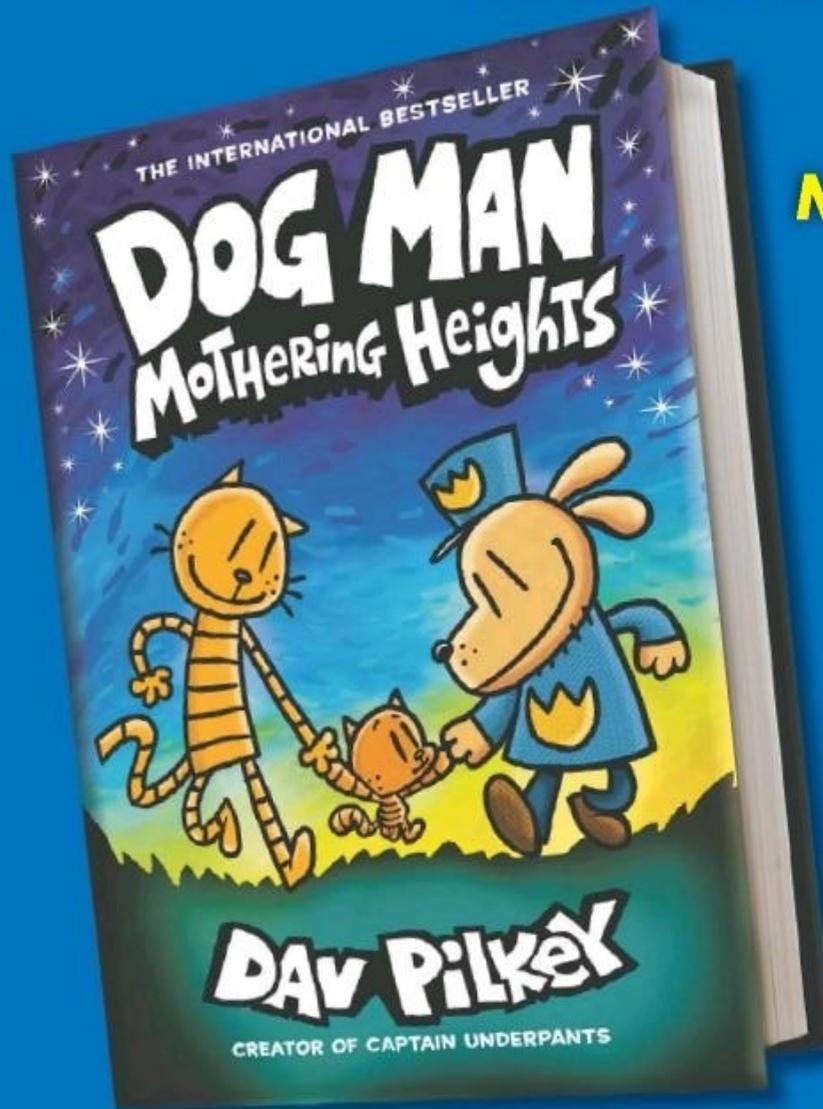
It’s late October 1960, a few weeks before the Nixon-Kennedy presidential election, and Martin Luther King Jr. is arrested at a protest in Atlanta. It’s the ultimate October surprise: Should the campaigns call for his release and risk alienating white Southern voters? Stay quiet and risk alienating civil rights supporters? The rapid-fire decisions end up swinging the election in (spoiler alert) Kennedy’s favor.

I’ve been steeping myself in the 1960s lately, and **NINE DAYS**, by Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick, made that historic time feel messy, chaotic, improvisatory — human. The book’s heroes are a few obscure Kennedy staffers who dramatically overstep their bounds and, without their bosses’ knowledge, throw the Kennedy campaign directly into the fray. I put the book down marveling at how that week’s harried phone calls still echo today, and wondering what our grandchildren, in 2080, will be reading about 2020.

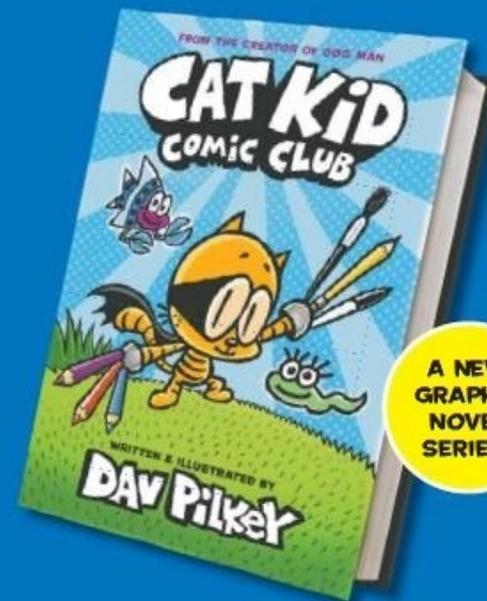
—SAM DOLNICK, ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR

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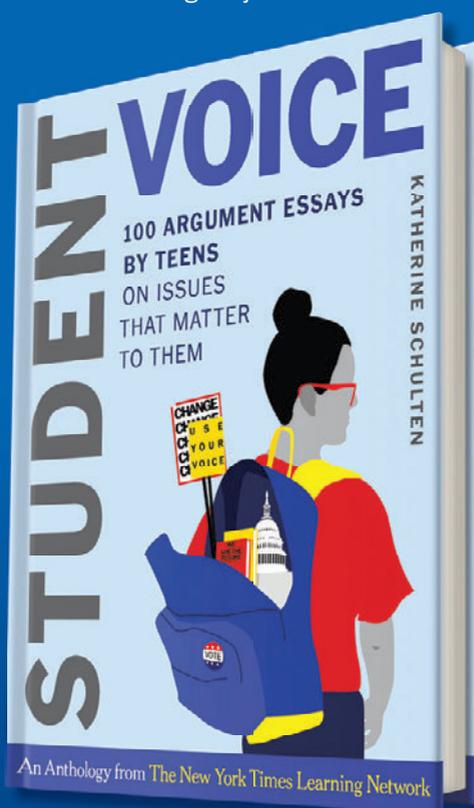
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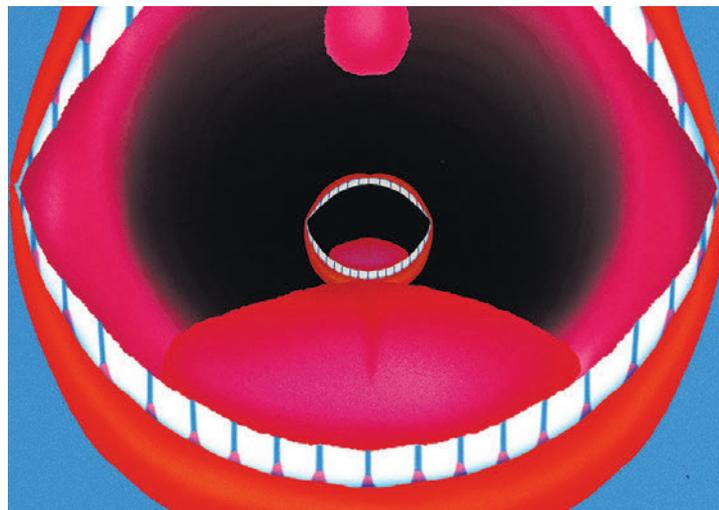


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 **Letters**



BRÁULIO AMADO

**Make Some Noise**

TO THE EDITOR:

In discussing the larynx, the subject of “This Is the Voice” (March 7), both the reviewer, Mary Roach, and the author, John Colapinto, miss a major point. They skirt the underlying anatomy and overlook the contribution of the hyoid bone entirely. This horseshoe-shaped structure resides immediately under the jawbone and attaches to muscles that help in swallowing and vocalizing. It is our only bone out of roughly 206 that does not contact any others.

The howler monkey represents the epitome of the hyoid’s development, where the bone is about the general shape of a round-bottomed cup. The hyoid is instrumental in the howler’s ability to project its voice about two miles. Given the relative numbers of howlers and humans, it’s good that we are not so well voiced.

ROY A. MEALS  
 LOS ANGELES

**Bill Gates**

TO THE EDITOR:

I have followed Bill McKibben’s writings for 30 years with unflagging admiration, but I was disappointed by his review of Bill Gates’s “How to Avoid a Climate Disaster” (March 7).

It is unfair to criticize an author for staying within the limits of his competence. As Gates acknowledges, he thinks like an engineer and accordingly presents an engineer’s evaluation of the available options to forestall the looming climate crisis.

Within that focus, his analysis is well informed, authoritative and desperately needed.

MICHAEL MURPHY  
 SAN FRANCISCO

TO THE EDITOR:

In his *By the Book* interview (Feb. 14), Bill Gates writes about how Google searches can be used to “make life better.” I would rather that people could search without being tracked. The acceptance of the “end user” as a nobody to manipulate and collect information on is increasingly sophisticated and increasingly inappropriate, and I look forward to a growing resistance to it.

It’s great that Gates is against climate change. However, having worked vainly as of late to keep Microsoft from telling me what I’m typing — all in my best interest, of course — while being informed that my “data makes ads more meaningful” as if I wanted more meaningful ads, I’m less and less interested in hearing tech moguls opine on much of anything.

CHRISTINA ALBERS  
 NEW ORLEANS

**Rust and Disgust**

TO THE EDITOR:

In her essay “Witness for the Defense” (March 7), Emily Mortimer makes a wonderful and perceptive witness for the defense of Vladimir Nabokov’s “Lolita.” She does her father proud.

Reading her essay, however, reminded me of a much less inspiring witness: Adolf Eich-

mann, who (according to Hannah Arendt) said to his jailer guard that he found “Lolita” to be “quite an unwholesome book.” There is more irony in the world than there is iron.

LOUIS PHILLIPS  
 NEW YORK

TO THE EDITOR:

I will spare your readers the details of what was done to me by an older man at a young age in the name of love (it lacks hilarity and does not lend itself to brilliant prose), and I will spare them the precise number of women I am personally acquainted with who experienced similar degradations.

But I will tell you that Emily Mortimer’s giddy praise for “Lolita” made me literally sick. I’m too old now, but someone must write a comparably “exhilarating and paradoxically cleansing” novel that will allow us all to “relinquish concern with right and wrong and just to feel things as another person feels them.”

The dissolution of one’s very self is an experience perhaps impossible to portray, unfortunately, but that’s the only novel that would shake the degeneracy and callousness that marks our engagement with “Lolita.” This is not a moralistic condemnation. It is a pure human expression of truth.

SUSAN MULLENDORE  
 TUCSON, ARIZ.

**EDITORS’ NOTE**

An essay on March 7 by the screenwriter and actress Emily Mortimer about “Lolita,” obscenity laws and cancel culture included several sentences adapted without attribution from an article by Caitlin Flanagan, “How ‘Lolita’ Seduces Us All,” that appeared in the September 2018 issue of *The Atlantic*. The online version of the essay has been revised to include attributions to Flanagan’s work.

**CORRECTION**

A bibliographic note with a review last Sunday about “The Good Girls,” by Sonia Faleiro, misidentified the book’s publisher in some copies. It is Grove Press, not Viking.

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# What are you doing for the next few days?



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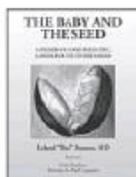


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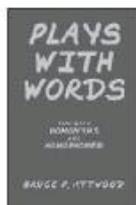
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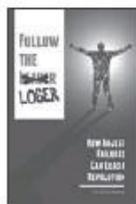
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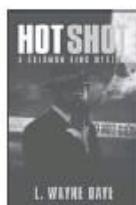


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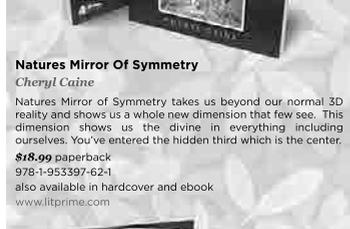
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## By the Book



# Don Lemon

The CNN host and author of 'This Is the Fire' didn't like the Harry Potter books: 'There are often Harry Potter clues in New York Times crossword puzzles. I never know the answers.'

### What books are on your night stand?

"The Fire Next Time," by James Baldwin; "Giovanni's Room," by James Baldwin; "Four Hundred Souls," edited by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain; "It's Up to Us," by John Kasich; and "Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World," by Fareed Zakaria.

### What's the last great book you read?

"Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents," by Isabel Wilkerson. I'm not sure how much I even need to say about this book. This is the first book since Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow" to broaden my knowledge on racism in America — and how America is both influenced by and has influenced racism the world over. By approaching the subject through casteism she expands the lens and graciously gives us a new perspective and perhaps a more fitting definition to tackle America's original sin.

**Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).**

The ideal reading experience is a Sunday afternoon in fall or winter with PJs, fur-lined slippers, a roaring wood-burning fireplace, WBGO Jazz 88 playing quietly in the background with a good book in hand and the Sunday New York Times in reach.

### What's your favorite book no one else has heard of?

I'm not sure no one has heard of it, but I'd have to say it's "Power vs. Force," by David R. Hawkins. You'd have to read it to understand my love for it. The books of his that follow are "Transcending the Levels of Consciousness" and "The Eye of the I." I suggest everyone read them.

### Has a book ever brought you closer to another person, or come between you?

"The Fire Next Time" brought me closer to my fiancé. He read it and really began to talk to me about the book and race. It's a beautiful thing.

**What's the most interesting thing you**

### learned from a book recently?

I learned from "Four Hundred Souls" that my ancestors arrived here on a slave ship before the Mayflower. Just because I went to a Black Catholic elementary and middle school, which drilled Black history into us, I thought I knew more about our history than most. Alas, I was wrong.

### Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

I wish more authors would weave full and true American history into their work. There's an awful lot that was left out, fabricated and embellished to favor certain people and diminish others. That's really where "the conversation" around racism should start — at the beginning.

### How do you organize your books?

I do organize my books, but not alphabetically or by subject. I like to create interesting shapes and colors on the shelves. I was doing it before Zoom bookshelves were a thing. Interior designers eat your hearts out.

### What kind of reader were you as a child? Which childhood books and authors stick with you most?

The only novels I remember reading as a child were "Moby-Dick" and "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." I went to Catholic school. We read the Bible a lot. The first book I ever read was a "Dick and Jane" primer. "See Dick run. Run Dick run."

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

Obvious answer: Baldwin, Morrison and Capote.

### Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn't? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

I hate to say this, but Harry Potter for all of the above. It really sucks, too, because there are often Harry Potter clues in New York Times crossword puzzles. I never know the answers.

### What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?

I feel like I should read a lot more Whitman. Maybe when I retire or actually get to take more than one week off at a time.

### What do you plan to read next?

"All Boys Aren't Blue," by George M. Johnson. A friend recommended it as we were talking by phone just before I began answering these questions. □

An expanded version of this interview is available at [nytimes.com/books](https://nytimes.com/books).

# What are you doing for the next few days?



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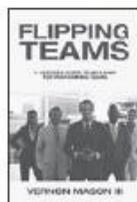
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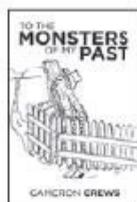
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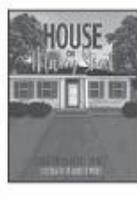
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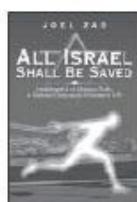
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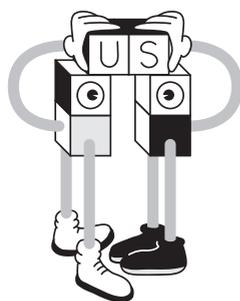


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# Other People

In this novel, a writer finds herself surrounded by competing vanities and insecurities.



LINDA MERAD

By **SADIE STEIN**

THIS IS A GREAT MOMENT, in contemporary letters, for crummy people. I'm not talking about Bernhardian antiheroes or protagonists who are hard to relate to. I mean jerks. Their voices have generally been honed by Twitter to a rapier-sharp meanness, alternating between dismissive sneering and scrupulous sanctimony. They tend to mistake oversharing for intimacy, neurosis for vulnerability, self-loathing for charm. Trauma is allowed, but not heart.

**MONA**

By **Pola Oloixarac**

Translated by Adam Morris  
176 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$25.

Why you should invest in these characters' fates is never made clear; your interest — or at least a kind of readerly Stockholm syndrome — is simply assumed. Such characters (or their creators) appear to believe that the less sympathetic they are, the more authentic they sound, and that they're just saying what all of us would if we only had the nerve. *I hate myself*, they say smugly. *More than you possibly could.*

The title character of "Mona," a new novel by the Argentine writer Pola Oloixarac, might have been perfectly nice once, but we'll never know it. Mona is a rising star on the Latin American literary scene, scornful of the international establishment that exploits her for her identity ("being a 'woman of color,' in the vade mecum of American racism, began to confer a chic

**SADIE STEIN'S** writing has appeared in *Vogue*, *New York* and *The New Yorker*, among other publications.

sort of cultural capital") but dependent on its academic appointments, publishing contracts and monetary awards. When we meet her, she is en route from Stanford to Sweden for the presentation of the lucrative Basske-Wortz — "the most important literary award in Europe," for which she and 13 others have been nominated. Mona is brilliant, superficial, mysteriously bruised, exhibitionistic, insecure, vain and impossibly glamorous. Needless to say, she is adept at social media.

Once in Sweden, Mona finds herself surrounded by preening jackasses of many lands. There's the swaggering Colombian Marxist Marco; Hava, the combative Israeli feminist; the frequently naked local classicist Akto. Preceding the award ceremony is a four-day conference: punishing rounds of talks, panels, group meals, petty intellectual one-upmanship, casual misogyny and lackadaisical love affairs. To blunt the experience — as well as the repressed memory of the obscure hurt that haunts her mind and body — Mona spends most of her time on various drugs, or in a porn-glazed reverie. As for the recurring fox and the sinister phalanx of silent men who seem occasionally to trail her — are they a manifestation of inner demons, or something real and menacing?

Pola Oloixarac's debut, "Savage Theories," a multilayered novel spanning eras and continents, generated both adulation and obloquy. Even its harshest critics had to acknowledge its ambition; it took on Argentina's Dirty War, gaming culture and high theory, wrangling with the problem of how to dramatize intellection and laying bare a fascinating mind.

By any measure, "Mona" is a slighter effort, though Oloixarac frequently made me laugh out loud. There are moments so casually well observed — hat-tip to her trans-

lator, Adam Morris — that you're almost eager to prolong the conference beyond its antic and hallucinatory (in a bad way) conclusion. Clearly, this is a world the author knows all too well, whose vanities she despises. Each of the writers Mona meets is convinced of the unique importance of his work, yet even the palatable ones seem to suffer from the same underlying corruption.

The problem, of course, is that Mona buys into it too. For all of her relentless winking, she craves the reader's admiration like the Valium she keeps in a gold pillbox. Both she and her author need us to appreciate the barrage of in-jokes and up-to-the-minute signifiers, to recognize a dizzying array of philosophical and literary references, or even better, to not recognize them. To understand, above all, that she is *important*. For all the pre-emptive diffidence, the self-consciousness, the self-disgust, the self-criticism, there is a pernicious thread of . . . self-regard. Indeed, one might call it the most genuine thing about the novel.

At the end of the book, Oloixarac tries to melt and clarify Mona's defenses in the heat of emotional truth: Flanked by the sensitive, beautifully jacketed Sven (the "Alpine nonfictionalist"), Mona is able to face the trauma in her recent past and, in theory, casts the events of the novel into sinister high relief. But after 170 pages of relentless, knowing brittleness, this climax has the feeling of a deathbed conversion to some older model self. Mona's defensive irreverence has cheapened what could have been real tragedy into a jarring piety.

Of course, Mona would probably tell you that was what she intended all along. As she says to Sven, "I do believe that contempt is the lingua franca of our era, and on that I'll bet we can both agree." □

# Head Case

A transplant surgeon who wanted to understand the brain.

By **SAM KEAN**

ONE DAY IN the 1960s, a priest walked into an operating room in Cleveland to find a dead dog lying on the table. The transplant surgeon Robert White had drained its blood and cooled its brain to 50 degrees. The priest then looked on, aghast, as White spread a picnic cloth on the table and began munching on a sandwich.

Halfway through his meal, White asked the priest if he thought the dog really was dead. The priest said yes — right? With a merry twinkle, White set to work, recirculating blood and rewarming the brain. However groggy, the dog eventually lurched to life and began staggering around. At this, White winked at the priest. “Maybe like Christ,” he teased. “Dead and revived.”

White didn’t pull this stunt to mock religion; he was actually a devout Catholic who attended Mass daily. Nor was he simply showing off his medical skills. Rather, as Brandy Schillace explains in her de-

**MR. HUMBLE AND DR. BUTCHER**  
**A Monkey’s Head, the Pope’s**  
**Neuroscientist, and the Quest to**  
**Transplant the Soul**

By **Brandy Schillace**

303 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$27.

lightly macabre “Mr. Humble and Dr. Butcher,” White’s real goal was to push the boundaries of both surgery and theology, which he viewed as complementary fields — each one wrestling with big questions about life, death and the human soul.

Schillace, a medical historian at Case Western Reserve University, first learned of White when a doctor in Cleveland, aware of her love for gruesome tales, presented her with an old, blood-spattered lab notebook of White’s. It more than lived up to her expectations. The book that resulted from her fascination is partly a history of transplant surgery — especially its fraught early days, when accusations of murder, racial bias and sadism were surprisingly common. The bulk of it, however, focuses on White, whose entire life, which spanned the 20th century (1926-2010), was a series of contradictions.

He was nominated for a Nobel Prize for developing lifesaving surgical techniques, yet also inspired shlocky horror films like “The Brain That Wouldn’t Die.” He advised the pope on bioethics, yet appalled actual bioethicists, as well as animal-rights activists. He demanded to be taken seriously by the medical community, yet strutted around on Halloween with a medical bag emblazoned “Dr. Frankenstein.” (He in

**SAM KEAN** is the author of the forthcoming “*The Icepick Surgeon: Murder, Fraud, Sabotage, Piracy, and Other Dastardly Deeds Perpetrated in the Name of Science.*”

fact seemed to consider “Frankenstein” not a cautionary tale but a how-to manual.) Nor did he see any conflict between science and religion. “Quite the contrary,” Schillace writes, “he viewed the operating theater as a ‘sacred space,’ a place where his God-given talents met their God-directed end.”

Indeed, White’s work got into some pretty heavy metaphysical territory. His ultimate goal in surgery was to transplant a human head from one body to another — purportedly to prolong the life of someone like Stephen Hawking. In private, though, White had an ulterior motive. He was fascinated with the question of where the human “soul” resides. In the brain? The body at large? He hoped head transplants would allow him to study the question scientifically. He also pondered removing brains from their skulls and keeping them alive in jars. Could such brains think? White argued yes. He in fact believed that detached brains might be superior to regular brains in realms like mathematics, since they could manipulate pure symbols without the “distraction” of sensory information.

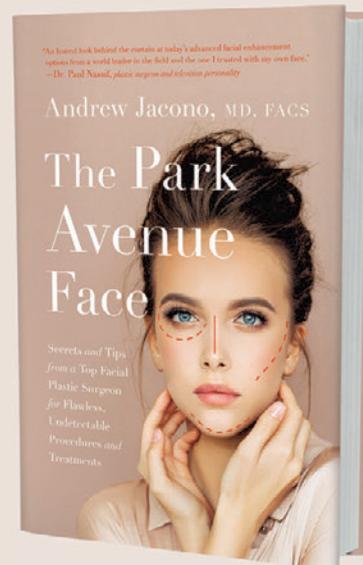
This work might seem like the relic of a more brutal age in medicine. But in 2019, scientists at Yale University discovered how to reboot dead, disembodied pig brains in the lab. Moreover, surgeons in Italy and China are actively pursuing a head transplant today. “To the last,” Schillace notes, White “remained convinced that the surgery would be performed, somewhere, someday, and that his work would be exonerated.” In other words, while White may be forgotten now, his ghost still haunts medicine — a prospect that would have delighted this pious, puckish Frankenstein. □



Robert White

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# Deus Ex Machina

A biography of the Nobel-winning scientist who has revolutionized gene editing.

By DAVA SOBEL

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC forced Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier to accept the 2020 Nobel Prize in Chemistry virtually, instead of actually attending the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences' annual December ceremony at the Stockholm Concert Hall, where the king of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf, would have given each of them an 18-karat gold medal along with a congratulatory handshake. This year's gala, like so many events everywhere, was canceled for the first time in decades.

## THE CODE BREAKER

**Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race**

By Walter Isaacson

Illustrated. 516 pp. Simon & Schuster. \$35.

The landmark research that brought Doudna and Charpentier to the pinnacle of global acclaim has the potential to control future pandemics — either by outwitting the next viral plague through better screening and treatment or by engineering human beings with better disease resistance programmed into their cells. The technique of gene editing that they patented, which goes by the unwieldy acronym of CRISPR-Cas9, makes it possible to selectively snip and alter bits of DNA as though they were so many hems to take up or waistbands to let out. The method is based on defenses pioneered by bacteria in their ages-old battle against viruses.

Doudna and Charpentier — one American, the other French — are the sixth and seventh women to win the chemistry Nobel in its century-plus history. (Marie Curie was first, in 1911, followed by her daughter Irène in 1935.) The names Doudna and Charpentier had already been notably paired in 2015, when they jointly won the \$3 million Breakthrough Prize in Life Sciences, and again in 2018, when they collected the coveted Kavli Prize in Norway. Although they have never belonged to the same research institution, they formed a successful collaboration with each other and numerous colleagues in several countries by building on shared interests, camaraderie and competition.

The CRISPR history holds obvious appeal for Walter Isaacson, a biographer of Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, Steve Jobs and Leonardo da Vinci. In “The Code Breaker” he reprises several of his previous themes — science, genius, experiment, code, thinking different — and devotes a full length book to a female subject for the first time. Jennifer Doudna, a genuine heroine for our time, may be the code breaker

DAVA SOBEL is the author of “Longitude,” “Galileo’s Daughter” and, most recently, “The Glass Universe.”



Jennifer Doudna's landmark work has been celebrated with multiple awards and grants.

of the book's title, but she is only part of Isaacson's story. The subtitle promises a wider reach: “Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing, and the Future of the Human Race.” This may sound like publisher's hyperbole, but Isaacson devotes much anguished discussion to the ethics of gene editing, especially when it comes to “germline” changes that can be passed on through generations and “enhancements” such as green eyes or high I.Q. that prospective parents could insert into their offspring's genomes.

The term “code breaker” also describes the CRISPR complex itself, which cuts through the double strands of the DNA molecule carrying the genetic code.

“The Code Breaker” introduces Doudna on a sleepless night early last March, just before “lockdown” became a household word. She and her husband, the Berkeley geneticist Jamie Cate, are driving to Fresno to retrieve their teenage son, Andy, from a robotics competition set to begin later that day. A few hours' reflection has left Doudna time to question the wisdom of leaving Andy with more than a thousand other kids in an enclosed convention center, given the specter of the incipient epidemic. Andy, understandably, is none too happy to see his parents again so soon, but, as the reunited family decamps, he receives a text message announcing the competition's cancellation. All of Andy's fellow robot enthusiasts from high schools statewide must likewise leave the prem-

ises immediately.

This is a good place to start the story, because “The Code Breaker” is in some respects a journal of our 2020 plague year. By the final chapter, Isaacson has enrolled in a vaccine trial. Between the main character's frantic road trip and the author's rolled-up sleeve, there is room to explore Doudna's childhood, trace her career, meet her competitors and collaborators, fret over the future fallout of the CRISPR revolution and marvel at its positive potential.

## CRISPR promises to engineer human beings with better disease resistance.

Fortunately for Doudna, her early reading of “The Double Helix,” by James Watson, proved formative. She breezed right past Watson's snarky comments about the structural biologist Rosalind Franklin's looks and took away an important message: Rosalind Franklin was a scientist; therefore Jennifer Doudna could be one, too. Echoes of those encouraging words emanate from the pages of “The Code Breaker,” as well as from Doudna's own book, “A Crack in Creation,” written with her former student Samuel Sternberg and published in 2017. Its subtitle, “Gene Editing and the Unthinkable Power to Control Evolution,” reflects a sober respect for

what her years of effort have wrought.

“The Code Breaker” is a handsome volume with color photos distributed generously throughout. While the pictures enhance the storytelling, the narrative flow is constantly interrupted by subheads and space breaks. Almost every spread includes one, as though admonishing the reader to pay attention.

Isaacson keeps a firm, experienced hand on the scientific explanations, which he mastered through extensive readings and interviews, all of which are footnoted. In a chapter called “I Learn to Edit,” he tries his hand at editing human DNA using CRISPR, expertly guided by Doudna's associates.

Most of Isaacson's first-person appearances in “The Code Breaker,” which are numerous, demonstrate his diligence as a reporter. He attends scientific conferences, tours labs, consults experts on both sides of disputes, even facilitates an important phone call between two principal personalities. However, a certain clubbiness attends some of these references, as when he names the restaurants where key conversations occur, even including, in one case, the menu highlights:

“When the first day of presentations is over, Doudna and Sternberg go to a casual restaurant in Old Quebec City, but I accept an invitation from Feng Zhang to join him and a small group of his friends for dinner. Not only do I want to hear his perspective, but I also want to check out the inventive new restaurant he has chosen, Chez Boulay, which features crispy seal meatloaf, huge raw scallops, Arctic char, seared bison and cabbage blood sausage.”

Some of the most exciting sections of “The Code Breaker” detail the way CRISPR researchers rose to the Covid challenge: They developed rapid test procedures and vaccine strategies — and posted them to an open database for the benefit of the entire scientific community, spurring progress to a gallop.

Considerable challenges attend the writing of a book about a developing field of science. For all the care invested, not to mention the perfect timing of the Nobel Prize, the epilogue of “The Code Breaker” contrasts sadly with our current reality. Isaacson, enjoying a fine day last fall on his balcony in New Orleans's French Quarter, “can again hear music on the street and smell shrimp being boiled at the corner restaurant.” There was no way for him to know the enemy virus would surge and mutate by his book's publication date to become even more contagious than before, though he suspected it might.

Reflecting on the nature of scientific research, Isaacson lets Emmanuelle Charpentier have the next-to-last words: “At the end of the day,” she tells him, “the discoveries are what endure. We are just passing on this planet for a short time. We do our job, and then we leave and others pick up the work.” □

# Disappearing Acts

THERE'S SOME HEAVY irony at work in **RED WIDOW** (Putnam, 352 pp., \$27) as one of its leads, the C.I.A. agent Lyndsey Duncan, is known by colleagues as the “human lie detector.” Polygraphs are so inaccurate that many courts won’t admit them as evidence. But their continued use by intelligence divisions is a metaphor for the lack of trust inherent in this work, a metaphor Alma Katsu employs in sly fashion.

Lyndsey, in particular, has excellent reason to be wary of everybody. A Russian asset she’s spent months developing has been fatally poisoned. His family needs safe harbor, but she’s getting resistance from the higher-ups. And a fledgling friendship with the titular widow, Theresa Warner, seems predicated on falsehood and betrayal. Figuring out who’s doing the most double-dealing, and how many layers of deception are involved, makes for delicious suspense.

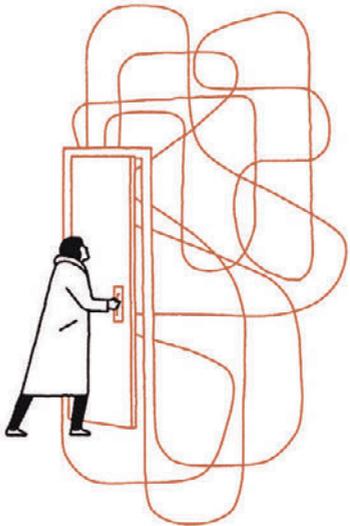
Katsu, a longtime intelligence analyst for the C.I.A. and N.S.A., writes what she’s most professionally familiar with after years in the paranormal and horror novel trenches. The plotting is sophisticated and laced with surprises, but what stands out most is the emotional core of Lyndsey and Theresa’s alliance, and whether there is room, in a nest of vipers, for true sisterhood.

YEARS OF READING and reviewing crime novels has led me to a consensus judgment about their construction: A book can open with an outlandish premise and still feel credible, but when similar twists appear late in the narrative, they almost always sink the book. I’m still puzzling over **CENTRAL PARK** (Little, Brown, 336 pp., \$28), by the French suspense king Guillaume Musso; the initial conceit provoked plenty of interest, but the latter-half plot shift didn’t feel earned.

That opener is a doozy, however: The Paris-based homicide detective Alice Schafer wakes up in an autumn woodland one morning, handcuffed to a strange

man who turns out to be the jazz musician Gabriel Keyne. Both soon realize they are in a densely forested part of Central Park called the Ramble. Gabriel has a clue cut into his skin, and Alice finds another on a piece of paper — left, perhaps, by a serial killer she has tried and failed to apprehend.

Musso, as reflected in Sam Taylor’s nimble translation, spoons out details and misdirection with brio, along with the roots of Alice’s raw rage, carry-



PABLO AMARGO

ing this reader along for longer than she bargained for. More jarring, in addition to that credibility-shattering last-act twist, were the inappropriate, power-imbalanced meet-cutes that men have with Alice, inexorably linking her romantic life with death.

WHEN READERS MEET Erin McCabe, the protagonist of Robyn Gigl’s emotionally resonant debut, **BY WAY OF SORROW** (Kensington, 304 pp., \$26), she’s in a courtroom for the first time in five years, hoisting a homophobic judge by his own petard. Establishing Erin’s capability and creativity as a lawyer right away is a smart gambit, because the bulk of the novel juxtaposes her professional acumen with the struggles she and her client Sharise face being recognized for who they are.

Erin is transgender, as is

Sharise, who is jailed for murdering the son of a senator. So, too, is the author, a New Jersey-based litigation specialist. This matters because Gigl writes scene after scene where her characters’ basic humanity is ignored, laughed at, mocked or cause for imminent harm. (That the story takes place in 2006 and 2007, when trans rights garnered far less public discussion, also matters.) The misgenderings sting, and should, but Gigl is too astute and compassionate a writer to create cartoon villainy out of anti-trans attitudes. Both Erin and Sharise will find acceptance, often slow, sometimes fervent, among recalcitrant loved ones.

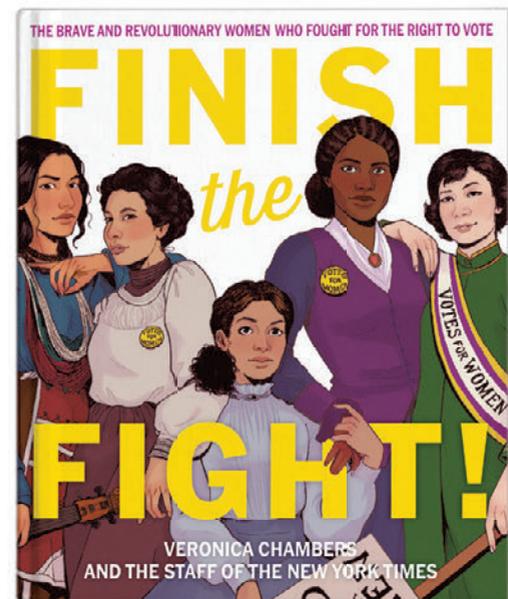
Both women also find themselves caught up in a terrifying conspiracy that costs the lives of far too many. The resulting legal resolution feels inevitable, but open-ended enough for more Erin McCabe appearances, a welcome — and quietly groundbreaking — development.

THE 1959 DISAPPEARANCE of 900 residents from a small Swedish enclave is more than mere documentary subject for Alice Lindstedt. She grew up hearing stories about Silvertjarn from her grandmother, whose parents and younger sister counted among the missing. So why not recruit friends old and new to help her make a film and solve lingering family mysteries? It will not surprise any discerning reader of **THE LOST VILLAGE** (Minotaur, 352 pp., \$23.99), Camilla Sten’s unnerving debut, that Alice’s obsession will get the better of her.

Sten does not break new ground, nor does she need to. The abandoned Silvertjarn and the ghosts that have long haunted the village — and continue to haunt it — hold enough menace. Flashbacks to the last days of the functioning village fill in requisite gaps and flesh out the level of loss Alice is contending with, and show how easy it is for her and her friends to lose whatever hold on reality they had before voluntarily cohabiting with ghosts. Come for the mounting horror and scares, but stay for a devastating examination of the nature of family secrets. □



## READ THE UNTOLD STORIES OF THE DIVERSE HEROINES WHO FOUGHT FOR THE 19TH AMENDMENT.



AGES 8+

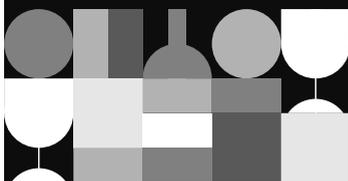


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# Legacies of Imperialism

The imperial past is never dead; it's not even past.

By **FAREED ZAKARIA**

WE ARE ALL in the throes of a hangover, Samir Puri writes, a “great imperial hangover.” He explains in “The Shadows of Empire” that we are living in the “first empire-free millennium” in history and yet the legacy of these empires still powerfully shapes our times. He is aware of the notion of informal empires but makes a strong case that there was something distinct and notable about formal empires, which existed from the days of the oldest human civilizations until 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. This juxtaposition — imperial legacies in a postimperial world — is an intriguing idea that proves a clever prism through which to look at the world. Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Britain’s exit

**THE SHADOWS OF EMPIRE**  
**How Imperial History Shapes Our World**  
By **Samir Puri**

384 pp. Pegasus Books. \$28.95.

from the European Union and the break-downs in Iraq and Syria all have deep roots in an imperial past that still casts shadows on the present.

Once you start to think along these lines, you see the shadows of empires everywhere. The day I began the book, I had been reading about a topic that Puri does not discuss but is one more example of his thesis: the roiling debate about what to do with the hundreds of thousands of artifacts that were, over the centuries, taken from across the globe and now sit proudly in the great museums of the West. In recent history, because of the reach of Western power, most countries have either acted as imperialists or found themselves subjugated, and in both cases their national identity was profoundly shaped by the experience. Even the United States has been deeply affected by imperialism, Puri says, arguing that American slavery was an idea imported from Europe’s empires and was “the ultimate manifestation of colonization, not of land but people.” In fact, the MSNBC anchor Chris Hayes has described the historical circumstance of African-Americans as “a colony within a nation.”

Puri, an expert on armed conflict who has worked in the British Foreign Office, makes the case that Britain’s two pivotal decisions of the last several decades — joining the United States in the Iraq war and Brexit — were both crucially conditioned by the country’s imperial hangover. Once the world’s greatest imperial power, Britain clung to the idea that it had the military strength, the diplomatic skill and above all the ambition to shape far-flung parts of the globe. In addition, modern-day Iraq was a British creation, cobbled to-

**FAREED ZAKARIA’S** most recent book is “*Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*.”



British troops on the way to Baghdad, 1917.

gether in 1920 out of three provinces of the collapsing Ottoman Empire. London could once again decide Baghdad’s fate.

Brexit was animated by a view that Britain was not a country defined by its proximity to Europe. In fact, what had often characterized British nationalism was its separation from the Continent. (In Shakespeare’s “Richard II,” John of Gaunt gives voice to a deep-rooted English nationalism when he describes the island nation as “this precious stone set in the silver sea / Which serves it in the office of a wall / Or as a moat defensive to a house, / Against the envy of less happier lands.”) The leading Brexiters, including now-Prime Minister Boris Johnson, often spoke about a “global Britain,” continuing its historical mission around the world, forging closer ties in particular with its old colonies and dominions from Canada to India to Australia.

The Russian case is in some ways even easier to make. Puri points out that “the evolution of Russia was inextricably linked to its expansion, so much so that it is unclear whether Russia created an empire or the process of imperialism created Russia.” He dates the start of Russia’s European-facing empire to the kingdom of Kievan Rus, which began in the ninth century in Kyiv, the present-day capital of Ukraine. From those modest beginnings grew an empire that at its height, after the Soviet Union’s victory in World War II, spanned 11 time zones and comprised almost 200 million people. When you consider this history, Vladimir Putin’s remark that the collapse of the Soviet Union was “a major geopolitical disaster of the century” makes sense, especially if you listen to what he said immediately after: “Tens of millions of our co-citizens and co-patriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover the epidemic of disintegra-

tion infected Russia itself.” These deep imperial ties with Ukraine help explain why Putin’s brazen annexation of Crimea was broadly popular within Russia.

We enter the postimperial 21st century with an unusual geopolitical dynamic. The two leading powers on the planet, the United States and China, both derive a great deal of their internal legitimacy and purpose from the notion that they are anti-imperial nations. In America’s case, its identity is tied to its birth story of rebelling against the British Empire. In China’s case, every schoolchild is taught that the country’s modern history began with Western imperialism humiliating and crippling the Middle Kingdom for over a century. And yet both countries have informal empires. The American one is a vast network of economic alliances and military bases scattered around the world. China, for its part, is trying to develop something quite similar with its huge Belt and Road Initiative, which may swell to 10 times the size of the Marshall Plan.

How will these two distinctive postimperial superpowers interact in the 21st century? What will be the consequences of the imperial shadows cast in this new, emerging bipolar era? Unfortunately, Puri does not have much to say about any of this. Having provided a fresh perspective on all the issues I have raised above, he offers brief and intelligent speculation, but mostly proceeds to simply recount the imperial histories of major countries or parts of the world. Much of this is well written, comprehensive and judicious, but it is still potted history. Having introduced a fascinating subject, Puri declines to fully engage and explore his own thesis. He seems to imply that this task is left to the reader, but that leaves too much to us, and lets the author of this stimulating book off the hook too easily. □

## Why do we assume that a work of literary fiction must be based on its author's life?

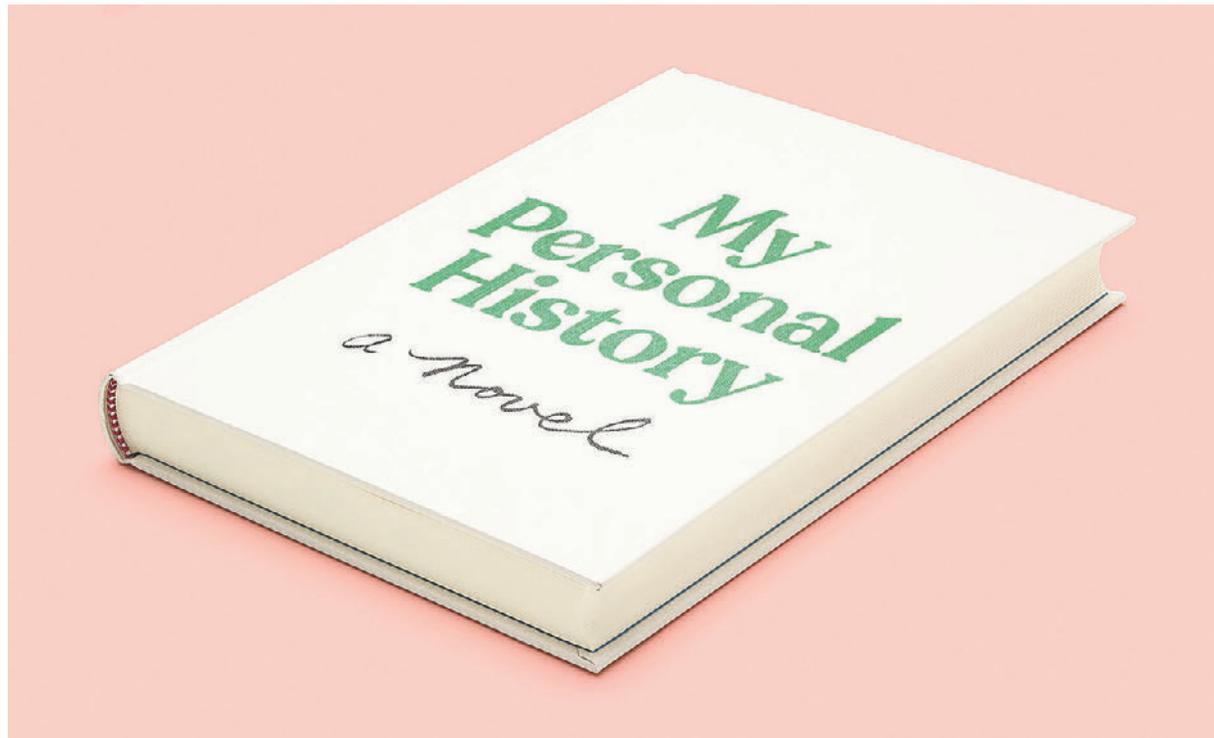
IN FEBRUARY 2020, at a book party in a Brooklyn brownstone, a smiling stranger walked up to me. “We have something in common, you know,” she said. “We conceived our children without having sex.” My memory of the exchange then goes blank for a moment — I must have spluttered some confused pleasantries in response — but it quickly emerged that she had read my first novel, which explores its protagonist's struggles with infertility, and drawn the conclusion that I myself had undergone I.V.F., as she had.

It was an audacious introduction. But I could not begrudge the assumption she had made, even if I was disoriented by the way she had expressed it. I, too, assume that much of the contemporary fiction I read is autobiographical. The most celebrated novels of the past year — Douglas Stuart's “Shuggie Bain,” which won the Booker Prize, drew openly on the author's childhood. Ayad Akhtar wrote “Homeland Elegies” in the form of a memoir, and Brandon Taylor, a former doctoral student in biochemistry, called his campus novel “Real Life.” Two of the buzziest books of early 2021, Lauren Oyler's “Fake Accounts” and Patricia Lockwood's “No One Is Talking About This,” blur the lines between art and life while deploying the language and brain fugue of internet immersion. None of these books would be caught off-guard by a prying party guest.

“Write what you know” has been the novelist's imperative at least since Charles Dickens retooled fragments of an abandoned memoir for “David Copperfield,” and reached a logical extreme with the autofiction boom of the last decade. The belief that every novel is a self-accounting is timeworn, too: Some early readers of “Lolita” suspected that only someone with the mentality of a child predator could have conjured the depraved Humbert Humbert. Publishers, meanwhile, often appear to want readers to see books as thinly veiled autobiography, and their publicity campaigns typically emphasize authors' personal connections to their work. This can backfire, as with the P.R. blitz for Jeanine Cummins's border-crisis blockbuster “American Dirt,” which exaggerated the author's Latina heritage and suggested that her husband is an undocumented Central American immigrant (he's from Ireland).

Some of the boldest and most exciting novels of recent years have taken the autobiographical assumption and everything knit up in it — the nature of truth, the boundaries between what is real and what is imagined — as a shadow theme. The first third of Susan Choi's “Trust Exercise” steepes itself in the horny adolescent drama of a performing-arts high school modeled in part on the one Choi herself attended in Houston in the 1980s. Then, however, Choi raises another curtain and yet another, her book shape-shifting into a dazzling metafiction on authorship and self-performance. From the opening pages of “The Need,” Helen Phillips, a mother of two, captures the sticky overwhelm of early parenthood — the engorged breasts, the toddler mayhem — with diaristic, feels-real precision. But from the jump, Phillips's book is also operating in the realms of science fiction and body horror, becoming a wondrously demented commentary on the slipperiness and duality of the maternal state.

JESSICA WINTER is an editor at *The New Yorker*. Her new novel is “*The Fourth Child*.”



LINDA HUANG

The expectation that fiction is autobiographical is understandable for the simple reason that so much of it is. When that expectation becomes prescriptive, however, critical reading can devolve into a tiresome kind of fact-checking. In a tepid review of “The Need,” a writer for *The London Review of Books* used Phillips's acknowledgments section as a bizarre gotcha, saying it “testifies against her vision of motherhood as embattled isolation, thanking 10 family members from three generations for help.” A reviewer for *Kirkus*, the trade publication, took a similar approach, though to opposite effect, in a rave for “Shuggie Bain,” writing, “Readers may get through the whole novel without breaking down — then read the first sentence of the acknowledgments and lose it.”

There is something backhanded about using authors' personal statements as a Captcha tool for verifying the emotional resonance of their work. This tendency reached a nadir with the conversation around Kate Elizabeth Russell's “My Dark Vanessa,” in which the author, facing unfounded allegations of plagiarism, felt compelled to restate publicly that she, like her protagonist, was a survivor of sexual abuse. An author working in good faith can't win at this game. If she is forced to confirm that her material is autobiographical, then she risks forfeiting both the privacy and the power of transfiguration that fiction promises. If she denies it, then she surrenders a badge of authenticity that she may never have wished to claim in the first place, and lays herself open to accusations that she is appropriating the pain of others.

Whether or how much a book draws from real life isn't strictly quantifiable. In his essay collection “How to Write an Autobiographical Novel,” Alexander Chee posits a kind of epistemological mystery: A reader may see himself accurately reflected in such a novel, but the

writer may not. Of his debut, “Edinburgh,” Chee writes: “I wish I could show you the roomful of people who've told me the novel is the story of their lives. . . . I still don't know if I'd be in that room.” Part of this mystery is due to the chaotic consciousness native to the novel-writing process, which requires a degree of possession. Nobody is asking you to do what you are doing. There are more than enough novels in the world, and nobody is more painfully aware of that than the person attempting to write one. To dig a book out of the ground can be backbreaking, hand-tearing work; you need to forget what you are doing, to fall into a trance, and when the spell breaks, you can't be entirely sure what you've unearthed, where it came from or who will recognize it as belonging to them, too. And however much of what results is pure invention (or so you think), your subjectivity is all you have. *You* made it up. It's made of you.

After I had revised a draft of my second novel, which is set in my hometown, Buffalo, a friend proposed the title “The Fourth Child.” I had used a passage from Doris Lessing's “The Fifth Child” as my book's epigraph, but so explicitly nudging my work into line with that of a Nobel Prize winner felt arrogant, unseemly. Then, however, another friend flagged the actual provocation. “You are the fourth child,” she said. “In your family.” I hadn't noticed this parallel — that, like one of my characters, I am the youngest of four children, with a large age gap between my older siblings and me — until my friend pointed it out. This is not merely embarrassing; it's preposterous. It points to a rather terrifying lack of self-knowledge, a near total absence of control over the thing I spent five years making. If someone else told me this, I'm not sure I would believe her. But look: I wrote it down. You just read it. So it must be true, it must have really happened — right? □

# Life on the Outside

A memoir of grasping for Black identities that never quite fit.

By **IJEOMA OLUO**

I WAS ABOUT 10 when I found out that my whole life I'd been saying my name wrong. A friend of my father's — an "uncle" — had come to town, and my white mom had dressed us up for the occasion in traditional Nigerian dress. My top and wrap skirt were of a gorgeous orange- and red-printed fabric, hand-sewn by a woman from my father's village in Rivers State. But when this uncle asked me my name, I embarrassed myself and my family by mispronouncing it "Joma."

"That is not your name," he replied. "Your name is Ijeoma. You have to know how to say your name. It is a very good Nigerian name." Suddenly my clothing felt tight and uncomfortable, as if my uncle could see that none of this — the clothing or the name — fit me.

## FLOATING IN A MOST PECULIAR WAY

By **Louis Chude-Sokei**

219 pp. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. \$27.

To this day, when people ask me how to pronounce my name, part of me knows that no matter how much I've practiced, I still don't say it right. It is a good Nigerian name, and my father was a good Nigerian, while I am floating in this space just outside.

In his debut memoir, "Floating in a Most Peculiar Way," Louis Chude-Sokei writes from that space outside, detailing with unflinching directness the confusion, isolation, horror and bizarre humor of his life as a child born to a high-ranking Biafran major father and a Jamaican mother in the midst of civil war in Nigeria. Born the day that war was declared in 1967 — "Family legend had it that while she was in labor she could hear the first fruits of the federal government's bombing campaign against Biafra" — Chude-Sokei, the director of the African-American studies program at Boston University, doesn't remember being carried away by his mother to Jamaica. By 6 he was living in a "home for left-behind children" in Montego Bay while his mother tried to find work in the United States. "America was a place where people disappeared all the time," Chude-Sokei writes, "mothers in particular." But eventually, after years in this austere and often abusive environment, he joined his mother as an adolescent in Inglewood, Calif.

Chude-Sokei's prose is both direct and poetic, describing horrific trauma with such flat immediacy that at times I had to set the book down for a moment, just to process what I was reading.

This is a story of a young Black man trying to find himself in a world where he

never quite seems to belong. Too African for Jamaica, too Jamaican for America, too American for Nigeria, Chude-Sokei grows up grasping at these various identities in the hopes of finding a Blackness that fits him, as each of these realms places its own, often contradictory, expectations upon him.

I cringed with recognition as Chude-Sokei attempts and fails to escape American racism by embracing his African forebears' prejudice against Black Americans. But Chude-Sokei resists editorializing. There are no life lessons, no rationalizations of the bigotry and violence that exist in a diaspora so ravaged by white colonialism. We must look at the author's story, see how messy it is, and try to figure out why alongside him. Reading this book I wondered if white readers would get its complexity, if they'd be able to reserve judg-



Louis Chude-Sokei

ment. As I reached the end I was anxious to laugh at the absurdity of my expectations. How very American to expect a story so wide, so vast, so nuanced to be tied up in a bow. This is not a Hollywood movie; this is a man's life, and a life like those of so many of us who make up the African diaspora. Herein lies the beauty of "Floating in a Most Peculiar Way": It reveals how we carry trauma with us, how that trauma can cause us to hurt one another, and how we still love and carry one another with wounds unhealed. I finished this book wanting to know more — about Chude-Sokei's mother's story, about my own father's. There were times when I enjoyed this book and times when I felt like I survived it, but there was never a time when I did not find myself within it. These are words in which those of us who have floated outside for so long can touch down for a bit, and connect. □

**IJEOMA OLUO** is the author, most recently, of "Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America."

# After Hours

Uncovering the victims of a killer who preyed on gay men at bars.

By **CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN**

ON A SUNDAY afternoon in May 1991, a maintenance worker emptying garbage barrels on the Pennsylvania Turnpike made a grisly discovery: Wrapped inside eight knotted trash bags was the mutilated body of a 54-year-old man, killed by stab wounds to the abdomen, his severed penis shoved in his mouth. In a notable concession to the overriding paranoia of the era, the maintenance worker was advised to take an AIDS test, even though he hadn't come in direct contact with blood.

## LAST CALL

**A True Story of Love, Lust, and Murder in Queer New York**  
By **Elon Green**

255 pp. Celadon Books. \$27.

A little over a year later, a second dismembered body was discovered wrapped in bags off a remote New Jersey highway. Both victims — older, white-collar professional men, with the heterosexual vestments of marriages and children — had last been seen at an upscale Midtown Manhattan gay piano bar called the Townhouse.

So begins Elon Green's terrific, harrowing, true-crime account of an elusive serial killer who preyed upon gay men in the 1990s, perfidiously turning the safe havens of gay bars into hunting grounds, and semi-anonymous late-night hookups into an opportunity to kill with impunity. Two more men would be added to the body count in 1993: a struggling prostitute known to operate out of the Port Authority and the "hustler buffet" in the East 50s; and a mild-mannered patron of a West Village piano bar. The most prolific serial killers exploit the vulnerabilities of the social order; the "Last Call Killer" took advantage of gay men's need for discretion and the endemic homophobia of law enforcement.

"Last Call" is Green's first book, and it admirably demonstrates his commitment to sidestepping easy sensationalism for the far grittier work of checking sources, poring over police reports and reinterviewing witnesses. In choosing a serial murder case that was scantily covered at the time, Green takes us far from the terrain of fashionably notorious Netflix psychopaths like Andrew Cunanan (whom Gary Indiana described in 1999 as "a diabolic icon in the circus of American celebrity"); that this now reads like a high compliment gives some indication of the culture's ever-tightening embrace of the criminal).

Instead of focusing on the killer, Green opts to humanize his victims. This proves a thorny task when dealing with men who

led pointedly secret lives. In the book's epilogue, he explains that he was motivated by the lives that these men "wanted but couldn't have. Here was a generation of men, more or less, for whom it was difficult to be visibly gay. To be visibly whole." I would have put the emphasis on *visibly* rather than on *whole*. Closeted gay people do, of course, lead rich, satisfying existences, even if they leave fewer traces. One of the perils of writing about marginalized murder victims is that their lives can be framed as one long sorrowful arc of victimization — in a sense fated to be found dead in a trash bag on the side of the road. Gay men pressured to hide their sexuality at the height of the AIDS epidemic are particularly susceptible to all-consuming tragic narratives.

Green seems to anticipate this journalistic conundrum. With great compassion, he widens his scope to explore the social value of gay bars to the queer community and the vital work of grass-roots groups like the New York City Anti-Violence Project, which fought for fair treatment for gay crime victims during a period when they were often treated like career criminals. He also fills the narrative void by telling the stories of bar patrons and employees, including those of the cultishly popular piano players who serenaded the victims and their murderer. As a result, Green proves a conscientious crime writer. He provides an adrenalized police-procedural plot without ever losing sight of the fact that these were innocent human beings who were duped, butchered and discarded. We are never allowed a moment of perverse awe for the murderer.

Ultimately, that strength is also the book's weakness. In 2000, thanks to advances in forensic science, the trash bags were reanalyzed for fingerprints, which led back to Richard Rogers Jr., a nurse at Mount Sinai Hospital who lived on Staten Island. In the chapter devoted to his life, he is described in all the ways a person never wants to be remembered unless he is an opportunistic murderer: normal, average, gangly, introverted, unassertive, round-shouldered and sunken-chested, someone who walked without swinging his arms. Rogers was tried but not convicted of murdering a male roommate in 1973, and it is likely that his killing rampage exceeded the number of victims found by chance on roadsides in the early '90s.

Green acknowledges that Rogers, who is serving two consecutive life terms in prison, declined his attempts to interview him. That missing confrontation creates a fissure in his otherwise impressive reporting. Exactly how, where and why Rogers killed remains a vexing mystery. More than once in the abrupt final chapters, in the midst of reading about him, I forgot the murderer's name. But it is to Green's credit that I never forgot the names of the four known victims. How many serial-killer victims can you name? □

**CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN** is the author of four novels, most recently "A Beautiful Crime," now out in paperback.

# Now You See It

A magician's memoir gets at the nature of truth and deception.

By **ERROL MORRIS**

LYING IS UBIQUITOUS. Why should it be otherwise? There are far more reasons to lie than to tell the truth. Isn't lying *beneficial*? Often, it is. And the importance of truth-telling — is it a fiction we tell ourselves? A fairy tale? A form of self-deception? Our *original lie*?

And yet we have this absurd belief that we are truth-tellers, or at least that we're capable of *occasionally* telling the truth.

In "Amoralman," Derek DelGaudio's masterly memoiristic account of lying and self-deception, we start life fully capable of truth-telling. Man in the state of nature or in infancy (take your pick) revels in telling the truth to others. In his epigraph DelGaudio — a sleight-of-hand artist and stage performer — quotes Ecclesiastes: "We are born knowing only truth. Then we see."

## AMORALMAN

A True Story and Other Lies

By Derek DelGaudio

Illustrated. 238 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. \$27.

Maybe we retain this ability later in life. But it seems unlikely. We may know the truth, but quickly realize no good can come of it. So we give up on it.

"Amoralman" offers up successive parables. Central among them is the parable of the cave from Plato's "Republic." In the parable, men are in shackles. They can turn neither to the left nor to the right, nor can they look behind them. They spend their lives looking at the shadows of things — not the things in and of themselves. (Not so coincidentally, the title of DelGaudio's Off Broadway play and its subsequent screen adaptation is "In & Of Itself.") They are prevented from seeing the truth and when shown the things in their *real* and substantial form, prefer to return to shadows and shackles. It is summed up in DelGaudio's maxim: "I lost sight of reality just enough to glimpse the truth."

The book is in two parts. The first part, a bildungsroman, introduces DelGaudio's family, his mother's lesbian lover, Jill, and then Ryan, the boy next door. Their Colorado neighborhood comprises two different religious groups: conservative Christians and *ultraconservative* Christians. Ryan and his family are members of the latter. DelGaudio's happy childhood is permanently interrupted when he tells Ryan about having two mothers. "My mother had taught me the value of truth, but she neglected to teach me the cost," he writes. "She told me that honesty was always the best policy, but now I had evidence to the contrary."

**ERROL MORRIS'S** many feature documentaries include "The Thin Blue Line," the Oscar-winning "The Fog of War" and, most recently, "My Psychedelic Love Story."



MAX LÖFFLER

The second part of the book is an extended poker game. Hired to cheat others, DelGaudio imagines he's in control. After all, he's the one involved in false dealing. It turns out differently than he might have expected.

This is a story of unending ironies and misconceptions. That which we expected to be the truth is a lie, or at least a partial fiction. Anecdotes could be true, but falsely attributed. Intentions could be and are misrepresented or misunderstood. Good guys turn out to be bad guys and vice versa. And the purpose of magic and sleight-of-hand in such a universe? It goes back to Plato's cave, which reminds us that things are *always* different than they seem. We misunderstand context. We confuse shadowy representations for the things in and of themselves. We live in a shadowy, fictional world.

DelGaudio believed when he was a boy that the puppeteers in Plato's cave were trying to dupe the prisoners. But he couldn't answer why. By the end of his story, he realizes that the puppeteers may have been themselves deceived. And yet, grafted onto what might at first seem like a

despairing vision — a vision I would not be at all unsympathetic toward — is a belief that life is not less than what it seems, but *more*. We are limited by how we see ourselves, and once we shed those blinders the possibilities are endless. Once we realize we are all slaves dealing in a world of shadows, we can imagine (or even confront) almost infinite possibility. So, is this ultimately about deception? Or is it about truth?

Why not both? "I am not interested in fooling people," DelGaudio tells us. "It's about truth. To know illusions is to know reality. . . . I want to be the prisoner that returns to the cave." He imagines an escapee who "picks up the tools of the puppeteer and teaches himself to cast shadows, with the hope of using those illusions to set the others free."

His deepest epiphany comes when he realizes that the game of duplicity that he's running is being run on him. He is duping others, but he is also duping himself. Like Plato's cave, nothing is as it seems.

"Amoralman" can be seen as a series of illustrations about how we deceive ourselves into believing that whatever we're

doing is right and good. There's the sense that the only thing we can be certain of is that we're being deceived. But also, that the real Amoralman, the most amoral man of all, is ourselves.

There is a much-told anecdote sometimes attributed to William James. It concerns the little old lady who on being told that the Earth revolves around the sun, said, "I've got a better theory."

"And what is that, madam?" inquired James politely.

"That we live on a crust of earth which is on the back of a giant turtle."

"If your theory is correct, madam," he asked, "what does this turtle stand on?"

"You're a very clever man, Mr. James, and that's a very good question," the little old lady replied, "but I have an answer to it. The first turtle stands on the back of a second, far larger, turtle, who stands directly under him."

"But what does this second turtle stand on?" asked James.

To this, the little old lady replied, "Oh, Mr. James — it's turtles all the way down."

In DelGaudio it is turtles all the way down. Turtles on top of turtles on top of more turtles without surcease. Certainty leads to uncertainty and then more uncertainty.

For me, the shadow of Ricky Jay runs through much of this. Ricky was a friend of mine, a master magician, an incredible archivist and raconteur. DelGaudio is a less misanthropic version of Ricky. Not necessarily nicer, but less misanthropic. What we don't know about man doesn't lead us into a pit of despair, but perhaps to a future of enlightenment and to greater possibility. We are opening our eyes not to slavery but to infinite possibility. Such an optimistic vision almost gives me the heebie-jeebies.

**'I am not interested in fooling people. . . . To know illusions is to know reality.'**

But it's the end of the Trump era, and we deserve to turn over a new leaf, no?

In the first part of the book, there's an exchange between DelGaudio and his mother where he tells her he wants to be a Christian. Then he learns that Christianity can be as much about intolerance as about forgiveness. But there's this additional irony in DelGaudio's presentation of himself. At times he seems like a Pentecostal revivalist. He often has the air of a disappointed true-believer. This is the stuff not of nihilism, but of someone searching for true belief. Perhaps searching for something beyond belief.

It reminds me of one of my favorite lines in literature — the last line of Huysmans's "À Rebours": "O Lord, pity the Christian who doubts, the skeptic who would believe, the convict of life embarking alone in the night, under a sky no longer illumined by the consoling beacons of ancient faith." □

# Birds of a Feather

The surprising role pigeons play in South African diamond smuggling.

By NATE BLAKESLEE

DIAMOND MINING ISN'T the only business built on a lie, though the industry's central myth — that diamonds are scarce and therefore extremely valuable — has to be among the most brazen.

The cartels that mine South Africa, which for generations provided the lion's share of the world's diamond supply, perpetuated this inconceivably lucrative fiction by carefully limiting annual production, which is why smuggling was considered such a threat. Black-market diamonds — mostly smuggled out by the impoverished miners themselves — threatened the illusion of scarcity, and so mining concerns long ago became exercises in total control.

Until the area began to open up in 2007, a huge portion of South Africa's west coast was a virtual no-go zone called Die Sperrgebiet ("the Forbidden Zone") that remained closed to the public for nearly 80 years. Miners lived in company houses, sent their kids to company schools and

## FLIGHT OF THE DIAMOND SMUGGLERS

A Tale of Pigeons, Obsession, and Greed Along Coastal South Africa  
By Matthew Gavin Frank

208 pp. Liveright. \$25.95.

played cricket on company fields. They never needed to leave and historically were forbidden to do so. At the mines themselves, there are X-ray machines, constant pat-downs and random application of powerful laxatives to discourage those who would swallow contraband. Possession of a diamond in a mining town is cause for arrest, and touching a diamond with your bare skin is not allowed even inside the mines.

Miners who die on the job are buried on site, lest their bodies be stuffed with diamonds on the way out. Everything in the mine, the mining town and the mining region is designed to make it as difficult as possible to get the tiny unpolished stones out of the company's control.

That's where the birds come in, as the essayist Matthew Gavin Frank explains in "Flight of the Diamond Smugglers," his rumination on brutality and resistance in the mines of South Africa. Homing pigeons, hidden inside miners' lunchboxes or tucked under clothes, have been used for decades to illicitly spirit gems away from the mines. Smugglers fit their birds with tiny diamond-filled parcels, usually one on each leg and under each wing, and release

NATE BLAKESLEE is a writer at large for *Texas Monthly* and the author, most recently, of *American Wolf*.

them from the mine's vast pits in the hopes they will deliver the booty back to their homes undetected. The practice has become so common that pigeons have been outlawed in mining towns and are killed on sight by shotgun-toting security guards. Frank describes disturbing scenes of overloaded pigeons landing on beaches, too exhausted to make it home, only to be set upon by villagers who know all too well what payload they are carrying.

It's only the most recent in a long list of indignities visited upon the pigeon during a partnership with humans that spans millenniums. Relied on for food, fertilizer and, of course, delivering messages in both wartime and peacetime, no other animal

cally elected councils. Frank and his wife, who is from South Africa, managed to finagle their way into an area that hosted the original DeBeers mines, the enormous pits that made the company among the world's wealthiest. What Frank finds is a lesson in what happens to a company town when the company pulls up stakes. Eerie scenes of depopulated and denuded landscapes and empty highways are made spookier by tales miners share of what happens when

**You will realize what an astonishing creature you are shooing out of your way.**



No other animal aside from the dog has been as useful to humans, and few have been as thoroughly studied.

aside from the dog has been as useful to humans, and few have been as thoroughly studied. We still don't know exactly how pigeons find their homes even when released hundreds of miles away, but we do know they are among the smartest of animals, capable, for example, of distinguishing all 26 letters of the alphabet and passing the "mirror test" by recognizing their own reflections — something very few animals can do. And their stamina is legendary; they have been known to fly up to 800 miles in a single day at speeds of over 60 miles per hour. If you get nothing else from this book, you will realize what a truly astonishing creature you are shooing out of your way on the sidewalk or cursing for crapping all over your car.

In recent years, companies have begun pulling back from South Africa's coast, an area now considered "overmined," and turning their company towns over to lo-

smugglers get caught. Confirmed (or even suspected) offenses have historically been dealt with extrajudicially — usually with a broken finger or a gouged eye or even a bullet through the head. It's a reign of terror lately overseen, Frank learns, by the larger-than-life "Mr. Lester," the DeBeers security chief whose very name invokes averted eyes among the locals, who seem to regard him as something akin to a boogeyman.

"Flight of the Diamond Smugglers" has some affecting scenes and some wonderful turns of phrase. In a cafe in a near-abandoned company town, Frank spots some old trophies on the wall, "testaments to the golf contests that were once held here, when there were still things here that could be won." But there are also some wrong turns, phrasing-wise, in some cases so many in one sentence that readers could be forgiven for just giving up and moving

on. Here is the author on some fogbound miners spotted on the side of the highway: "The soil of their hearts feels alluvial, rife with stones both precious and feral, the metastable carbon allotropes (now responsible for their livings and their crumbling towns) having eons ago exploded from the center of the earth through kimberlitic pipes" and so on. That's a steeper mountain than the average reader will be willing to climb, not to mention a lot of insight to glean about the miners' interior lives without actually talking to them. In another such town, he spots two women chatting at a store counter. To the best of my knowledge, the women of South Africa chat much as they do anywhere else, but to

Frank they "appear to be dancing with the cashier's counter between them, as if bound, forever sepia and strobe-lit, to some epileptic phenakistoscope." Frank seems to enjoy the people with whom he actually does talk, but you have to wonder if it occurred to him how few of them, given the opportunity, would ever reach the end of a book like this one.

Whether or not you enjoy this kind of prose is a matter of personal taste, but the author's talent is not in question. Frank gets great quotes from the characters he interviews, and the book's structure — searching for the mysterious Mr. Lester — keeps the story moving and offers a payoff in the end that is disappointing, but in all the best ways. The material in general — ghost towns, corporate cruelty, the centuries-old relationship between humans and a species almost magical in its abilities — is fabulous.

The problem is that there is not enough of it. Somewhere in this manuscript is an outstanding New Yorker-style piece of perhaps 10,000 words on pigeons and diamond mining, but successfully extending that

to book length would have required more reporting than we get here. What we do get is not really reportage, in any case. Frank seems to know this; a running joke throughout the book is his failure to show up to interviews with an actual notebook and being forced instead to scribble on receipts or whatever else is at hand. Nor does the material really work as a book-length essay along the lines of Helen Macdonald's "H Is for Hawk"; themes hinted at early on — including the author's grief over his wife's lost pregnancy — are never fully developed. I would call this travel writing, which is nothing to be ashamed of for a writer with literary aspirations — we have all read travel writers so literate that their work transcends the genre. But we have all eaten thin soup, too, and know that nothing can really save it — not even page after page filled with allotropes and phenakistoscopes. □

# Big Reveal

In this novel, an aging filmmaker confronts his hidden past.

By ADAM HASLETT

LEONARD FIFE, the protagonist of Russell Banks's furiously driven new novel, has been hiding all his life — from the world and from himself. On the outside he's a successful documentary filmmaker, a semifamous left-wing figure in Canada, where he fled to from New England in 1968, supposedly to avoid the draft. He resides in a well-appointed Montreal apartment with Emma, his wife and producer of 40 years, and has managed to be both materially comfortable and morally righteous. But at 78, ill and on the verge of death, he's now consumed by the need to confess that his life is as riddled with lies and betrayal as his body is with cancer.

## FOREGONE

By Russell Banks

305 pp. Ecco. \$28.99.

To tell his story, he invites a former student, Malcolm, and a small crew to his apartment for what his acolyte believes is the chance to make a film about his mentor's career. Fife, however, has a different purpose. To tell Emma — through the camera and in the spotlight — what he cannot bring himself to tell her in private: that before meeting her he abandoned two wives and two children and that he moved to Canada to escape not Vietnam but his own hollow self.

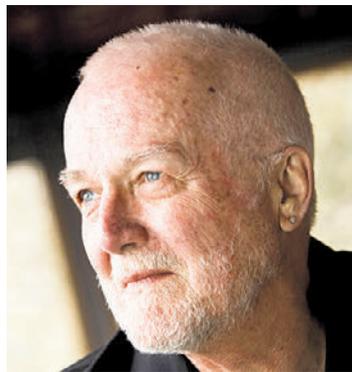
"Foregone" is Fife's confession. In the present timeline of the novel, we never leave the film shoot. Where we go is deep into his bleak experience as a boy, young man and young father. Emma either already knows what Fife has to say, or doesn't want to hear it. She'd rather he stop the interview and protect his reputation. But like a man desperate to expel a demon, which he can be free of only if his wife witnesses the exorcism, Fife insists repeatedly that she stay and listen. His mind addled by medication, he's transported into his past, leaving the reader to guess how much of what we read is ever heard by his captive audience and how much is the dying man's flight of memory.

One of the main strands of Banks's fiction has long been what you might call a working-class New England existentialism. In bitterly eloquent novels such as "Affliction," "The Sweet Hereafter" and "Continental Drift," he has chronicled the blunted, pragmatic affect of Northern white men and the women unfortunate enough to be entangled with them. "Foregone" is in the same vein, only here the protagonist is an artist. And what Banks reveals of this artist's life is a profound emptiness, seeded early on, which Fife has

ADAM HASLETT is the author of "Imagine Me Gone," "Union Atlantic" and "You Are Not a Stranger Here."

run from ever since.

Fife's parents exhibited an "unbroken sadness and lassitude and constant low-level anxiety and detachment and pessimism bordering on despair," which he believes he "caught" from them. At 16, in the first of many attempts to escape the inheritance of his grim home outside Boston, he drives to Texas, where he's molested by a blind, middle-aged man and drinks himself into oblivion trying to forget the episode. By 19, he has fled to Florida, married a woman he met in a bar, gotten her pregnant and brought her back to Boston, where their relationship soon unravels. His second marriage, to a Virginian heiress attracted to his pose as a "serious young man" and writer, lasts longer and frames the bulk of his memories of his



Russell Banks

younger self. But it ends in the same fashion — with his disappearance.

As always, Banks's prose has remarkable force to it. Like Emma, the reader too might prefer that Fife stop torturing himself in public, indulging in what is at times a kind of baroque self-recrimination complete with the sexist presumptions of the postwar American male. But there is such brio in the writing, such propulsion as the lashes are applied, that we follow Fife into the depths. The book's real theme is the curse of being convinced that one is unlovable. And who among us hasn't suffered that conviction to one degree or another? Such hollowness will haunt Fife till the end. He has managed to remain with Emma all these years only because early on she professed not to "need him more than he needed her;" a self-sufficiency they took as a mutual "compliment." Only it isn't. It's a fantasy détente with the human condition of vulnerability. A condition that only now, in his final hours, does Fife no longer seek to hold at bay.

To his credit, Banks has never solicited his readers' approval of his characters, and many are unlikely to be charmed by Leo Fife. But what they will find in "Foregone" is a character, a novel and a writer determined not to go gentle into that good night. □

# No Boys Allowed

A fictional boarding school is hit with rape allegations.

By KATE ELIZABETH RUSSELL

THE CENTRAL FIGURE in Emily Layden's debut novel is Atwater, not a person but a place: an all-girls boarding school in northwest Connecticut. An institution steeped in tradition and prestige, it's the kind of school where the rich and powerful send their daughters. The academic standards are high, the campus is beautiful — and the administration is dealing with a sexual assault lawsuit from an alumna who was raped by a teacher 20 years ago.

We learn this in the opening pages of "All Girls," when yard signs reading "A Rapist Works Here" appear around town on Atwater's move-in day, strategically placed so families driving to the school are guar-

## ALL GIRLS

By Emily Layden

320 pp. St. Martin's Press. \$27.99.

anteed to be confronted with the allegation. The signs are quickly taken down and the school does its best damage control, but the local paper runs a story. The truth, or some version of it, gets out.

It feels like the setup of a thriller, but rather than delve into institutional drama, "All Girls" looks to the periphery of the scandal: to current Atwater students who experience the fallout of the rape allegation as a backdrop to their academic year. With each chapter focusing on a different girl, readers navigate Fall Fest, vespers, prom, a breakup, a sexual assault, the chance meeting of an estranged friend.

Nine narrators is a lot and names can be hard to remember, but the pages turn fast and the girls are complex, compelling and written with incredible tenderness. Layden excels at rendering the everyday details of boarding school life — a dorm hallway littered with plugged-in hair straighteners and makeup bags, girls groggy at Saturday breakfast dressed in sweats and socks, the LOL-laden group texts of gossip. The girls deal with their own problems, anxieties over school, relationships and the future, but hovering over every individual experience are unifying questions of the scandal. Is the alumna telling the truth? Which teacher is the rapist? Did Atwater really try to cover it up?

Layden is generous with her characters as they try to understand the implications of the ongoing crisis. Some sneer at Atwater's "corporate jargon," others blame the victim and defend the school. Some recognize the wrongdoing, but don't know how to address it. The student paper puts together a special issue focused on the rape allegation, only to have the administration ax it. Instances of activism continue in the wake of the yard signs, but mes-

KATE ELIZABETH RUSSELL is the author of "My Dark Vanessa."

saging is unclear. The headmistress commends the work of the frustrated newspaper editors even as she silences them. A dorm parent suggests to her freshmen charges the accuser might be lying, then expresses concern for any girl who might feel triggered.

"All Girls" is about teenage girls, but it's also a portrait of an institution recalibrating itself, trying to figure out how to retain power.

The novel reaches for nuance, though for some readers the situation may be too straightforward for ambiguity: A teacher raped a student and the school covered it up. Atwater's mealy-mouthed statements get tiresome as it becomes clear there will be no real accountability and around the halfway mark, I began to yearn for a char-



MIKYUNG LEE

acter willing to burn it all down. But even so, I appreciated why this wouldn't happen. The majority of Layden's characters come from privilege and wealth, some groomed from birth to attend this boarding school, and even non-legacy students describe Atwater with a devotion that borders on obsession. One girl notes, "This school sinks into your veins." Another describes it as a place students "never really leave." These girls are trapped.

"All Girls" takes place during the 2015-16 academic year, which places the narrative pre-#MeToo. The movement's absence is felt — not just in Atwater's infuriating lack of transparency, but also in the girls' ambivalence and confusion. I can't help wondering how much more clearly these characters might have seen Atwater's manipulations if the novel were set a couple of years later. Without understanding how your school's abuse of power mirrors countless other cases, how can you recognize the pattern? How do you begin to understand how you've been betrayed? □

# Gotham Revival



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

rich to their own devices; historically, a dangerous idea,” and “while the smart money had been going to real estate, so had the stupid money.” “Bruce Ratner believed he made money doing good — the story many in New York had been telling about themselves for a decade”; Richard Ravitch “had the burly sense of purpose found in fighting mammals of the Upper Midwest”; Jeff Van Gundy “led the Knicks to the N.B.A. finals with all the ugly luck of finding a winning scratch-off on a bodega floor”; Al Sharpton “on the face of it . . . had a deathbed conversion, but really he’d just rebranded.” And “of all the things Abe Beame can be blamed for, Donald J. Trump is by far the worst.”

“New York x 3” begins on Feb. 14, 1978, designated “I Love New York Day” for the ubiquitous jingle introduced that afternoon, part of a last-ditch publicity campaign to revive a city that even those who loved it feared was dying. But New York wasn’t dying, and why it wasn’t — the women and men, policies and plans, trends and revolutions in everything from music to technology to public spaces to private desires that transformed it — is Dyja’s story. What he has produced is a tour de force, a work of astonishing breadth and depth that encompasses seminal changes in New York’s government and economy, along with deep dives into hip-hop, the AIDS crisis, the visual arts, housing, architecture and finance.

It’s quite a high-wire act, and one that Dyja, who has previously written a cultural history of Chicago, pulls off without ever losing the rush of his narrative. He slips in telling statistics with the skill of a *banderillero*, using them always to secure a point and move his story forward. Thus we learn that 60 percent of the African-American population in Harlem left between 1950 and 1980. That there were about 86 publishing houses in New York at the start of the 1980s and that “between 1979 and 1989,

2,500 new magazines came out.” From the start of Ronald Reagan’s term to 2000, “the top 1 percent had gotten 86 percent of the stock gains”; and New York City lost over 100,000 single-room-occupancy units at roughly the same time New York State’s psychiatric units dumped 50,000 inmates back on the streets. At the nadir of the crack epidemic, “some 150,000 New Yorkers were plying the drug trade,” and in 1990 “2.28 million Black men were jailed in the U.S. while 23,000 earned a college degree.” And that “by the end of 1983, New York’s entire contribution to AIDS services and education totaled \$24,500.”

Dyja’s narrative starts with the decline of what he calls, with only faint irony, “The Workers’ Paradise,” the legendary working-class/middle-class city that emerged after World War II with a million manufacturing jobs and what was — for America — an unrivaled social welfare state. But even this fabled New York, as he notes, “existed during a period of exclusion” for most citizens who did not happen to be white, and crumbled under the batterings of deindustrialization, corruption, mismanagement and the usual neglect from Washington and Albany. Its aura lingered on, though, complicating things for those trying to forge a new city. (When a woman urged Ed Koch to “make the city what it once was,” the mayor told her with characteristic bluntness, “Lady, it was never that good.”)

What to do? Dyja frames the struggle as a fundamental shift in how New York operated, “from mass society to networks,” with “the collective world of unions, borough machines, the archdiocese and even the Mob” giving way “to one of individuals who define themselves primarily by the networks they belong to.” As he neatly puts it: “Information took over from Industry.”

I’m not sure this is as much of a change as Dyja believes it to be — but then, this is a good book to argue with. I, for one, don’t think that Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s “The Gates” did a thing for Central Park. I believe Dyja exaggerates wildly when he describes New Yorkers as so shellshocked by 1990 that they “turned their self-imprisonment into a trend; they became couch potatoes.” And as someone who has lived

his entire adult life in New York, beginning almost two years before “I Love New York Day,” I vehemently deny the claim, forwarded from the Koch parks commissioner Gordon Davis, that Urban Park Rangers had to “help New Yorkers relearn how to behave in the city at large.” The acting out that Dyja and Davis refer to was largely the doing of the young and the crazy, and if the rest of us did not always interfere it was mostly because of a sentimental attachment to things like our teeth.

But go have your own argument with Dyja; you will enjoy it. In our current atmosphere of political fanaticism and fantasy, his reasoning is a joy, as are his sense of nuance and his willingness to question his own assumptions. He elides what he calls the “morality play” that has warped most arguments about New York for the last 40 years, giving each mayor his due — and his skewering — with astonishing objectivity, and each genuine reformer the benefit of the doubt. He looks at the city from all points of view, from that of the poorest outsiders to the Masters of the Universe, and best of all he brings to life the volunteers, everyday New Yorkers, who stepped forward to save their city when it needed them most.

What they accomplished was remarkable, as Dyja recognizes, a New York that was and is — at least pre-Covid — wealthier, healthier, safer, greener, longer-lived and more modern than it has ever been. The city has absorbed an entire Philadelphia’s worth of immigrants, from all over the world, more than 1.5 million new Americans since 1978, two-thirds of whom live in Brooklyn and Queens and have transformed those boroughs into the dynamic places they are today. They are “half of the city’s accountants and nurses, 40 percent of its doctors, real estate brokers and property managers.” Dyja celebrates how the city has indeed managed to monetize its culture in a postindustrial world, between tourist sites, high art and hip-hop, “New York’s most globally influential cultural invention.”

And yet, for Dyja, New York has become in too many ways a victim of its own success, or “oversuccess,” as Jane Jacobs

called it. In the end, “too many good ideas, practical strategies and necessary temporary measures became permanent, inflexible policies applied to a place in constant flux.” A “proactive” police department that he credits with helping crush crime has devolved in many cases into what he calls racist “security guards and mercenaries” abusing their power. Runaway real estate speculation created a “Luxury City,” with more and more of it privatized by parks “conservancies” and business improvement districts, housing more and more unaffordable, small businesses steamrollered by chains and mega-developments, and the Upper East Side reduced to “a kind of jewelry store now,” with “a third of the apartments between 49th and 70th between Fifth and Park . . . vacant 10 months a year, owned by shell companies and L.L.C.s.”

The original sin was tying so much of New York’s fate to Wall Street, a dependence that has grown exponentially over the years, and that has set the city’s economy on its seemingly endless roller coaster ride. A trillion dollars “evaporated” after the 1987 stock market crash, nearly \$4 trillion after the 2000 slump. And at the same time, like a bad dream, the city’s poverty levels have remained intractable, today “around 20 percent, with another 20 percent highly vulnerable” — or 3.4 million people in all — and “almost 50,000 people sleeping on the streets any given night.”

“The result” — well before the pandemic — “was a city flush with cash and full of poor people, diverse but deeply segregated, hopeful yet worryingly hollow underneath the shiny surface,” Dyja declares.

What is to be done? Dyja sees the need for another reinvention of New York, though he offers no easy answers — probably because there are none. He can counsel only that which has worked best, when it has been tried, which is selflessness, moderation, involvement, empathy, creativity; “a New York built on a bedrock of justice, not just *noblesse oblige*.” But he has already, in this outstanding work, done all that a historian can do to light the way forward, by so vividly illuminating the past. □

KEVIN BAKER is the author, most recently, of “The Fall of a Great American City: New York and the Urban Crisis of Affluence.”

# Chemical Reaction

The plastics and pesticides around us may be putting the future of our species at risk.

By **BIJAL P. TRIVEDI**

IF YOU'VE SMUGLY enjoyed the dystopian worlds of “The Handmaid’s Tale” (where infertility is triggered in part by environmental pollutants) or “Children of Men” (where humanity is on the precipice of extinction) — and believed that these stories were rooted firmly in fantasy — Shanna Swan’s “Count Down” will serve as an awakening.

“Count Down,” which Swan wrote with the health and science journalist Stacey Colino, chronicles rising human infertility and warns of dire consequences for our species if this trend doesn’t slow. The reason, Swan explains, may be growing exposure to “endocrine disrupting chemicals” that are found in everything from plastics,

## COUNT DOWN

**How Our Modern World Is Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, Threatening Sperm Counts, and Imperiling the Future of the Human Race**

By **Shanna H. Swan with Stacey Colino**

304 pp. Scribner. \$28.

flame retardants, electronics, food packaging and pesticides to personal care products and cosmetics.

She outlines the danger. These substances interfere with normal hormonal function, including testosterone and estrogen. Even in small doses, they pose particular danger to unborn babies and young children whose bodies are growing rapidly. These hormone-warping chemicals, which can enter even the placenta, have the ability to alter the anatomical development of girls and boys, change brain function and impair the immune system.

Swan is a noted environmental and reproductive epidemiologist who has studied this subject for more than two decades. Her work on falling sperm counts garnered worldwide attention in 2017. Media coverage focused on her central finding: From 1973 to 2011, the total sperm count of men in Western countries dropped by 59 percent. The quality also nose-dived, with more odd-shaped sperm and fewer strong swimmers capable of fertilizing an egg. Perhaps most important, the DNA they carried was also more damaged.

A study Swan cites in “Count Down” found that just over a quarter of men experiencing erectile dysfunction were under 40. That may be, in part, because testosterone levels have been dropping at 1 percent per year since 1982. The outlook for women isn’t good either. The miscarriage rate has risen by 1 percent per year over the last

two decades. If these trajectories continue, in vitro fertilization and other artificial reproductive technologies may become a widely needed tool for conceiving children.

Swan distills information harvested from hundreds of published studies and while some ring familiar, the conclusion she reaches hits hard. These chemicals are limiting the ability of current and future generations to have children. They could, ultimately, snuff out the human species altogether.

This is why Swan was compelled to write this book, one with apocalyptic implications. Despite the publicity, these alarming findings haven’t sparked changes in environmental policies, regulations or public demand for safe substitutes.

Her focus on male infertility marks an overdue inflection point, with the medical community’s acceptance that the health of both sexes is equally important. When a couple can’t conceive or a woman miscarries, she usually bears the blame. Swan dispels the myths surrounding reproductive failure. Yes, as women get older, their ability to get pregnant drops, but Swan reminds us that a man’s reproductive clock is also ticking as he ages. Abnormal sperm, increasingly common in men over 40, can also cause miscarriages.

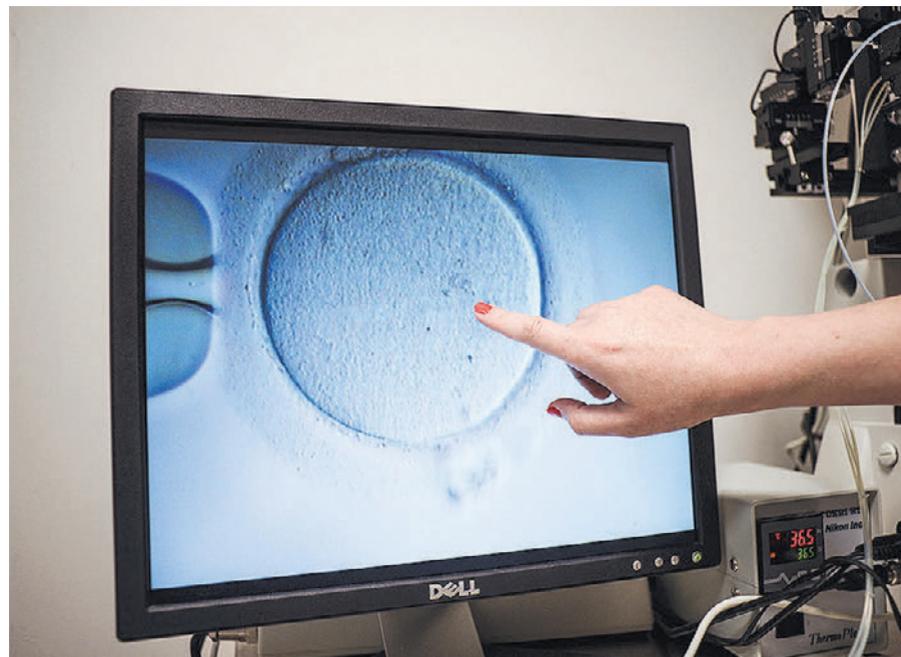
Teasing out the mechanisms behind plummeting fertility rates is complicated. While man-made chemicals certainly play a role, Swan emphasizes that timing matters, with different impacts for those exposed in utero, as newborns, adolescents or adults. She walks the reader through the reproductive problems that result from contact with flame retardants, pesticides and what she calls “an alphabet soup” of chemicals.

For men, phthalates, found in many products, from plastics to shampoos, are the worst offenders, tanking testosterone levels and sperm counts — and causing sperm to basically commit suicide. In women, these chemicals may cause early menopause or cysts in the ovaries, or they may disrupt monthly cycles.

Bisphenol A, a ubiquitous chemical used in hard plastics, electronics and millions of other items, affects both sexes but is particularly concerning for women. It interferes with conception and causes miscarriages early in pregnancy.

Swan broadens her argument by documenting how these chemicals are jeopardizing the survival of many other creatures. Genital abnormalities are of great concern: distinctly smaller penises in alligators, panthers and mink, as well as fish, frogs, snapping turtles and birds that appear to have both male and female gonads, and mating difficulties in many species caused by altered behavior.

Swan highlights another layer of risk. Parents’ exposure to these chemicals can affect the sexual development of their children. If a woman smokes when she is pregnant, her son’s sperm counts may drop by 40 percent



If these trajectories continue, Shanna H. Swan writes, in vitro fertilization and other artificial reproductive technologies may become a widely needed tool for conceiving children.

— and if he is later exposed to endocrine disruptors, his sperm production may drop so low that he becomes infertile. Swan describes the collateral damage caused by a combination of lifestyle factors — such as stress or bad diet — and daily exposure to toxic chemicals. The effects can radiate down through several generations.

Although most of Swan’s analyses focus on Western countries, she has uncovered similar trends in South America, Asia and Africa.

Swan offers a sense of relief in her wrap-up, providing practical advice on steps that individuals can take to protect their health. She goes beyond lifestyle recommendations, outlining a far more difficult task: Purging harmful chemicals from our homes by reading the ingredients on bathroom and kitchen cleaners. Choosing personal care products that are phthalate-free and paraben-free. Ditching air freshener and scented products. Not microwaving food in plastic, making sure to filter drinking water and toss out plastic food storage containers and nonstick cookware. The suggestions go on.

Swan does miss an opportunity to give more attention to real-life stories. When she mentions individuals, their reproductive problems are often described without the history or context that strengthens a narrative. There are times when a memorable personal story might have supplanted a rather detailed anatomical and chemical description. There are passages that suffer from what Swan herself refers to as “stat overload” or dozens of foreign-sounding chemical names.

Over all, her conclusion is well supported: the need for regulation, specifi-

cally United States federal policies that require companies to prove chemicals safe before using them commercially. Europeans favor this precautionary principle and are currently phasing out or banning the most dangerous chemicals. Swan underscores how this contrasts with the American approach of “innocent until proven guilty,” which then requires taxpayer-funded government studies to investigate health effects.

“Count Down” is an important book for anyone concerned about the environment, pollution, successful childbearing or declining health of the human species. Other than the pervasive chemical names, it is written in a casual, accessible style and will be of practical relevance to couples and young adults who are considering having a family.

Fertility is already an issue for some who have children later in life, when the effects of these chemicals may be more pronounced. Swan offers somewhat bracing recommendations for women who choose to delay pregnancy: Freeze your eggs in your 20s as an insurance policy. For men, investigating their sperm count early might reveal infertility trends when they are easier to correct. More broadly, this book provides a wake-up call that increases understanding of fertility, its challenges and the recognition that both partners play a role.

But ultimately her conclusion is a plea for swift national and global actions that ban the use of these chemicals and mitigate the effects of those that are impacting health and even life itself worldwide. Swan makes it clear that the future of many species, including our own, depends on it. □

# An Ounce of Prevention

The history of vaccines, one crazy idea at a time.

By **LYDIA KANG**

THE HISTORY OF VACCINES is a deserving addition to Don Brown's Big Ideas That Changed the World graphic nonfiction series, and the arrival of "A Shot in the Arm!" couldn't be more timely. Narrated by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), this fascinating and enlightening journey takes

## A SHOT IN THE ARM!

By **Don Brown**

144 pp. Amulet. \$13.99.

(Ages 8 to 12)

us around the world and introduces us to a range of scientific superstars of germ theory and vaccination development.

Many lesser-known but key players are rescued from obscurity here. Though Cotton Mather received most of the credit for

**LYDIA KANG**, an internal medicine physician and young adult novelist, is co-author of the forthcoming "Patient Zero: A Curious History of the World's Worst Diseases."

using variolation (a method of inoculating smallpox-naïve patients with tiny doses of smallpox through cuts in the skin) to save lives in 18th-century Massachusetts, it was Onesimus, an enslaved man from Africa (his home country is a matter of debate), who enlightened Mather about the well-known process performed in his home village. Likewise, you may have heard about the British physician Edward Jenner scratching cowpox blister liquid into the arm of a little boy to prevent full-blown smallpox, but a dairy farmer named Benjamin Jesty had successfully inoculated his own family with the liquid years earlier.

Montagu — known within high society for her beauty — herself suffered the disfigurement of smallpox. Later, while living in Turkey, she learned of inoculation to protect her children, then spread the word throughout Britain upon her return.

One of the book's shining moments is a clever infographic depiction of how vaccines help antigens more efficiently fight certain pathogens. After personally explaining the concept to countless patients, I am thrilled to see it presented in such a simple, accurate and entertaining way.

Brown (an award-winning author and illustrator of many nonfiction graphic novels for kids, including "Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918") doesn't shy away from the uglier parts of vaccine history. We learn about how smallpox-infected blankets were weaponized against Native Americans, and about the (sometimes violent) conflicts surrounding vaccines. Brown appreciates that children can absorb these complex issues.

Many will be intrigued by the ingenious Chinese practice of inoculating people by having them inhale smallpox virus, but this section gave me pause. Balancing entertainment and gross-outs while effectively delivering a story is challenging in kidlit. In this case there are too many "Ews" on the page, or perhaps not enough elsewhere in the book. Given the othering of people of Asian and Pacific Islands descent throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, it's unfortunate. Additionally, superstitious practices, such as using red clothing to ward off smallpox, are cited only in connection with non-Western countries, though it is documented that they occurred throughout Europe.



Despite these missteps, the author's goals are clear and vitally important, and the delivery is lively and engaging. The book ends, unsurprisingly, with Covid-19, touching on the outbreak linked to a Wuhan market, which may be viewed differently as we learn more about its origins. Brown takes a firm and necessary stance in support of the science behind vaccines. But we can't argue away anti-science sentiment around the world. Telling a story about the science, with all its positive and negative facets, all its known and relatively unknown heroes, is how the book persuades. Stories have power, too. □

# Sludge Report

A budding journalist uncovers a Flint-like scandal in her own backyard.

By **JULIE BOSMAN**

AS A NOSY KID in Wisconsin with endless unstructured outdoor time, I occupied myself with the comings and goings of my neighbors. A self-styled Harriet the Spy, I carried a notebook, filed dispatches for my homemade newspaper and proudly mailed

## THE LEAK

Written by **Kate Reed Petty**

Illustrated by **Andrea Bell**

240 pp. First Second. \$14.99.

(Ages 8 to 12)

copies of it — The Bosman Bulletin, written in navy ballpoint on loose-leaf paper — to my older sister at sleepaway camp.

Kids have seriously evolved since then. In the graphic novel "The Leak," by Kate Reed Petty and Andrea Bell, Ruth Keller, a 12-year-old news junkie, takes tween-jour-

**JULIE BOSMAN** is a Times national correspondent who has covered the water crisis in Flint, Mich.

nalist ambition to a new level, seeing misdeeds and corruption around every corner in her town of Twin Oaks. During a fishing excursion with a boy from school, she discovers suspicious black slime in the lake by a country club, and a dead fish that might have succumbed to whatever was in it, setting her on the trail of local businesses dumping polluted water in drains.

Ruth is armed with tools that would have put my circa-1991 self to shame: a cellphone for snapping surreptitious photos, a computer for research, lab equipment for running tests and a weekly e-newsletter with a subscriber base that skyrockets after each investigation.

"The Leak" is a spirited story of civic responsibility, of how to tell fake news from the real thing, of when to trust adults and when to publicly stick it to them. Dedicated to the people of Flint, Mich., it might not have been conceived if it hadn't been for that city's water crisis, a cautionary tale of the perils of trusting government to keep citizens safe from harm.

Ruth's story begins to unfold while she is in the chair at the dentist, who spots a cavity and accuses her — despite her denials



— of failing to brush her teeth. During the car ride home, her mother sides with the dentist and reminds her that cavities are expensive, leaving Ruth in a seething, weeping state of misery. Over a family dinner, her melancholy deepens when she's scolded for interrupting the adults with headlines that pop up on her phone.

Journalism is her escape. Perhaps anticipating the Substack craze, she starts the CoolsLetter, a digest of her own investigations, local crime items and op-eds. She is encouraged by Sara, her older brother's girlfriend, who is an intern at The New York Times. Sara explains the concept of

impostor syndrome, coaches her through an interview and shares basic rules of journalistic ethics.

But Ruth is also surrounded by grown-ups who can be clueless, hostile or condescending. Corporate executives lie to her and a sexist country club owner calls her "little lady." (Note to aspiring journalists: Yes, this stuff still happens.)

Ruth frequently stumbles. She is impetuous and jumps to conclusions. During her reporting, she doesn't hesitate to violate the law — breaking and entering, running when she's caught. Her desire to break stories leads to a difficult confrontation with a pack of girls at school.

The grown-ups do eventually come through, spurred by Ruth's passion. She finds an ally in her science teacher, who has been told to rein in Ruth's journalism but makes a quiet move that allows a crucial breakthrough in her investigation.

As one of the journalists who are still covering the Flint story, I know that when you talk to Flint residents today they say they still don't trust the water that flows from their taps. Ruth Keller would understand why. □

# 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)

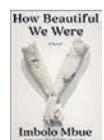
## COMBINED PRINT AND E-BOOK BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 28-MARCH 6

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		<b>LIFE AFTER DEATH</b> , by Sister Souljah. (Atria/Emily Bestler) In a sequel to "The Coldest Winter Ever," Winter Santiago emerges after time served and seeks revenge.	1	1	1	<b>HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER</b> , by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.	3
2		<b>LATER</b> , by Stephen King. (Hard Case Crime) An N.Y.P.D. detective asks the son of a struggling single mother to use his unnatural ability to track a killer.	1	2	4	<b>CASTE</b> , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	31
3		<b>DARK SKY</b> , by C. J. Box. (Putnam) The 21st book in the Joe Pickett series. The Wyoming game warden becomes a target when taking a tech baron on an elk hunting trip.	1	3	2	<b>THINK AGAIN</b> , by Adam Grant. (Viking) An examination of the cognitive skills of rethinking and unlearning that could be used to adapt to a rapidly changing world.	5
4	1	<b>THE FOUR WINDS</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin's) As dust storms roll during the Great Depression, Elsa must choose between saving the family and farm or heading West.	5	4	9	<b>UNTAMED</b> , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	52
5		<b>THE AFFAIR</b> , by Danielle Steel. (Delacorte) A French author's extramarital relationship affects various members of his wife's family.	1	5	6	<b>JUST AS I AM</b> , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperCollins) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices.	6
6		<b>KLARA AND THE SUN</b> , by Kazuo Ishiguro. (Knopf) An "Artificial Friend" named Klara is purchased to serve as a companion to an ailing 14-year-old girl.	1	6	3	<b>GREENLIGHTS</b> , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	20
7		<b>THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD</b> , by Colson Whitehead. (Doubleday) A teenage girl heads north on the network that helped slaves escape to freedom, envisioned in this novel as a secret system of actual tracks and tunnels.	17	7	7	<b>THE SUM OF US</b> , by Heather McGhee. (One World) The chair of the board of the racial justice organization Color of Change analyzes the impact of racism on the economy.	3
8	6	<b>THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY</b> , by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	14	8	8	<b>A PROMISED LAND</b> , by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.	16
9	5	<b>THE DUKE AND I</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton."	10	9	10	<b>NOMADLAND</b> , by Jessica Bruder. (Norton) A look at an expanding low-cost labor pool, which largely consists of transient older adults, and what this might portend.	2
10		<b>LIGHTNING GAME</b> , by Christine Feehan. (Berkley) The 17th book in the GhostWalker series. Ruben returns to his family's homestead and Jonquille cannot control the lightning her body produces.	1	10	5	<b>WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS</b> , by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann with Chris Mooney. (Little, Brown) A collection of interviews with troops who fought overseas.	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



**HOW BEAUTIFUL WE WERE**, by Imbolo Mbue. (Random House, \$28.) Mbue's quietly devastating second novel — about a fictional African village with high mortality due to an American oil company's pollution — charts the ways oppression, be it at the hands of a government or a corporation or a society, can turn the most basic needs into radical acts.



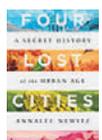
**BROTHER, SISTER, MOTHER, EXPLORER**, by Jamie Figueroa. (Catapult, \$25.) Figueroa's debut novel follows adult siblings in an unnamed Spanish-speaking country, who perform for tourists to make a living. It shows how these picturesque people in "exotic" lands have lives as complex as anyone's, with fewer resources to help them cope.



**NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS**, by Patricia Lockwood. (Riverhead, \$25.) This singular novel by Lockwood, a lauded memoirist and poet who first gained a following on Twitter, distills the experience of life online while transfiguring it into art. The result is a book that reads like a prose poem, at once sublime, profane, intimate, philosophical, witty and, eventually, deeply moving.



**UNDER A WHITE SKY: The Nature of the Future**, by Elizabeth Kolbert. (Crown, \$28.) A fascinating survey of attempts to manage the environment, from preserving tiny populations of desert fish to altering the entire atmosphere, this book crackles with the realities of an era that has proved there is no meaningful distinction between nature and humanity.



**FOUR LOST CITIES: A Secret History of the Urban Age**, by Annalee Newitz. (Norton, \$26.95.) Like a guide to vanished places, this book offers archaeological clues to our urban roots, from the little-known Catalhoyuk (a 9,000-year-old city located in today's Turkey) to the famed Pompeii, with its exquisitely preserved brothels and bars and graffiti.



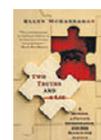
**THE BONE FIRE**, by Gyorgy Dragoman. Translated by Otilie Mulzet. (Mariner, paper, \$16.99.) Set in the aftermath of a revolution, this Hungarian novel considers how superstitions rise in times of turmoil. On one level, it's a coming-of-age story about a 13-year-old orphan and her eccentric grandmother navigating personal and political crises; on another, it's a tale of ghosts, folklore and ancient memory.



**THE DEVIL YOU KNOW: A Black Power Manifesto**, by Charles M. Blow. (Harper/Harper Collins, \$26.99.) Blow makes the provocative argument that Black Northerners should move south in a reverse migration as a way of fighting white supremacy and increasing their political power.



**ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, JUNK: A History of Food, From Sustainable to Suicidal**, by Mark Bittman. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$28.) Bittman's treatise on agriculture is urgent but realistic about the challenges facing us. "You can't talk about food," he writes, "without talking about income inequality, racism and immigration."



**TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE: A Murder, a Private Investigator, and Her Search for Justice**, by Ellen McGarrah. (Random House, \$28.) In 1990, as a reporter, McGarrah attended the execution of a convicted murderer. But questions about the crime inspired her to switch careers and take a closer look.

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

## Inside the List

ELISABETH EGAN

**Road Warrior** In the month since the publication of her memoir, “Between Two Kingdoms,” which just spent three weeks on the hardcover nonfiction list, Suleika Jaouad has heard from a number of individuals she didn’t expect to be in touch with — including her fourth grade teacher; a California oncologist who was a fellow at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City when Jaouad was diagnosed with leukemia at the age of 22; and a lawyer offering counsel to a Texas prisoner Jaouad writes about in the book.



**‘I’m always interested in traveling to where the silence is.’**

These readers have been moved by Jaouad’s story of surviving cancer and then taking a 15,000-mile road trip to visit people — many of them strangers — who responded to the New York Times blog where she chronicled her experience as a young adult facing her own mortality. By now, we all know it takes a village (albeit a socially distanced one) to endure illness, isolation and fear. “Between Two Kingdoms” drives home the fact that, where cancer is concerned, it takes an empire.

The idea for the road trip and the memoir arrived when Jaouad found herself at a crossroads. “I felt like I should be living some version of the heroic journey I’d been bombarded with,” she said in a phone interview. “But I didn’t feel excited; I didn’t feel done. There was this strange *omertà* of silence that seemed to enshroud survivorship. I’m always interested in traveling to where the silence is, so once I detected it, I knew that would be something that I wanted to interrogate.”

Jaouad’s nearest and dearest understood that there was no talking her out of her journey once her mind was made up, although some worried about her safety since she’d only had her driver’s license for a month. She recalled visiting her parents in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., about a week into the expedition: “My dad explained to me how, if you lean forward and look in the mirror, you can notice your blind spots.”

Along the way, Jaouad had books for company. She turned to Stephen King novels and true-crime accounts for guidance on narrative suspense; she devoured Audre Lorde’s “The Cancer Journals” and John Green’s “The Fault in Our Stars,” which she called “no small gift.” But her true “sick girl bible,” as she put it, was Lucy Grealy’s “Autobiography of a Face.” Jaouad said, “She’s one of the few who writes about the aftermath of trauma and the imprints of her own cancer that haunted her long after it was gone.” □

## PRINT / HARDCOVER BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF FEBRUARY 28-MARCH 6

THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Fiction	WEEKS ON LIST	THIS WEEK	LAST WEEK	Nonfiction	WEEKS ON LIST
1		<b>LIFE AFTER DEATH</b> , by Sister Souljah. (Atria/Emily Bestler) In a sequel to “The Coldest Winter Ever,” Winter Santiago emerges after time served and seeks revenge.	1	1	1	<b>HOW TO AVOID A CLIMATE DISASTER</b> , by Bill Gates. (Knopf) A prescription for what business, governments and individuals can do to work toward zero emissions.	3
2	1	<b>THE FOUR WINDS</b> , by Kristin Hannah. (St. Martin’s) As dust storms roll during the Great Depression, Elsa must choose between saving the family and farm or heading West.	5	2	2	<b>JUST AS I AM</b> , by Cicely Tyson with Michelle Burford. (HarperCollins) The late iconic actress describes how she worked to change perceptions of Black women through her career choices.	6
3		<b>KLARA AND THE SUN</b> , by Kazuo Ishiguro. (Knopf) An “Artificial Friend” named Klara is purchased to serve as a companion to an ailing 14-year-old girl.	1	3	6	<b>CASTE</b> , by Isabel Wilkerson. (Random House) The Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist examines aspects of caste systems across civilizations and reveals a rigid hierarchy in America today.	31
4		<b>DARK SKY</b> , by C.J. Box. (Putnam) The 21st book in the Joe Pickett series. The Wyoming game warden becomes a target when taking a tech baron on an elk hunting trip.	1	4	3	<b>THINK AGAIN</b> , by Adam Grant. (Viking) An examination of the cognitive skills of rethinking and unlearning that could be used to adapt to a rapidly changing world.	5
5		<b>THE AFFAIR</b> , by Danielle Steel. (Delacorte) A French author’s extramarital relationship affects various members of his wife’s family.	1	5	9	<b>UNTAMED</b> , by Glennon Doyle. (Dial) The activist and public speaker describes her journey of listening to her inner voice.	52
6	3	<b>THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY</b> , by Matt Haig. (Viking) Nora Seed finds a library beyond the edge of the universe that contains books with multiple possibilities of the lives one could have lived.	14	6	4	<b>GREENLIGHTS</b> , by Matthew McConaughey. (Crown) The Academy Award-winning actor shares snippets from the diaries he kept over the last 35 years.	20
7		<b>THE LOST APOTHECARY</b> , by Sarah Penner. (Park Row) An aspiring historian in London finds a clue that might put to rest unsolved apothecary murders from 200 years ago.	1	7	7	<b>A PROMISED LAND</b> , by Barack Obama. (Crown) In the first volume of his presidential memoirs, Barack Obama offers personal reflections on his formative years and pivotal moments through his first term.	16
8	5	<b>THE VANISHING HALF</b> , by Brit Bennett. (Riverhead) The lives of twin sisters who run away from a Southern Black community at age 16 diverge as one returns and the other takes on a different racial identity but their fates intertwine.	40	8	5	<b>WALK IN MY COMBAT BOOTS</b> , by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann with Chris Mooney. (Little, Brown) A collection of interviews with troops who fought overseas.	4
9		<b>INFINITE COUNTRY</b> , by Patricia Engel. (Avid Reader/Simon & Schuster) A kaleidoscopic story of a family occupying two different countries, Colombia and the United States.	1	9	8	<b>THE SUM OF US</b> , by Heather McGhee. (One World) The chair of the board of the racial justice organization Color of Change analyzes the impact of racism on the economy.	3
10	2	<b>A COURT OF SILVER FLAMES</b> , by Sarah J. Maas. (Bloomsbury) The fifth book in A Court of Thorns and Roses series. Nesta Archeron is forced into close quarters with a warrior named Cassian.	3	10		<b>HUNT, GATHER, PARENT</b> , by Michaeleen Doucleff. (Avid Reader/Simon & Schuster) A look at different approaches to rearing children from various parts of the planet.	1

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 JENNIFER KRAUSS



**THE ILLNESS LESSON**, by Clare Beams. (Anchor, 288 pp., \$16.) It’s 1871 in small-town Massachusetts. Eight female students at odds with the male founder of a girls school fall mysteriously ill, but are told they are not ill. “Then there is that flock of ‘disastrous-bright’ red birds that shows up, inexplicably, one day, injecting an element of Hitchcockian surrealism” into this “sly,” “astoundingly original” debut novel that, according to our reviewer, Siobhan Jones, “belongs on the shelf with your Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler collections.”



**THEN THE FISH SWALLOWED HIM**, by Amir Ahmadi Arian. (HarperVia, 288 pp., \$16.99.) A lonely bus driver named Yunus (after the prophet Jonah, who is swallowed by a big fish) becomes the scapegoat for violence at a union strike in this novel of entrapment and torture at Iran’s notorious Evin Prison.



**MINOR FEELINGS: An Asian American Reckoning**, by Cathy Park Hong. (One World, 224 pp., \$18.) A National Book Critics Circle Award finalist, this collection of essays, full of “candor and dark humor shot through with glittering self-awareness,” in the words of the Times critic Jennifer Szalai, explores feelings that are “ambient and chronic” — or, as its Korean-American poet-author puts it, built from the “sediments” of “everyday racial experience.”



**TOPICS OF CONVERSATION**, by Miranda Popkey. (Vintage, 224 pp., \$15.) This novel in 10 conversations highlights “inflection points” in the narrator’s life, from which she hopes to “excavate some sort of arc,” a “scaffolding” for her own “pulsing interior dialogue.” Our reviewer, Antonia Hitchens, declared Popkey good company. “I liked being inside her mind.”



**BUBBLEGUM**, by Adam Levin. (Anchor, 784 pp., \$18.) “For comedy, for sensibility, for style,” our reviewer, Garth Risk Hallberg, wrote, this “ruminative tromp” through a few days in the life of Belt Magnet, “a novelist-cum-memoirist-cum-unemployed schlub,” and his relationship with Keblankey, a “velvety soft, forearm-length ‘flesh-and-bone robot that thinks it’s your friend®,” is “prodigiously sustaining,” not to mention “admirably bonkers and fitfully phenomenal.”



**DOMINION: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World**, by Tom Holland. (Basic, 640 pp., \$18.99.) This “galloping tour of Christianity’s influence across the last 2,000 years,” as the Times Op-Ed columnist Ross Douthat described it, concludes that the Christian faith “still shapes the way even the most secular modern people think about the world.”

MONTHLY BEST SELLERS

SALES PERIOD OF JANUARY 31-FEBRUARY 27

THIS MONTH	Graphic Books and Manga	MONTHS ON LIST	THIS MONTH	Mass Market	MONTHS ON LIST
1	<b>CAT KID COMIC CLUB</b> , by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic) Stories within a story come to life as Li'l Petey, Flippy and Molly show baby frogs how to create comics.	3	1	<b>THE VISCOUNT WHO LOVED ME</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The second book in the Bridgerton series.	2
2	<b>CLAUDIA AND THE NEW GIRL</b> , by Ann M. Martin. Illustrated by Gabriela Epstein. (Scholastic) The ninth book in the Baby-sitters Club series. Claudia must choose between spending time with the very artistic Ashley or the Baby-sitters Club.	1	2	<b>THE DUKE AND I</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) Daphne Bridgerton's reputation soars when she colludes with the Duke of Hastings. The basis of the Netflix series "Bridgerton."	3
3	<b>GRIME AND PUNISHMENT</b> , by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic) The ninth book in the Dog Man series. After turning in his badge, the canine cop is determined not to just roll over.	1	3	<b>THE NUMBERS GAME</b> , by Danielle Steel. (Dell) An affair wrecks a marriage and a daughter seeks to get out from her family's shadow while old dreams and new love are pursued.	1
4	<b>IN LOVE &amp; PAJAMAS</b> , by Catana Chetwynd. (Andrews McMeel) Humorous and authentic moments within intimate relationships.	1	4	<b>RECKLESS ROAD</b> , by Christine Feehan. (Berkley) The fifth book in the Torpedo Ink series. One of the motorcycle club's members needs a second chance after thinking an intimate encounter was just a dream.	1
5	<b>THE DARK SECRET</b> , by Tui T. Sutherland. Illustrated by Mike Holmes. (Scholastic) The fourth book in the Wings of Fire series. Starflight discovers NightWings have imprisoned several innocent RainWings.	1	5	<b>AN OFFER FROM A GENTLEMAN</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The third book in the Bridgerton series.	1
6	<b>FETCH-22</b> , by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic) The eighth book in the Dog Man series. Li'l Petey struggles to find good in the world.	1	6	<b>REVENGE</b> , by James Patterson and Andrew Holmes. (Grand Central) A former member of the British Special Air Service looks into the death of a young woman in London at her parents' urging.	1
7	<b>NEW KID</b> , by Jerry Craft. (HarperCollins) Jordan Banks, an artistically inclined seventh grader from Washington Heights, has a tough time navigating an upscale private school where diversity is low.	16	7	<b>A MINUTE TO MIDNIGHT</b> , by David Baldacci. (Grand Central) When Atlee Pine returns to her hometown to investigate her sister's kidnapping from 30 years ago, she winds up tracking a potential serial killer.	2
8	<b>FOR WHOM THE BALL ROLLS</b> , by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic) The seventh book in the Dog Man series. A new villain has a bone to pick with Dog Man while Petey the Cat starts a new life.	1	8	<b>THE LOST AND FOUND BOOKSHOP</b> , by Susan Wiggs. (Avon) Natalie Harper takes over the care of her mother's bookshop and her ailing grandfather.	2
9	<b>BRAWL OF THE WILD</b> , by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic) The sixth book in the Dog Man series. When he is wrongly sent to the pound, Dog Man's friends try to prove his innocence.	1	9	<b>ROMANCING MISTER BRIDGERTON</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The fourth book in the Bridgerton series.	1
10	<b>MY HERO ACADEMIA, VOL. 1</b> , by Kohei Horikoshi. (VIZ Media) Will Izuku Midoriya's chance encounter with a superhero change his fate? Most likely!	14	10	<b>TO SIR PHILLIP, WITH LOVE</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The fifth book in the Bridgerton series. Eloise Bridgerton confounds a brutish gentleman's expectations.	1
11	<b>THE TWISTED ONES</b> , by Scott Cawthon and Kira Breed-Wrisley. (Scholastic) The second book in the Five Nights at Freddy's series. When bodies are found near her school, Charlie is drawn back into the world of her father's creations.	1	11	<b>LONG RANGE</b> , by C. J. Box. (Putnam) The 20th book in the Joe Pickett series. A grizzly bear attack and an attempted assassination of a local judge baffle the Wyoming game warden.	1
12	<b>LORD OF THE FLEAS</b> , by Dav Pilkey. (Scholastic) The fifth book in the Dog Man series. The villainous cat Petey becomes an unlikely ally.	1	12	<b>HIGHLAND TREASURE</b> , by Lynsay Sands. (Avon) The ninth book in the Highland Brides series. After escaping an English dungeon, Lady Elysande de Valance is escorted to the Highlands by the rugged Rory Buchanan.	1
13	<b>LOGAN LIKES MARY ANNE!</b> , by Ann M. Martin. Illustrated by Gale Galligan. (Scholastic) The eighth book in the Baby-sitters Club series.	1	13	<b>THE SEA GLASS COTTAGE</b> , by RaeAnne Thayne. (HQN) When her estranged mother becomes injured, Olivia Harper returns with her daughter to Cape Sanctuary and their secrets come to light.	1
14	<b>GINA — THE GIRL WHO BROKE THE WORLD</b> , by Judd Winick. (Random House) The seventh book in the Hilo series. Can Gina, DJ and Hilo protect magical beings in jeopardy?	1	14	<b>SHADOWS IN DEATH</b> , by J. D. Robb. (St. Martin's) The 51st book of the In Death series. A hitman with possible connections to Eve Dallas's husband is seen near the scene of a crime.	2
15	<b>THE PROMISED NEVERLAND, VOL. 1</b> , by Kaiu Shirai. Illustrated by Posuka Demizu. (VIZ Media) Kids at the Grace Field House orphanage learn the dark truth of the outside world.	1	15	<b>WHEN HE WAS WICKED</b> , by Julia Quinn. (Avon) The sixth book in the Bridgerton series. Will things between Francesca Bridgerton and Michael Stirling grow into something more or will she marry his cousin?	1

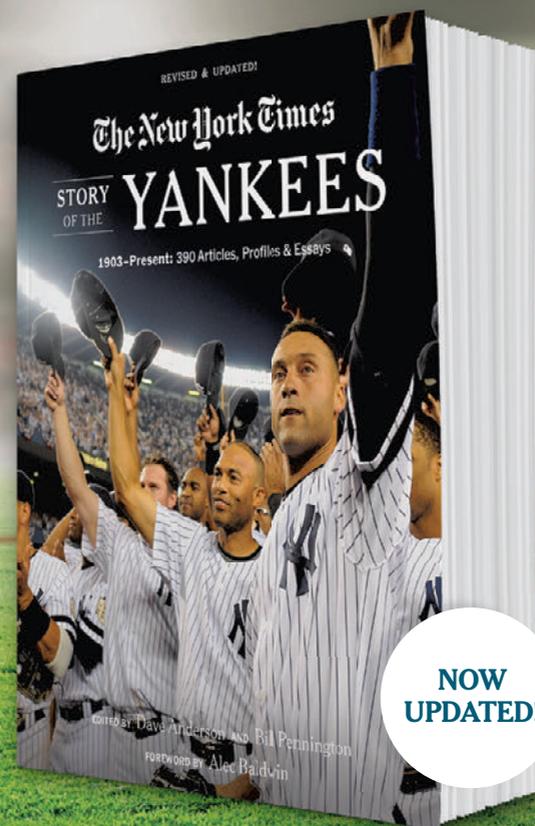
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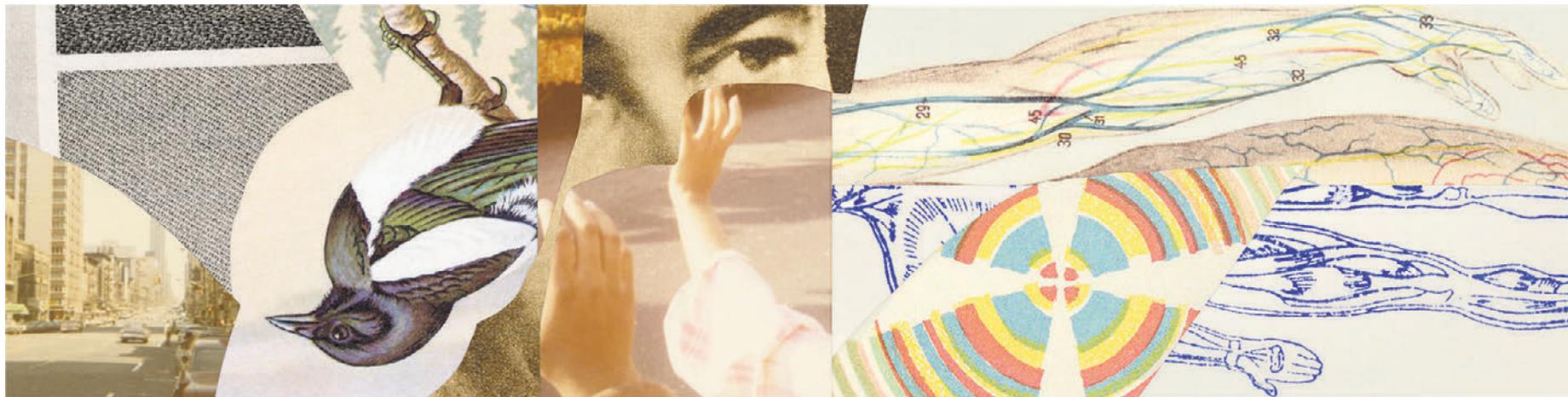


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**WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU**

**A Life with Chronic Illness — Lessons From a Body in Revolt**

By Tessa Miller

303 pp. Holt. \$26.99.



Miller's memoir, about chronic illness and the intersection of mental and physical health, should be read by anyone with a body.

"What Doesn't Kill You" is the story of Miller's fight for competent and compassionate care after she was diagnosed with inflammatory bowel disease. Though this is Miller's first book, she has already made a name for herself as a health and science journalist. Now, in her memoir, she writes explicitly for fellow chronically ill people, with chapters divided by topic, an index for practical use and instructions throughout to advise readers. If the book at times feels as if its primary function is dispensing information rather than storytelling, that's because informed care for our bodies is the story Miller is telling.

Throughout "What Doesn't Kill You," Miller's training as a journalist shines. She writes with precision, conviction, respect and thoughtfulness about pain as well as the disparate, and at times unjust, experiences that people face when navigating the American health care system. But her storytelling is also shaped by her personal experience — she writes with the frankness and intimate knowledge of someone living with chronic illness. (I, for one, am charmed by Miller's fondness for the term "butthole," which she uses often enough in her early pages to establish a winning authorial tone.)

Stylistically, the experience of reading "What Doesn't Kill You" can feel a bit whiplashy. Lyrical lines like "I created my own little spinning planet to mourn in" sit alongside chapters with titles like "The Most Important Poop of Your Life," which sit alongside cries for health care reform. And yet, Miller's book insists on being all things at once because, Miller argues, to understand chronic illness one needs the scientific and the personal and the political.

"What Doesn't Kill You" is relentlessly researched and undeniably smart, but more than that, it is humane and offers reliable information to chronically ill people and their allies.

**PEDRO'S THEORY**

**Reimagining the Promised Land**

By Marcos Gonzalez

291 pp. Melville House. \$26.99.



With "Pedro's Theory," Gonzalez has created a memoir that is at once a collection of essays about his life and also a kaleidoscopic investigation of the things America has tried to promise him.

In his book, Gonzalez writes about the Americas, about race, about queerness, about passing, about colonialism, about bodies, about pride and about shame. Gonzalez is a well-published essayist and a scholar, and in "Pedro's Theory," he is writing *against* projections of Latino identity that exist elsewhere as much as he is writing toward himself. Of his childhood neighborhood, he writes: "I live for nearly twenty years in this place constructed by the white imagination. And through this white imagining is how I conceive an image of myself and my family for the decades to come."

The memoir is thrilling because it engages the reader in the active process of exploring, seeking and discovering how we "compose a life." Perhaps the best term for Gonzalez's book is the one he borrows from Audre Lorde: "biomythography," a combination of autobiography, history and myth.

These pages are full of pathos — the details of his life Gonzalez chooses to hold up always have ballast to them, because, as he makes us aware, everything he conjures comes at the expense of something else elided or forgotten.

To quibble, the memoir's masterly structure speaks so clearly for itself that readers may grow impatient when Gonzalez spends time pointing out the form of the book, like someone trying to sell you a house you're already quite happily inhabiting. But Gonzalez writes with an appealingly telescoping range. His attention lights upon granular topics — a childhood photo in one moment, "Napoleon Dynamite" in another — as well as larger ideas like the effects of colonization and, in some of the most excellent writing in the book, a history of burlap.

Because how else to tell the story of a life these days but to run the gamut from the individual to the communal to the systemic to the cosmic? Gonzalez's storytelling feels honest for its expansiveness, and he manages this without ever sacrificing the intimacy of his strong, personal voice.

**FEATHERHOOD**

**A Memoir of Two Fathers and a Magpie**

By Charlie Gilmour

295 pp. Scribner. \$27.



"Featherhood" is the story of a magpie named Benzene, whom Gilmour and his wife (the set designer Janina Pedan, whom he calls Yana) adopt and raise in their London flat, a tale that is woven together with the story of Gilmour's biological father, the poet Heathcote Williams, and Gilmour's own

evolving thoughts on fatherhood as he and Pedan plan to have a child.

As animal stories go, "Featherhood" is mercifully free of schmaltz — Gilmour respects the wildness and absurdity of Benzene's birdness and has a knack for elegant, visceral imagery. For instance, he details how, in an early moment of caretaking, Pedan crushes grub heads with pliers to feed the magpie.

He is similarly vivid when writing about emotional connections. His parentlike care of Benzene stirs up questions about why Williams abandoned him as a baby, as well as fears about his own potential fatherhood. Gilmour's chronic sense of loss is palpable in the passages about Williams's absence, but when the writing turns to his present, multigenerational, blended family, bird included, the scenes are lush with the warmth and comfort of everyday living.

In the book's most striking anecdote about fatherhood, Gilmour dissects a tale Williams told him about a Turkish barber who Williams was convinced would slit his throat to steal his wallet midshave, and the sleight-of-hand trick Williams performed to delight and distract the barber from this (dubious) murderous intent. Of the story, Gilmour writes: "I've wondered if he was unconsciously confessing something about his approach toward me that day: that he dreaded being made to open up, to spill, and was using magic like a matador uses his cape, to distract and misdirect, to remain untouched."

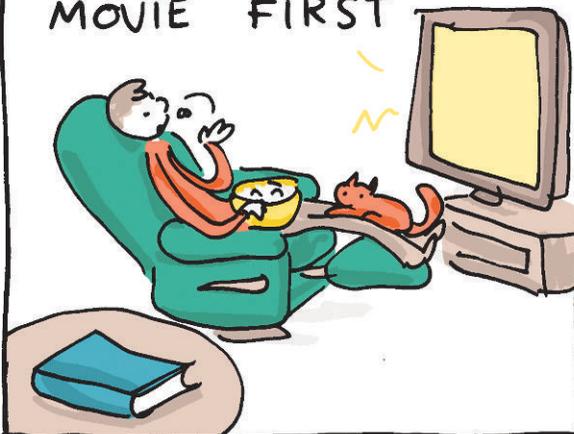
Gilmour, on the other hand, is fearless in sharing himself with readers. As he works through his relationships, the emotional freight is not always subtle, but this comes from a generosity and openness on his part, which, ultimately, is what makes "Featherhood" so lovely and inviting. Gilmour practices no magic here; he distracts the reader with no glitzy baubles. He gives us a man and a bird and tells us, best he can, what they've come to know about the world as it is. He is willing to spill a little blood.

# THE WORST READER

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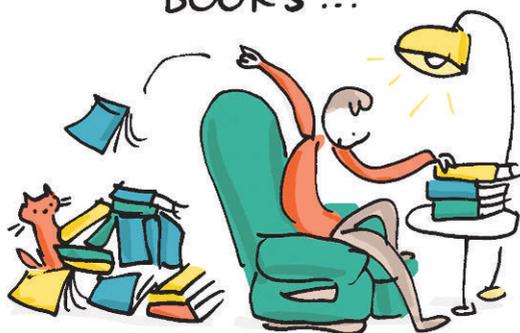
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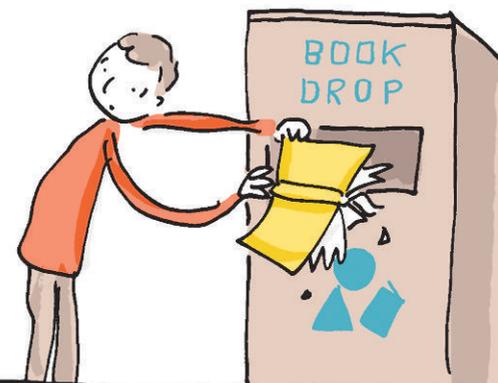


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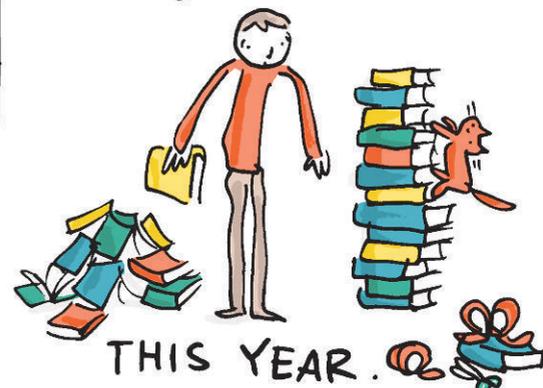
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